

One Among Millions

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Sondra knew exactly when the vampire started stalking her and the babies.

She called the police and they came out to the house, two dutiful small-town, small-minded men with beer bellies and the smell of grease and old cigarettes on their clothes. The twins, their cherubic blue-eyed faces achingly beautiful beneath wispy, platinum curls, cooed and giggled from the playpen in their room, oblivious to the terror on their mother's face and the tense conversation a room away.

"Listen," Sondra said, "I've seen it following us—"

"It?" The older of the two cops wore a name tag that said *McShaw* and sent his partner a meaningful look. He jotted something quickly on the form attached to his clipboard.

"Him, I mean." Her face was calm but inside she slapped herself for the verbal slip. Fear was a nasty, constant companion and could cause all kinds of mistakes, make a person tell the truth when that was the last thing in the world she wanted to do. She couldn't afford the truth here, not when the price was Mallory and Meleena's safety. "I've seen *him*."

"Okay." The other lawman was younger but headed the way of his chunky partner; too many donuts and sitting on his ass in the patrol car, wheeling around town and thinking he looked so smart in his blue uniform and spit-shined shoes, the carefully oiled .38 snug in its leather holster. Galena was far enough from Chicago to leave the murders and brutality to the city folk; little occupied these men during the day besides petty theft and speeding teenagers, maybe a few alcohol and drug situations. His revolver had probably never been fired at anything but a paper target; what did this man know of blood and terror? "So you saw someone following you in Fox Valley Mall," he repeated. "And you say he walked behind you and your children nearly all the way to your car."

"Yes."

"Then disappeared when you turned to confront him in the presence of another couple."

Sondra finally saw his nameplate, slightly askew on his shirt pocket. "Exactly, Officer Walters." She sat back.

McShaw grimaced. "Fox Valley is a big place, Ms Underwood." He peered at her over the rim of his glasses, brown eyes full of scepticism. "Isn't it conceivable that this man's car could have been parked close to yours? That it was nothing but a coincidence?"

"I'm telling you he was following us," Sondra said, too loudly.

The twins made a noise from the other room and she glanced anxiously towards the doorway, then lowered her voice. "He..."

Her voice trailed away and she rubbed at her neck absently. These two placid cops... how could she explain the panic she'd felt when the man with the familiar razored teeth fastened his gaze on hers in front of the Toys "R" Us store? She was only window-shopping with the babies, of course — she had no money for anything other than the essentials — but Sondra had forgotten all about the silly mechanical dog that yapped happily from behind the plate glass. The wide, brightly lit corridors and garish lights of the mall had done an odd sort of spin-and-fade, until nothing remained in the world but her, and *him*... and the twins, of course. Their little arms waving in the air as they began to cry for him, as mesmerized as her by his dark presence amid the shine and hustle.

"He what?" prompted McShaw. Pen poised above his clipboard, another three dozen boxes to be filled and checked off before he could leave for his next coffee shop appointment.

Sondra swallowed. Careful now, she warned herself. Be very, *very* careful. "I-I've seen him following us before."

The younger policeman's attention picked up. "How many times?"

"Twice," she said. "Once when I took the children to the clinic, and once when we were out for a walk."

"So he knows where you live?"

Walters's voice had sharpened, but instead of feeling vindicated, Sondra had the urge to slap him. Why should she have to lie to get them to protect her? Because being stalked once or twice was okay, but the magical number *three* was not. "I'm afraid to go out any more."

"Tell us about the other two times," McShaw said.

Abruptly Sondra stood. "Would you... like some coffee?" she asked shakily. "I'm going to pour myself a cup."

"If it's no trouble." The older policeman looked at her speculatively.

"None at all." She walked to the door of the nursery and checked inside before pulling it shut. Mallory and Meleena were settling down for a nap within the netted confines of the playpen, their soft, chubby bodies curled around each other like well-fed kittens. The door firmly closed, she turned back to the men waiting on the couch. "Sugar? Cream?"

"Black is fine," Walters said. "For both of us."

Sondra nodded and hurried to the kitchen, fumbling out mismatched mugs from one of the cabinets and making sure none of the nasty cockroach egg casings were stuck to the bottom. The insects in this place were a terrible problem and she didn't want to be embarrassed, but what could she expect from a place of hiding, a place of exile? The coffee was too strong from sitting on the burner since this morning and she didn't really want any, but she needed time to gather her thoughts so she didn't screw up the story. Her claim of seeing the man who hunted her and her babies by the clinic had been a lie, but Sondra could gloss that over by saying she'd only had a

glimpse of him then; they might write that sighting off, but they might not. Saying he knew where they lived was the truth, as was telling that he trailed after them every time she stepped out of the house, a spectre of living hunger that was impossible to deny.

Her knees went suddenly weak and she leaned against the counter for support. Would any of this do any good? Perhaps she would have to run again, flee in an endless, exhausting effort to give her babies a normal life. Dear God, would he never let them be?

Without warning his mocking, cruel chuckle filled her mind and the memory of his frigid hands sliding over her skin made her flush:

"Open your legs."

"No!"

His eyes were black, his gaze oddly sprinkled with yellow glitter, like a reflection of a midnight sky swollen with stars. His fingers, tipped with nails sharp enough to split her skin, scraped along the insides of her thighs. His touch made her veins throb with need.

"Bear my children."

"Let me go!" she cried. She cursed him, then damned her own body as her thin knees began to spread. Lying against the black sheets, her limbs were like the petals of a pale lily unfolding to float upon an onyx ocean.

"I will fill you with blood and fire," he whispered in her ear as his body weighed her down and pierced her with exquisite ice. Her insides pulsed around him in involuntary response and he moaned against her neck as he rocked, a wolf's growl of pleasure as the sharp edges of his teeth rubbed along her throat, so very close to the one thing he had yet to steal from her. Everything else was gone: her pride, her self-esteem, her virginity. She was his harlot and his slave, and soon she would carry the ultimate proof that he had used her. Surely he would allow her to keep the final, fragile bit of her humanity that pumped within her arteries. Surely—

The sugar jar jittered dangerously in her grasp and she slammed it on the counter and decided to do without rather than risk spilling it. *He* had sent the cockroaches to this place to torment her, to try and make her leave, and she'd be damned if she'd do anything to feed them. Turning to the sink, Sondra rinsed her hands and face in cool water, then used a paper towel to pat her skin dry. Easy does it, she told herself. Ten more seconds and her hands were steady enough to fish a battered rectangular cake pan from the drawer by the oven and use it as a makeshift serving tray to hold the mugs. She nearly dropped it when she turned from the counter and found the younger of the cops standing directly behind her. His eyes met hers and she felt trapped for an instant, came perilously close to telling him everything, the whole corrupt story burning at the edges of her lips. On the battered aluminium surface, the mugs rattled against each other.

"I'll take that for you," Walters said. He reached for the pan and his fingers, cold

like hers, brushed her arm. His face was unreadable but his touch left her oddly weak, disoriented. Standing before him in the small kitchen, Sondra saw that she'd been wrong about his build; he wasn't overweight at all. In fact, his entire body seemed to have elongated somehow and become lean, like a dog that looks soft and warm and sleepy until it stands up and stretches. Fear bubbled into Sondra's throat, but he only took her elbow with his free hand and guided her towards the living-room and his waiting partner, his flesh burning against her own like dry ice.

McShaw looked up from scribbling on his form and dropped his pen on to the coffee table, reaching eagerly for one of the mugs. Sondra sank on to the worn love seat with a feeling of relief that shattered when Walters settled loosely next to her instead of returning to his place on the old rocking-chair across the coffee table. Everything about the apartment was small: the rooms, the windows and the meagre amount of sunlight they permitted inside, the furniture; his thigh, bunched with muscle beneath the fabric of his slacks, pressed coolly against hers, but there was nowhere for her to move to get away. Was she suffocating here or was the pulse hammering in her throat simply getting in the way of the air trying to flow into her lungs?

"Okay," McShaw said after a moment. He made no move to pick up the clipboard he'd set on the table next to his pen. "Tell us about the other two times."

"I thought I saw him when I took the babies to the paediatrician at the free clinic last Tuesday," Sondra said hoarsely. She was proud of the way she kept her voice from shaking, from giving away her petty deception. "Following us again. But it was too crowded there and when we got out it was rush hour. He was gone."

"You thought?"

Sondra nodded but didn't elaborate. Let them discount this one if they wanted; it was a lie anyway, mere icing on an already poisoned cake.

"And when was the other time?"

"Last... night. I took the babies up to the park for the fall festival. He w-was there, and he followed us home."

McShaw leaned forward. "Ms Underwood, if he followed you home last night, why did you wait until this morning to call us?"

Sondra looked at her hands, the knuckles red from scrubbing furiously at the filth of this place, the fingernails strangely white under the edges from baby powder. "I-I don't know," she whispered. "I guess I was hoping he would just go away, but when I got up this morning and I thought about it, I realized that's probably not going to happen."

"Has he ever tried to make contact? Threatened you?" Walters's voice was smooth and vaguely... *sweet*, like one of those expensive frozen drinks the upscale restaurants served. She thought she heard all kinds of innuendo in it, as rich and varied as the variety of liquors dumped into the exotic glasses edged with garnishes made of fruit and plastic sticks.

Sondra's gaze found his unwillingly and she lost herself for a single, panicked moment, snapped back in time to answer before McShaw noticed her lag. "No." With a dying feeling, she realized how lame all of this must sound and she had to force the answer past her stiff lips. She had called too soon, they would never believe her; she was alone in her efforts to protect Mallory and Meleena, as she had been from the moment of their birth:

"We're going to have to call a doctor" the midwife said grimly. Sondra lifted her head and saw the woman's heavy, black face peering back at her through the inverted triangle of her spread legs and over the spasming mound of her bloated stomach. Apprehension made her southside accent run the words together. "You're bleeding too much and you've been in labour way too long."

"No doctor," Sondra hissed. The refusal ended in a scream as agony rippled through her uterus, as if the child inside were trying to tear its way through the prison of tissue and mother's blood. Had it heard the midwife's words and realized the danger of prolonging her agony? "It's coming now!" she screamed and pushed, bore down as she had never done before to expel the thing within her body that was trying to kill her.

"I see it — push again!" The midwife's hands were warm and wet with Sondra's blood and they pried at her ravaged flesh for a moment, then locked around something huge and painful. "I've got the head. Come on, Sondra — if you don't keep pushing you'll kill it and yourself besides!"

Sondra screamed again and dug into the sides of the mattress with her fingernails, felt the decrepit fabric tear at the same time as the child shot from her body with a wave of pain that nearly made her lose consciousness. Dear God, she thought disjointedly as she fought to find her breath, why hadn't the mound of her stomach grown smaller? Was it afterbirth — could the fruits of her coupling have filled her with that much dark debris?

She was still panting from Mallory's birth when deep within her belly the fire began anew, making her writhe on the soaked sheets and open her mouth in a scream too huge to be heard. The midwife was there in an instant, her large, slick hands working at Sondra's belly, kneading and pressing.

"Twins!" she declared. "Hold on, girl — there's another one coming!"

Sondra's wail found substance as a second child forced its way free. Something deep inside her relaxed and let her breathe, disregarded the short, puny cramps that followed as the midwife worked her stomach to get Sondra's body to eject the bloody afterbirth. "What?" Sondra finally managed, sucking in welcome air as she fought to sit up. "W-what are they?"

"Girls," the midwife said, turning back to the changing table. "Just as healthy as can be, too. A little over six-and-a-half pounds each — big for twins." Despite her assurances, the black woman's voice was reserved, puzzled. Exhausted, Sondra listened to the splash of water from the basin as the midwife expertly sponged down the infants, then wrapped them in receiving blankets.

"Can I see?"

"Here you go. One for each arm."

Warmth settled on either side of her and Sondra tucked her chin to her chest for a glimpse of her babies. Sleeping already, come into the world without so much as a whimper; tiny fingers bunched into loose fists, delicate lips still bluish-purple but pinkening by the second. Their heads were crowned with thick, dark hair above perfect eyebrows and petite, titled noses; as she gazed at them, the second one — Meleena — spread her heart-shaped mouth in a barely discernible yawn.

Sondra jerked and both babies opened their eyes and regarded her solemnly. "What was that?" she asked. Her voice was shaking.

For a moment the midwife said nothing, then the big woman folded her hands in front of her as though she were trying to pray unobtrusively. "Something I've never seen on a newborn," she said at last. "Teeth."

And now Sondra faced a new danger: *Walters*. There was something about him that reminded her of the twins' father, an elusive call to forbidden sexuality that she'd thought only one man, one *creature*, possessed.

"Open your legs."

"No!"

"Bear my children."

She gasped when someone touched her arm, then realized it was McShaw. "Are you all right, Ms Underwood? You don't look like you feel very well."

"I'm f-fine," Sondra stammered. "Tired, that's all. It's hard to get a good night's sleep with two crying babies." She clamped her lips shut, abruptly afraid she was whining. It was another lie anyway; the twins never cried. Her sleep was broken by the stealthy creaking of the stairs in the hallway outside the apartment, a thousand phantom shadows in the corners of the dark rooms, the hushed rasp of steel fingernails along the bottom of the too-flimsy front door.

Walters nodded sympathetically and for a moment she had the absurd notion that he could read her mind. "Of course," he said. "We understand."

Sondra bit back a sharp remark and they both stood, as if some invisible puppet master had pulled the "up" strings simultaneously. She found herself watching the subtle movement of muscles beneath the taut fabric of Walters's uniform, then flushed when her gaze travelled to his face and she realized he was watching her watch him. For the first time she noticed that his eyes were a strange yellowish colour unlike anything she'd ever seen, the stare of a lion surveying its prey.

"If you see him again, you call 911," McShaw said. "Plus we'll put your building down for a few extra drive-bys every shift, try to make the squad cars more visible. Until you give us something more concrete, that's about all we can do. I'm sorry." The chunkier cop looked down at his clipboard and frowned. "It doesn't seem like he's ever got close enough for you to get a solid description."

Sondra opened her mouth, then shut it again when Walters ran his cat-coloured gaze across her. She'd been about to say *He looks like him*, and point to Officer Walters; horrified, she put a trembling hand to her mouth and prayed McShaw wouldn't see her shivering. Was there that much of a resemblance? No, of course not.

Of course not.

Open your legs.

Walters was the last of the two to go out the front door. She didn't know why the tense words came, but when he looked back at her, all she could say was, "He wants the twins."

He nodded. "I know." Before she could close the door, he reached back through the opening and placed his fingers lightly on her wrist — a speed search for the hot pulse of life just below the skin? — then glanced surreptitiously towards his partner's retreating back, as though he were her colleague in some great and secret conspiracy. "I'll be in touch," he whispered.

I will fill you with blood and fire.

Sondra slammed the front door and stood trembling with anticipation and terror.

The babies were bathed and fed and put down for the night. They lay crowded against each other in the playpen — she couldn't afford a crib — content and quiet, like two halves of a whole. Sondra watched them for a while, knowing they wouldn't close their eyes for hours, wondering what they'd be like when they grew up. Right now they were small for their age, but would they catch up later? Go through one of those amazing growth spurts that parents were always crowing about and paediatricians predicted with nauseating regularity? She wished she could think of a way to keep them small and safe for ever, by her side and without the sweet, dangerous offering of the rest of the world.

After a while she went into the bathroom and stared at herself in the mirror. Her image was shell-shocked and pale, a thin face with prominent cheekbones and a nondescript nose, hazel eyes undercut with purple shadows of exhaustion. Budget shopping and constant worrying had made her gaunt and graceless, left her mouth an oversized flesh-coloured slash across the bottom part of her face. Even her brown hair was nothing special — cut to shoulder length, then falling into a stupid wave that made the ends go in all directions. What was it about her that drew them? Why *her*?

"Because you are one among millions, Sondra."

She spun with a slow-motion movement that felt like she was trying to turn underwater. "You!"

Officer Walters gave her a handsome smile. "I told you I'd... be in touch."

Sondra took a step backward, felt the sharp edge of the cheap drawer pull dig into her spine. For a moment she thought it was teeth and her knees tried to buckle;

she locked her muscles and felt behind her for reassurance — an old, bent brass handle, that's all. "How-how did you get in?"

"The door was unlocked."

"That's impossible," she said hotly. "I didn't—"

He was standing in front of her before she had time to form her next word, the width of the room no more than a blink between them. Whatever she was going to say broke off when his hand, cool and white and alarmingly powerful, reached up to cup her jaw. His thumb skated delicately along the line of bone, then skipped up to trace her lips. "I think you left it open for me..."

"No!"

"Didn't you?" Walters leaned over her, his face only an inch away. His breath was thick and meaty but not unpleasant, a cool, unnatural draught against her cheeks. He looked different than he had earlier, as if the chunky, donut-plied town cop were only a costume he donned to give stereotypical service to the public job and complement his partner's rotund figure. The basic features were still there, but now he looked like a predator, something long and sleek and dark; a panther, slipping through the night that was her life and ready to ambush its quarry.

"Please," she heard herself say. She wanted to cry but her eyes were as dry as her mouth. "Don't touch me."

"You don't mean that," Walters murmured against her neck as he grasped her upper arms and pulled her from the bathroom and into the cramped kitchen. Sondra tried to turn her head and made the monumental mistake of locking gazes with him. Immediately she felt like she was dropping through space, an exhilarating dive from a hundred-storey building and no concern about the unyielding earth rushing up to crash into her; she would have tilted sideways except that he was pressed fully against her now, holding her, the temperature of his skin bleeding through both his clothes and hers.

"Open yourself to me, Sondra."

His voice had deepened and twisted and sounded so much like the other's that a moan of dread made it past her lips. Shivering violently, she could be lying face down on a blanket of finished leather for all the heat she felt from his muscular chest, the hard plane of his stomach, the firm pressure of his thighs. Her heart was slamming in her chest long before his fingers hooked around the collar of her blouse and tore it open.

"You can do this for me, make a miracle. Let me be inside you . . ."

"I am not a fucking breeding farm!" Sondra wailed. "Get away from me!" She tried to beat at him but she was pinned against the wall, the refrigerator, against *something* that made it impossible to escape. When his hands slid over her breasts and cupped them, then began to massage away the chill of his own touch, she wanted to screech as she unwillingly pressed her hips against his and her fingers tangled in the heavy locks of his hair to yank him closer.

"I can make you warm again, my sweet. I can fulfil you. With blood . . ."

His teeth, so sharp and wet, scratched along the line of her neck and sent a spike of pleasure into the deepest pit of her stomach.

"... and fire."

In response, damning herself the entire time, she started tearing at his clothes, desperate to feel his wintry flesh against her heat, shuddering with the need to cool the fire he'd started inside her. Sondra screamed as he took her standing against a kitchen cabinet, then screamed again when she came and remembered she didn't even know his first name.

"Nicholas will come for you," Sondra said woodenly. It was the first time she'd spoken the other's name aloud since the night sixteen months before when he had first possessed her mind and body in a basement bedroom more than 500 miles away. Perhaps she deserved all of this for letting him bewitch her so easily back then, allowing him to pick her up in a bar and enchant her into following him docilely into his loft apartment with the huge windows and black-sheeted, oversized bed. But how well she had suffered for her weakness! She should have been stronger then; she should have been stronger tonight. But she was nothing to Nicholas, or to Walters, a poorly used and ragged feather, blown crazily about by the wind of their cravings. "He might even kill you."

Her words were slurred with cold, her legs still sticky with the testimony of their mating. The dull tiles of the kitchen floor beneath her bare skin were freezing, the unseasonable cold outside seeping through the concrete foundation and crawling up her limbs and lower back. She wanted to move, get up and huddle within something warm until she could feel her blood pulse once again in her veins, but Walters had wrapped his legs and arms around her from behind like a giant spider sucking the essence out of its juiciest kill. Even the cockroaches had gone, fled from this oh-so-superior hunter.

"Nicholas only wants to see his children," Walters said against her hair. His lips nuzzled the strands, tongue flicking out now and then to taste. "If you allow him a meagre visit every so often, everyone will be happier. His mind is... younger, more fickle. His life has lacked experience and the babies will prove overwhelming — I doubt he'll even stay. Instead you run from place to place like a terrified jackrabbit with her offspring, forcing him to follow and calling the police every time he comes too close. But I am not so foolish or irresponsible as brother Nicholas, my love."

"What do you mean, *brother*? What are you talking about?" Panicked by the realization that he knew their pursuer was actually the twins' father, Sondra tried to twist out of Walters's grasp and face him, but the arm across her ribcage was like a tight steel band. She started kicking at his feet in frustration and his free hand dipped between her legs and stroked; behind her spine he began to harden again and he ground his hipbones against her and started to rock. Gasping with shame and pleasure, her hands gripped his knees as her legs parted and she arched to meet his

fingers. She forgot the icy kitchen floor and the disappearing cockroaches and most of everything else as Walters probed and readied her, finally raised her whole body effortlessly and settled it on his. Beyond the orgasm pounding through her senses, Sondra still managed her strangled question. "What did you *mean*?"

"*I thought it was clear,*" Walters said. His voice had deepened to the familiar sexual growl and he rolled forward with her, still joined, until Sondra was on her knees beneath him. One of his large hands slipped beneath her left arm and encircled her throat; he didn't squeeze — never that — simply held tight enough to feel the hot rush of her pulse through the artery so close to his killing fingers. The feel of her blood excited him more and he drove deeper into her, making her cry out in surprise and spiralling ecstasy. His other arm snaked across her hipbones and lifted until her knees were clear of the floor and she dangled from his body with only her fisted hands to keep her face from banging against the tiles. Flopping loosely in the air while he fucked her like she was some kind of whore doll, Sondra would have been furious except for the tenderness in his dark voice and the convulsions of rapture that were enveloping her. The words in her ear were like ice-crusting velvet as his mouth grazed the soft juncture of her throat and shoulder and left another barely bloody scratch for him to suckle like an infant.

"Remember what I said, Sondra? You're one among millions, able to do something that should be treasured. And I will do just that. I will exalt you and place you above all else, for ever."

Sondra didn't know if it was his next words and the way his hand moved from her throat to caress her waiting belly, her rippling, final orgasm, or her sanity giving way that made her begin to shriek as he came and filled her with a blazing, blood-streaked icy liquid and passion.

"Unlike my twin brother Nicholas, I will be with you at every moment as you carry my precious sons and bear them into this world."