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Near Dawn

The original stories of the Darkyn

by Lynn Viehl

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Nature's Decree, A Personal Injustice and Infusion

First published online 2002 (*Do or Die*, S.L. Viehl)

Abbadon

First published online 2003 (*Now or Never*, S.L. Viehl)

Excerpt from *Twilight Fall* by Lynn Viehl

published by Onyx

to be released in print July 2008

Excerpt from *Stay the Night* by Lynn Viehl

published by Onyx

to be released in print January 2009

For Shiloh Walker
old friend, gifted colleague,
and the author of
the first e-book I ever read.
I figure this is pretty much
all *your* fault.

Introduction

Few of my new readers know that the five novels of the Darkyn published to date are actually based on a trio of short stories that I wrote almost twenty years ago: *Nature's Decree*, *A Personal Injustice*, and *Abbadon*. They were, like most of my short stories, idea experiments, and the results convinced me to expand the stories into novel form.

I submitted the original Darkyn novel series proposal to my publisher in 1999. After rejecting the proposal, my editor at the time advised me to give it up, as there were far better writers than me publishing vampire fiction. I listened and shelved the proposal, but I still liked the stories a lot, and self-published all three under my SF pseudonym, S.L. Viehl, as freebies for my readers.

Oddly enough, my readers didn't share the editor's opinion. Everyone wanted more stories of the Darkyn, and a hundred or so e-mails asking for them prompted me to write *Infusion*, in which appeared the early incarnations of Lucan and Samantha, the most popular characters of the series.

It took me a little longer to work up the nerve to submit the proposal again, but I did in 2003, and I sold it this time around. The Darkyn novel series went on to become an instant bestseller for me and my publisher. All of the novels in the series have debuted on the USA Today bestseller list, and the last two, *Night Lost* and *Evermore*, made it all the way to the NY Times extended bestseller list.

Readers of the print novels will recognize the characters and story lines that follow, but you'll also see the changes that evolved over the ten years since I wrote original stories. Name changes, such as Vanessa Whitman to Alexandra Keller, and Jacques-Sebastien to Michael Cyprien, are frequent. My original world-building followed along the lines of classic vampire mythology, something I decided to toss out the window when I went to print.

I might never have tried to submit the Darkyn series proposal again, if not for the readers who e-mailed me to give me feedback and ask for more stories, my writer friends who bullied me into submitting again, and my editor and agent friends who have assured me over the years that my vampire fiction actually doesn't (excuse the pun) suck. Any success I enjoy really belongs to all of you.

So, what do you think I should write next?

Lynn Viehl

Nature's Decree

"... features should fulfill their offices according to nature's decree.." Gaspare Tagliacozzi, 1597

"Got another letter from that rich guy in New Orleans," Ginny said as she placed the mail in front of me. "He upped his offer."

"Again?" I set aside the weighty nightmare that was Luisa Lopez's medical file. "You're kidding me."

My office manager eyed me over the top rims of her glasses. "I never kid about one and a half million dollars, boss."

"Send him another no thanks and a copy of the referral sheet."

"I've done that three times already - *and* left two messages on his machine." She extracted a letter and pushed it into my hands. "Want to take a shot?"

I had two car accident survivors, a cleft palate and Luisa at the hospital to see that morning. Plus two tricky surgeries to perform in the afternoon. I certainly didn't have time for J.S. Cyprien and whatever he wanted tucked or tightened - no matter how many zeroes he added to his check. But like most rich men, he probably wouldn't believe that unless he got the shove-off from me personally.

"All right." I pulled out the letter, which was typed on beautiful buff linen paper with an important-looking gold crest at the top. A faint, sweet smell drifted to my nose, like he'd sprayed it with rose perfume.. "I'll call him."

Ginny pointed at my phone. "*Before* the Maloneys get here."

I scowled at her. "Bully."

"Battle dodger." She headed back out to reception.

I dialed the number listed under the fancy gold crest, and a woman with a pretty French accent answered. "*Le Petit Jardin, Éleine Selvais.*"

"This is Dr. Vanessa Whitman." An old boyfriend had taught me a few words in French, but none of them could be used outside the bedroom. Hopefully she understood English. "Is Mr. Cyprien available?"

"I'm sorry, madam, he is not. May I take a message for him?"

I checked the bottom of the letter, and saw the initials ES. "Sure. You can tell Mr. Cyprien that my answer is still the same. I can't fly to New Orleans and I can't perform his surgery."

"*C'est une honte.*" She didn't sound quite so friendly now. "Are you quite certain there is no exception you can make? Mr. Cyprien is in great need."

What a weird way to put it. "As I've indicated before, I don't make cross-country house calls. I'll be happy to perform a preliminary consultation here in Chicago." The flowery perfume was starting to get to me, so I balled up the letter and tossed it at the trash can across the room.

"Mr. Cyprien is unable to leave New Orleans." Éleine sighed. "Doctor, it would only require a few days of your time, and of course money is no object."

Oh, of course. For guys like Cyprien, it never was. I thought of Luisa, who couldn't have paid for the box of Kleenex in my waiting room. "I'm sorry, it's just not possible. There are several very qualified plastic surgeons in New Orleans, and I've had my office manager send Mr. Cyprien a referral list." I could still smell

roses, even stronger now. It must have gotten on my hands or something. "That's all I can do, Miss Selvais."

"I will give Mr. Cyprien your message. Thank you for calling, Dr. Whitman." She hung up with an abrupt click.

I did the same, then went into the adjoining exam room and washed my hands. The smell of roses faded. Although I had had often received outrageous requests from the spoiled and wealthy, Cyprien's persistence bothered me. It wasn't as if he knew me or I knew him, and I wasn't the only reconstructive surgeon in the world.

Once or twice I'd been contacted by men who wanted very specific, private work done. The kind of work someone had when they were trying to switch identities and/or elude prosecution. I'd turned them down, too. I don't do criminals.

Ginny buzzed me on the intercom, and I returned to my desk. "Guess who's here fifteen minutes early?" she asked over the sound of a man and woman bickering.

I sighed. "Send back the happy couple."

Andrew Maloney and his wife Patricia looked anything but happy as they entered my office, still arguing with each other.

"Come on, Patti." Andrew ran a hand over his shaved scalp, under which I'd implanted a steel plate to replace part of the skull the crushed roof of his car had pulverized. His entire head was bright red, as if he'd been badly sunburned -

but I saw no blisters. "I told you a million times, the freaking accident wasn't my fault!"

"If you'd bought the new tires like I told you, cheapskate, it never would have happened!" Patricia shouted, giving her husband a shove. She hadn't been wearing her seatbelt, and I was a third of the way through rebuilding what flying headfirst through the windshield had done to her face. She glared at me from under her pressure mask. "You tell him, Dr. Whitman!"

"We didn't have the money!"

"Because you blew it drinking with your dumbass friends!"

"Hey!" I pointed to the chairs in front of my desk. "Stop yelling and sit, or I send you both back to see the therapist."

"She needs the shrink, doc, not me," Andrew said as he dropped into the chair. "See what she did to me last night?" He gestured at his reddened skin. "She dumped five packages of cherry Kool-Aid mix in the shower head. Real cute, huh?"

Patricia jerked her chair a foot away from Andrew's. "That's only because I couldn't find the rat poison."

* * *

I got the Maloneys checked out, told Patricia to lay off the Kool-Aid, and scheduled an appointment for them with their family therapist. My next patient was Bryan, a quiet, polite four year old boy who should have been bouncing with energy. The Department of Children and Families had referred him, and after three years of red tape and multiple foster care placements, I now had

permission to repair the disfiguring birth defect that had divided his upper lip, nose and palate in two. They had not approved removal of the other scars from the beatings his young prostitute mother had given him as an infant, but I was throwing them in for free. Bryan's foster mother, who took in unwanted children so she wouldn't have to work, only needed assurance that his Medicaid would cover the cost of the surgery.

"Does his bio mom want to talk to me about any of this?" I asked her before they left. "I can explain the procedures to her over the phone." I didn't want to meet her in person, not knowing what she could do to a six month old baby with her fists.

"She don't care." The foster mother picked up the boy and placed him in the ancient umbrella stroller she'd brought. "She pregnant again, you know."

Bryan had six half brothers and sisters in the foster care system. Like him, all of them were born addicted to heroin. The last two were born HIV-positive.

"Someone needs to sterilize that woman."

"Only fix she wants is the kind she can stick in her arm." She pushed Bryan out of the exam room.

After I told Ginny to call HRS and make a report on Bryan's mother, I headed over to the hospital to check in with surgery and see the most critical of all my patients. I'd been to her room a hundred times, and still I had to force myself to go.

And with every step, I felt the invisible weight on my shoulders increase.

Luisa Lopez had lived in the projects on Chicago's west side all her life.

Pregnancy at sixteen entitled her to the welfare and her own apartment, but the building she moved into was much older than her mother's. The tenants were so vicious that cops would not even enter the building without backup. But Luisa was determined to live on her own and do better for herself and her baby. One night after finishing GED class and picking up her son from her mother's, six men attacked Luisa just outside her door. They forced her into her apartment and ransacked it. When they found nothing of value, the six turned on Luisa and her child.

What they did to them was translated into clinical terms on the ER intake report. It took five pages, front and back, to complete the comprehensive list of horrors.

Police later theorized that Luisa's attackers had set fire to her apartment to hide their crimes, but someone on the same floor had smelled the smoke and called 911. I'd spoken to the fire fighter who had found Luisa curled up on the floor, her clothes on fire, still cradling her dead baby in her arms.

The men who had murdered her son and mutilated her were still at large.

Burn wards are quiet places, and I kept my voice low as I checked in with the charge nurse. "How's she doing?"

"Bad night, ripped out her IV twice." The nurse handed me a chart. "Got her catheter out, pissed all over the cradle and called me a stupid cracker bitch when I rolled her after breakfast."

"That's my girl." I noted how much morphine she'd been given, then wrote up a script for Valium. "If she gets feisty tonight, tranq her."

Because the fire had left Luisa with third degree burns over forty-five percent of her body, which had already been brutalized beyond belief, she had not been expected to live. I'd been called in on the case by her mother, who had been infuriated by the other staff physicians' apathetic treatment. Sancha Lopez told me she'd do whatever it took to keep her daughter alive.

And every time I looked at her, I wondered what kind of life that would be. "How's it going, Lou?"

Her face turned slowly toward me. I'd covered her jaw and neck with a layer of cadaver skin, which would not replace the derma she had lost, but would protect her exposed muscles until we grew enough of her own skin in the burn lab to begin grafts. Her lips, which had been cut off by her attackers, would be restored in the cosmetic phase of treatment. If we made it that far.

"Shi. Dee." Heat damage to her larynx and lungs made her gasp out words in a strangled whisper. "Drik."

I brought her water cup and straw to her ruined mouth, but she turned away. "Come on, take a sip for me."

"Real. Drik," she rasped out. "Whis. Key."

"On top of all the drugs you got for ripping out your lines?" I made a tsking sound. "I do that, you'll float right out of this room."

"Fuh. Kig. Crack. Her." She showed me the jagged remains of her shattered front teeth.

"Not me, babe." I stroked a finger across her forehead, one of the few places on her upper body where she hadn't been beaten, stabbed, or burned.

"I'm more caramel than cracker."

"You. Sis. Der?"

Explaining my mutt lineage would take forever, and sadly, she would never see the color of my skin. "Yeah, I'm a sister."

"Hell. Me." One of her bandaged arms jerked up, batting mine. Heat had fused all her fingers together, but she managed to rest them on top of my wrist.

"Hell. Me. Go. Sha. Eel."

Shawneel was her son's name. From the autopsy report, I knew the men had taken their time killing him. "You'll be with him again someday, Lou. Not just yet, though."

She didn't like that, and began choking out abbreviated screeches and fighting the foam cradle holding her body above the hospital bed. Her movements created stress on her deep burns, and scarlet-tinged suppuration bloomed over her bandages. The resulting pain made her vitals spike, setting off three monitor alarms, bringing the charge nurse came in with a crash cart.

"All right, hon, you've got to chill out for me." I quickly prepared a syringe and injected her through the IV, then watched the monitors. "This will help, now, settle down."

She struggled to take a deep breath. "Give. Me. More." Low, hitching sounds came from her chest. Luisa couldn't cry tears anymore, but she could sob. "Hell. Me. Die."

"Try to get some sleep." My own eyes blurred as I turned away from the bed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

* * *

My afternoon surgery began with Debbie Johnson, a fifteen year old female with comminuted naseoethmoid orbital fractures from a bad fall. According to the original trauma report, the teenager had fallen down some stairs at home and landed on her nose, breaking it. The intake ER physician had simply slapped a bandage on her face and sent her home.

Deb's mother had brought her back when the swelling disappeared and they took off the bandage. And saw the entire right side of her face sagged two inches lower than the left.

The complex union of bones in the central midface were the most difficult to reconstruct. Early open repair to reduce and stabilize bone fragments would have prevented that, but the damage was done, and now I was on cleanup. Two hours later, I told her parents that I'd been able to successfully restore contour and support. With one more soft tissue operation and no complications, Debbie would likely regain her preinjury appearance. How long she would keep it was up to her mother, and me.

After reviewing Debbie's x-rays and medical history, I'd taken a little ride past her home. Then I chatted with a neighbor, and confirmed that Debbie Johnson lived in a single story house with no basement.

There were no stairs in her house.

I pulled Mrs. Johnson to one side. "I'd like you to call my office later, if you

would." I felt Debbie's father, who was a factory worker and built as if God had followed World Wrestling Federation guidelines, watching us. "I'll need some other information from you."

She tensed. "Like what?"

I turned my back toward Mr. Johnson. "Just some standard medical questions. I want to make sure Debbie doesn't suffer a reinjury." I pressed the card listing the number for the abused woman's shelter into her hand. "Here's the number to call."

Debbie's father clamped one of his paws on his wife's thin shoulder. "We'll do whatever it takes to get our little girl better, doc," he said, bending to kiss her cheek. "Won't we, sweetheart?"

She nodded and quickly tucked the card into her purse.

"Good." What Mrs. Johnson didn't know was, if she *didn't* call the shelter in the next twenty-four hours, I'd report both of them for aggravated child abuse.

My second operation did not go so well. Like Debbie, Luther Marton had experienced severe craniofacial trauma - in his case, an ex-wife wielding a baseball bat. She should have tried out for the Yankees; her one slug to his head had blown out and destroyed all four walls of internal orbits of his skull. In order to fix his crushed eye sockets, I had to extend the surgical exposure of the fractures, reduce and rigidly stabilize the bones with dozens of microplates, an entire sheet of metal mesh and delicate split calvarial bone grafts. If the patient's eyes were ever going to function normally again, total orbital reconstruction was the only way to go.

"Shit." I tossed aside a bloody probe and looked into my scope again. Because internal orbit bone was so thin and weak, it was easily damaged - the same way Humpty Dumpty would be, after being pushed off the Empire State Building. "Luther, you're making me want to Teflon your damn head back together."

It took another five hours to complete the basic foundation building, then I closed and sent him off the recovery. It would be a week or two before I'd know if the combination of plates, mesh and grafts would hold, and Luther was still going to need more work. A lot more.

Once I'd followed up on both patients and spoke to the cops about Luther's prognosis (the ex-Mrs. Marton was pending trial for assault charges) I was more than ready to drag myself home. I stopped outside the burn unit, then forced myself to continue out of the hospital. The charge nurse would page me if anything changed - and seeing Luisa twice in one day would only agitate her mental and physical condition.

And if I keep repeating that, I thought as I walked out into the private physician's parking lot, I may even convince myself of it by Christmas.

I could fix my patients on the outside, but I could never erase or avenge what had been done to them. I couldn't heal the wounds that didn't show up on the CT scans and the x-rays. And while I could deal with the victims of accidents, I couldn't really help the Bryans and Debbies and Luisas.

No one could.

I didn't see the two men approaching me until they were only a few yards away. I didn't recognize them, but they were well dressed in nice suits and looked like a couple of doctors.

"Good evening," one of them said, nodding to me as we passed each other.

Before I could reply, something hard and blunt hit me in the back of the head, sending me staggering forward. Pain went off like a landmine inside my skull as the two men caught me by the arms. Then the one who had spoken covered my face with a square of damp cloth.

What the hell. . . I tried to hold my breath, too late. Roses filled my head.
Is that...perfume?

Whatever it was, it knocked me out four seconds later.

* * *

Later I found out that the men had stuffed me into my own Jeep and drove me to the airport. I remained unconscious throughout the ride, and the chartered flight from O'Hare. I didn't wake up until the next morning, and found myself locked in a gorgeous but unfamiliar bedroom filled with pricey antiques. The headache that woke me up was extensive and only enhanced by my abductor's use of the flowery-scented chemical anesthetic.

Plus someone had undressed me down to my bra and panties.

Once I found my clothes (clean and neatly folded on the end of the bed) I spent the next hour pounding on the door and screaming myself hoarse calling

for help. There were no windows, and the only other door lead into a private bath that had no windows. My watch told me I'd been unconscious for eleven hours.

Once my voice started reaching frogdom, I sat down on the bed and tried to piece together what had happened to me. My last clear memory was being attacked and knocked out in the parking lot. I had no idea where I was, or who the two suits were. Someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to abduct me, but why?

I was financially secure but by no means wealthy. Neither was my family. What few relationships I'd had in the past had ended amicably, and I hadn't dated anyone for the last two years. I hadn't ever fired anyone, so it couldn't be a disgruntled ex-employee, and as far as I knew none of my former patients held a grudge. And who dumps someone they want to hurt in a bedroom with Queen Anne furniture and red satin bed sheets?

I should have figured it out when the door opened and a pretty blond woman carrying a tray walked in, but I was still stunned at the thought of me being abducted.

"*Bonjour*, Dr. Whitman." She set down the tray, then came over to me and held out her hand. "Welcome to *Le Petite Jardin*."

Cyprien's secretary.

Sitting there with my mouth open wasn't going to get me out of here, so I jumped to my feet and ran for the door. And smacked face-first into one of the suits, who had a chest like concrete.

"Phillipe will not permit you to pass, doctor." Éleine Selvais sounded almost apologetic as the goon gently turned me around to face her. "I've brought you a salad and sandwiches for lunch. Blue cheese dressing is your favorite, is it not? And turkey with mayonnaise and romaine lettuce on whole wheat."

"Your boss had me kidnapped?" Dull heat rose into my face. "Is he out of his fucking mind?"

"That you must discuss that with Mr. Cyprien tonight. For now, you should eat something." She gestured at the tray like one of the showcase models on *The Price Is Right*. "I brought water, but would you prefer tea, coffee, or something else to drink?"

"I prefer to be in Chicago." Since she was in *LaLaland*, I turned to Phillipe. "Kidnapping is federal rap, pal. Let me out of here, right now, and I won't press charges." Oh yes, I would. *Everyone* was going to jail for this little stunt.

"Regrettably, Phillipe does not speak English." Éleine smiled at me. "Nor do any of the other staff." She went to the door. "I will return for your tray in an hour. *Bon appetit*."

"You can't do this." I tried to follow, but Phillipe blocked me again. "Get Cyprien and tell him I want to talk to him," I called over his shoulder. "Now!"

Éleine came back for my tray as promised, but only repeated that her boss would see me later that evening. I tried a different tact and told her about Luisa and the other patients who were depending on me back home.

"These people, they will go to another doctor," she told me, dismissing everything with a wave of her hand. "Mr. Cyprien cannot."

"Of course he can see another surgeon, there are thousands of them in the South -"

She shook her head. "None of them are quick enough."

Everything became clear in that instant. Six months ago, the medical editor of Time magazine had sent a reporter to interview me about Luisa. I'd brushed him off, but someone at the hospital talked about me, and how quick I was with a scalpel. The reporter decided on speed as his angle, and surreptitiously timed me against twelve top surgeons performing the same procedure around the globe.

The article had been titled, "*Vanessa Whitman, Fastest Scalpel in the World.*"

"Just because I'm quick doesn't mean he'll heal faster." I grabbed her arm as she went to the door. "Tell him that."

"You can tell him yourself." With a surprisingly strong grip, she removed my hand from her arm. "Tonight, at dinner." She waved at the armoire across from the bed. "You'll find suitable garments in there. Please be ready by seven p.m." Out she went, and Phillippe shut the door in my face.

I stalked around the room for a few minutes before sheer curiosity made me open the armoire. There were dozens of fancy-looking gowns in a rainbow of colors hanging inside, a row of low-heeled pumps sitting beneath them. The drawers at the base contained piles of silk lingerie.

The assortment didn't bug me as much as discovering everything, right down to the high-cut panties, was exactly my size.

* * *

I stayed in my own clothes, which earned me a frown from Phillippe when he opened the door at seven p.m. on the dot.

"*Vous êtes très têtu,*" he murmured, sounding almost miffed.

"Yeah, you're a laugh a minute, too." I looked down both sides of the hallway outside the door, but all I saw were more doors. Wherever I was, the place was huge. "Where is he?"

Phillippe gestured toward the left, and paced me as I stomped off in that direction. We went down some old stairs, through a labyrinth of more pricey antiques, and ended up in a cavernous formal dining room. Only one place had been set at the end of the table.

"Uh-uh." I shook my head as Phillippe pulled out a chair. "Go get your boss."

"Sit down, Dr. Whitman," a deeper male voice said from behind me. When I whirled, there was no one there. Then I spotted the intercom set into the wall. "My assistant has prepared a delicious meal for you," the disembodied voice said over the little speaker.

"I'm not hungry. Can we get on with it? I have patients waiting for me."
And cops to call. And charges to press.

"Perhaps it is better that you not eat yet. *Phillippe, apportez-la moi.*"

Phillippe guided me back out of the dining room and down another flight of stairs, this time into what appeared to be a basement level. It was cooler and darker here, the furniture older, the floor tiled with what appeared to be gold-shot

black marble. No hot water heaters or tool racks in Cyprien's basement; in fact it was nicer than the upper levels. As if this is where he really lived.

Maybe he's afraid of being bombed. I saw a strange arrangement of red velvet curtains hanging from the ceiling, all draped around a boxy four poster bed. A familiar smell hit my nose, and I scanned the room, trying to identify it.

"I am here, Dr. Whitman." A curtain twitched. "Please prepare yourself before you look."

Prepare myself. I'd seen people so badly injured and mutilated that they no longer resembled anything even remotely human - and he was worried his sagging jowls would shock me? I strode up to the bed, tugged back the curtain, and looked inside.

J.S. Cyprien didn't have sagging jowls.

He didn't have a face, period.

"Dear Christ." I leaned over him, reaching for the mass of twisted scar tissue that covered the front of his misshapen skull. It was completely healed, and had covered his forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks and chin. His straight hair was black from crown to nape, but had turned completely white all around his face. His ears were gone, and his mouth was an uneven hole at the bottom. "What the hell happened to you?"

"It is difficult to explain."

"Try." I began gently palpating the raddled flesh to feel the distorted bone beneath it. His twisted skin felt cool and dry to the touch, and the smell of roses between us intensified.

"I had an unfortunate accident." The hole stretched out, as if Cyprien was trying to smile. "You're not frightened by my appearance."

"I'm not easily spooked." But I was. I'd never seen a patient with such injuries who had been allowed to heal like this. Next to him, Luisa was a supermodel. "Mr. Cyprien, am I the first physician to examine you?"

"No." His mouth might be a mess, but his voice came out clear and beautiful. "I had thought a female doctor might be too sensitive, so I sent for one of your male colleagues. He told me he could do nothing for me." The hole twisted. "And then he threw up all over my bed."

My cast-iron stomach was fine, but I wasn't too sure about how my ears were working. "Are you saying you were never treated for these injuries at the time you received them?"

"No. It was not possible." His voice softened a degree. "As you can see, I am something of a medical challenge."

"To say the least." I performed a more thorough examination, surveying the map of ruin from the top of his cranium to the rather precise line at his throat where the scars abruptly ended. What my hands were telling me couldn't be true. "Who or what did this to your face?"

"I was severely beaten, then subjected to . . . immersion in an acidic liquid." He lifted a hand - the long, pale hand of a clever artist - and touched what had been his right cheek. "I remained unconscious for some time, and when I awoke, my injuries had healed."

That he wasn't dead was a miracle, but what he was telling me didn't make sense. "Do you suffer from Paget's disease?"

"No."

Yet I was feeling intact surfaces under the skin. "Did someone treat you while you were unconscious? Operate on you?"

"No."

I took my hands away and sighed. "If you're going to lie to me, Mr. Cyprien, I can't help you."

"I spontaneously heal."

I couldn't help the burst of laughter that came out of me. "Uh-huh. And I can set fires with the power of my thoughts. Want me to light the fireplace?"

"Phillipe, j'ai besoin d'un couteau."

The *couteau* turned out to be a long, sharp dagger, which Phillipe placed in Cyprien's hand.

"Wait a minute." I stepped in, trying to grab the knife. "I don't need you to hurt yourself on top of this."

"I am willing to prove my claims, doctor." Cyprien lifted the dagger and slashed it across his palm, then turned it toward me. Blood ran sluggishly down to his wrist.

"Oh, for God's sake." I grabbed his wrist, and applied direct pressure.. Then my fingers tensed as I watched the edges of the deep gash pull together and close. In less than a minute, the wound disappeared, and I let go of his wrist. "Nice trick - how did you do it? Rubber knife?"

"I am not deceiving you." After a small hesitation, he handed me the dagger.

I studied the blade, which seemed real enough, but looked like it was coated with bronze or some kind of dark alloy. "Pretty. But it doesn't prove anything. Come on, tell me, what did you use? A packet of blood under some fake skin? How did you get it to close like that?"

He extended his arm. "Cut me yourself."

Did he think I'd get all female and shriek that I couldn't? I was a surgeon, for Christ's sake. "Give me the other one." When he did, I made a quick, shallow slash just above his elbow.

And watched the cut I'd made close and disappear.

I probed the newly-healed skin, looking for latex, rubber, and a fake blood packet - and found only flesh, tissue and bone.

"God." I dropped the knife and shuffled back a few steps. "What are you?"

"I am a victim of brutality, doctor. Nothing more." Cyprien sat up, and the sheet fell away from his bare chest. From the neck down, he could have easily graced the cover of any romance novel. From the neck up, he was a poster boy for Clive Barker. "Because of my . . . ability, I cannot seek conventional treatment. Surgery is almost out of the question."

Almost. All the pieces fell into place as I processed what he was telling me. "That's why you brought me here. You think I'm fast enough to beat that kind of healing?"

"If you are not," Cyprien said, "then my face is lost forever."

* * *

I made several demands that night. Some of them Cyprien agreed to, others he refused.

"I cannot travel to Chicago, and I cannot be admitted to a hospital. Tell Éleine what type of equipment you will need, and she will have it brought to the mansion." He lit a funny-looking black cigarette, which I snatched out of his hand. "You object to me smoking?"

"Not if you're on fire. Otherwise, yes." I dropped it on the ground and stomped it out. "Look, there are some things I can't do unless you're in the hospital. I'll need x-rays, blood work, CT scans - and we won't even discuss what the surgery itself will entail."

"Give a list of what you need to Éleine." He sounded tired, and made a weak gesture. "I must rest now. Go and have your dinner, doctor."

I thought of the bedroom I'd been locked in. "Am I still your prisoner?"

"I will speak with you tomorrow." He closed the curtain.

Phillipe escorted me back to the dining room, where I picked at a plate of designer food. Éleine reappeared, but ignored my protests and asked me for a list of equipment and supplies. Recklessly, I gave her a comprehensive list of enough stuff to fill a trauma clinic. She wrote everything down, thanked me, and departed.

I was locked in the bedroom after that, which answered my question about my residency status. I didn't sleep well, but things other than my own kidnapping were bothering me. How could I reconstruct that face if he healed as soon as I

cut into him? What kind of physiology allowed a patient to spontaneously heal like that? He should have been at one of the top research hospitals in the world, being worked on by the finest surgeons on the planet, not me.

And then there was the question of me. Cyprien had already gone as far as kidnapping. What would he do if I failed to fix his mess?

Not knowing, and not being able to sleep because of it made me grumpy. So did being kept in that room for a second day. I paced, I brooded, and then I took a long hot shower. Phillippe silently delivered my breakfast and lunch, and escorted me downstairs for dinner again. This time, there were two place settings, and Cyprien sat waiting for me.

He wore a red velvet robe with a generous hood pulled up to completely hide his face. "Good evening, Dr. Whitman. I hope you are well."

I ignored the faint, sweet smell of roses coming from him and yanked out my chair. "If I spend one more minute locked up in that damn room, I'll turn psychotic." I sat down, and glanced at his empty plate. Mine was filled with some kind of shrimp concoction. "Aren't you eating?"

"I cannot see to eat normally" -he gestured toward the space where his eyes should have been- "and my dietary requirements make it an unpleasant business to watch. Please, enjoy your food. I merely wished to provide you with some company."

I jabbed my fork into a shrimp. "Have you been able to do this all your life? Heal right away, I mean?"

"Regrettably, no. I acquired the ability as a young man."

"Does it run in your family?" I ignored the wine goblet Phillipe filled with something golden and bubbly and drank from my water glass. "Did either of your parents have the same ability?"

"No." He lifted his wine glass to his slash of a mouth, and sipped.

"It still could be genetic." I lost myself in the fantasy for a moment - being able to isolate a gene that enabled a human being to heal like that.. It might even lead to a cure for diseases like cancer and AIDs. "Mr. Cyprien, if I restore your features, will you allow me to run some tests on you? All I need - "

"No."

I began to explain the enormous benefits medical research could gain from studying him, until he held up one of his hands.

"Dr. Whitman, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but my ability does not come without a heavy price." He finished his wine and rose. "If you're finished, perhaps we can adjourn to my chambers? You can inspect your equipment."

He lost me. "What equipment?"

"Élaine obtained what you requested." He came to me and offered his arm, and I realized he was a lot taller than I'd thought. "Come, I'll show you."

Ten minutes later I sat down on the edge of the surgical table, unable to grasp anymore. All around me, diagnostic equipment hummed and blinked. A glass-paneled cabinet sat full of the latest supplies and tools. There was a portable lab and x-ray machine with their related processors, and the latest in alloplastic and autogenous grafting materials, the most perishable of which were stowed in a refrigerated case.

"I can't believe this." I stared up at Cyprien. "This isn't equipment. This is a field hospital."

He sat beside me and looked around. "It is what you will need, is it not?"

"Uh, yeah. I could treat a hundred patients here." I pushed myself off the table and tapped the surface. "You get to be first."

I took blood and tissue samples, using syringes that appeared to be made from the same bronze metal as the knife. "Why aren't these needles stainless steel?"

"Copper is the only metal that can penetrate my skin."

"Get out of here." I took out the needle and watched the tiny hole it had left disappear. "What moron told you that?"

He sighed and rubbed his arm. "Think of it as a severe allergy."

To keep from snickering, I rolled over the portable x-ray and did a half dozen plates on his head. Luckily I still remembered how to develop them from my intern days. Once the films were developed, I placed them on a light table and studied the results.

The results were unspeakable. "Oh boy."

"How bad is it?" Cyprien got off the exam table and joined me.

"This might be your skull. I think." I followed the jagged contours of his distorted bones with a finger, then remembered he couldn't see. "Sorry. It looks like someone put a puzzle together with all the pieces jammed in the wrong places." I glanced up at him. "How are you able to walk around without bumping into things?"

"I have retained an excellent proximity sense." He reached out and tapped the end of my nose with one finger. "And your voice is very easy to follow."

"Mom always said she could hear me a block away." I studied the films for a few more minutes. "I'll need to see any other x-rays of your head, prior to the accident - "

"There are none."

It wasn't my lucky night. "Okay, then I'll need to see a photograph of what you looked like before this."

"I've never been photographed."

"You're kidding." I released a frustrated breath. "You're not. Great. How am I supposed to restore your face if I don't know what it looked like?"

He turned in the direction of our chaperone. "*Phillipe, obtenez la peinture de la bibliothèque et apportez-l'au docteur.*"

Phillipe disappeared, then returned carrying of all things, a huge painting. It looked to be a few hundred years old, and featured a man dressed in some kind of dark-colored armor sitting on a black horse.

The face of the man in the painting was handsome, if a little cruel. Maybe he was upset about all the dead bleeding bodies around the feet of the horse.

"Nice picture, but that's not going to help."

"Before the accident, I looked exactly like the man in the portrait."

"This badass knight on a black horse?" I asked, to be sure - after all, Phillipe could have picked the wrong painting. "He looks like he wants to kick some serious butt."

His mouth bent up on the ends. "He was considered to be a rather handsome, dashing fellow in his time."

"The Mel Gibson of the Dark Ages." The painting was actually quite detailed for its time, I saw as I got up close to it and studied the face. "I can't give you back the mustache and beard, and you'll need to dye your hair to get rid of the Cruella DeVille effect, but I can work off the features. If I can keep you from healing around my scalpel."

"I have also had all the instruments coated with copper." He gestured toward the cabinet, then made a three-sixty. "Is there anything else you require for my surgery?"

"Yeah." I laughed the word. "Some interns, plenty of nurses, an anesthesiologist, a sterile environment and at least a week to prepare the graft materials."

"I will serve as your nurse," Éleine said as she joined us. "The alloplastic grafts are already prepared."

This situation was a chuckle a minute. "I prefer to harvest my own, thanks, and what do you know about surgery?"

"I know enough to hand you the correct instruments." She turned to Cyprien. "Shall I set up the trays now, *monsieur*?"

Cyprien nodded. "Dr. Whitman, if you would prepare for surgery, please."

"Now?" I looked at both of them, aghast. "But I haven't even had time to check your blood work."

"That is not necessary. You have everything you need, and the skill to do the work." Cyprien went back to the table. "We will do the rest."

"And what if you die under the knife?" I demanded. "What happens to me?"

His faceless head turned my way. "I can promise you only one thing, doctor. Whatever you do to me on that table, I will survive." There was a click behind me, and I turned to see Phillipe holding a sizeable gun pointed at my head. "I cannot say the same for you, if you do not operate on me tonight."

* * *

I don't argue with guns, but I did make one final protest to Éleine as we scrubbed. "I can't keep him anesthetized and do the cutting."

"That will not be a problem." She tugged on my gloves for me like a pro. "Mr. Cyprien does not require anesthesia."

I ripped the gloves off. "That does it, I'm outta here."

"*Vous l'aidez,*" Phillipe said, making a jabbing motion with his gun toward the operating table, where Cyprien lie waiting.

"I can't operate on a conscious patient," I said, through gritted teeth. "He won't be able to stand the pain. He'll *fight* me." The big French goon simply cocked his gun. "I'm a doctor, not a butcher. Go ahead and shoot, I'm not going to do it."

"He will not move," Éleine said, putting fresh gloves on me. "He will enter a trance state, and remain in it until you are finished." She held out a mask. "You must trust us, Dr. Whitman. We know what we are doing."

Phillipe have me a shove toward the table.

I went along with it, figuring on getting a scalpel and slashing my way out of there. Yet when I checked Cyprien, he appeared to be unconscious - heart rate and BP were low, and his breathing was regular and steady. There were some doctors who advocated using hypnotism to put patients under for minor procedures, but I'd never heard of one doing it for comprehensive cranial surgery.

The blonde pushed the instrument tray between us. "Shall we begin?"

Sweat ran down the back of my gown, and my hands were shaking so much I didn't think I could hold a suction tube. Then I felt something touch the back of my neck, and a weird, tickling sensation on the inside of my skull. The smell of roses was so strong I almost vomited.

Then I watched my now rock-steady hand stretch out. "Scalpel."

What happened then was unlike any surgical experience I'd ever had - I seemed to go on some kind of autopilot. Peeling back Cyprien's facial scar tissue had to be done in sections, but I knew the severed blood vessels would seal off themselves and the flaps would heal out of place. Testing a theory, I created a tiny flap, allowed it to heal, then abrading the underside of the flap and the foundation site, then pressed them back together. The reattachment was almost instantaneous. Once I'd confirmed that, I sliced off Cyprien's face, pulled it out of the way, and began the work to repair the massive damage to his skull.

Distorted bone stretched from his upper cranium down to the mandible, but his eyes were intact and the pupils reacted to light. One part of my mind was

screaming at me that he could see, hear and definitely feel everything I was doing to him, but something larger and stronger than that kept me functioning. I snapped out orders for instruments as my hands flew. The bone healed at a slightly slower rate than his tissue, but still required me to operate at top speed.

As I excised and grafted, I began to create new surfaces that meshed and hardened beneath my fingertips. It was more like sculpting marble than operating on bone. I rebuilt each zygomatic arch, each lateral orbital rim, and reinforced the nasion. The distribution of healed fractures went far beyond any LeFort III case I'd ever seen. Once I extended the length of his cheekbones and got to the upper mandible, I found two unusual bilateral abscesses in his upper palate that appeared to be congenital.

"He has two holes in the top of his mouth," I muttered. "Was he born with some form of cleft palate?"

"His *dents acérées*," Éleine told me. "You must not close them."

"Right." I accepted that like she was Chief of Surgery and went on to repair the damage to his jaw. The little voice inside me shrieking for me to stop and think about what I was doing had finally gone away, which was good - his jaw was a real bitch to put to rights. Once the bones were finished, I reattached Cyprien's face and went to work on his facial scars..

My patient never twitched a muscle.

Twelve hours later, I put the final tuck in one corner of Cyprien's new mouth, waited for it to heal into place, then set aside my scalpel. "Give me some saline on a sponge." When the blonde handed it to me, I began wiping the blood

and bits of bone from his newly-healed skin. "How does he come out of this trance?"

"Call his name."

"Mr. Cyprien - "

"Jacques-Sebastien."

"Jacques-Sebastien," I repeated dutifully.

The eyelids I'd remade for him blinked, then opened. "It is over?"

"*Oui, maître. La chirurgie était un succès.*" Éleine sounded like she was ready to burst into song. "*Vous êtes vous-même encore.*"

Cyprien reached up and tentatively touched his face, then gazed at me.

"Do I look like the man in the painting?"

I should have been exhausted, grouchy, and ready to deck someone. Someone who wasn't me smiled with my mouth and talked with my voice. "You look wonderful." I, however, was about to keel over. The floral scent overwhelmed me, as if someone was stuffing roses into my mouth and nose.

"*Merci, docteur.*" He sat up, swung his legs off the table and gestured for Phillipe, who hurried over. His new face looked wonderful, but he was deathly pale, and trembling. "*Je dois chasser.*"

"You are too weak for that." Éleine clamped her arm around my waist and guided me toward him. "Don't you agree, Dr. Whitman?"

An invisible string made my head bob. "He should definitely rest for at least forty-eight hours."

Cyprien made a weary gesture. "Stop it, Éleine. She has done enough."

"She will not mind this one last service." A slim hand stroked my hair..
"Will you, Vanessa?"

I couldn't reply, I was too busy staring into Cyprien's eyes. When I was operating on him, I could have sworn they were blue. But now they had darkened, as if the pupils had expanded to crowd out the pretty irises. A delayed reaction to the trauma of the surgery, or maybe something else . . .

I stopped smelling roses, and started smelling him.

His scent was like his eyes, deep and dark and filled with secrets. Secrets that tugged at me like unseen hooks in my chest and pelvis. His eyes seemed to be bottomless, stretching straight back through his skull into eternity, like those two abscesses I'd seen, endless and enigmatic and swallowing up the light . . .

His hands were still shaking when he cradled my face between them.
"*Pardonnez-moi, cherie.*" He was lisping a little, but maybe it was because he had grown two enormous fangs.

Funny. I frowned a little as strands of his white hair tickled my cheek. *I don't remember giving him those.*

Then he turned my face to one side, and used them on me.

* * *

"I think I called every emergency room in the state of Illinois," Ginny was saying when I woke up. "Don't ever do that to me again, Ness."

I looked around the hospital room, then at my office manager. "Won't," I croaked out.

"Shit!" She jumped up from the chair beside my bed and grabbed my hand. "You're awake, oh thank God, I told them you were too tough, damn it." She burst into tears.

My throat hurt, my head hurt, my eyelids hurt. "Sallright, Gin." I had no memory to explain why I was an inpatient, but something told me I was lucky to be breathing. I closed my eyes and held on to her hand. "Be fine."

I stayed in Intensive Care for another day before they moved me down to a regular room. Gin was the one who told me how I'd been found, unconscious and near death, in the ladies room at the airport. Several of my colleagues had appointed themselves to my case and were quite eager to know what had happened, and how I'd nearly bled to death when I had no physical wounds to speak of. The last thing I could remember was leaving the hospital and walking to my Jeep. The next thing I knew, I was in ICU, listening to Ginny cry.

According to the police officer who took my statement, I'd been missing for three days.

After undergoing every possible test under the sun to explain my blood loss, my colleagues threw up their hands and discharged me. Ginny drove me home and stayed to fix me dinner and settle me in.

"I'll stay the night, if you want company," she offered.

"No, I think I need to be alone." I smiled at her. "Thanks, hon."

When she left, I turned off all the lights, and sat in the dark. I should have been hysterical or at least a little upset about whatever had happened to me, but something inside me seemed to be waiting. Like I was keeping an appointment I

didn't know I'd made.

I didn't even jump when the front door bell rang.

I opened the door to find a tall, good looking man in a dark coat on my threshold. He was carrying a briefcase like an attorney, but wore his long hair in a ponytail. Strange how all the hair around his face was white. "Yes?"

"Good evening, Dr. Whitman." His voice was soft, and he had a distinct accent. *French?* "May I come in?"

I never let a stranger in my house in my life, but I felt as if I knew him - and knew he wouldn't hurt me. "Yes, of course."

I thought I smelled roses as he walked past me into my house. Maybe he delivered flowers on the side. Wouldn't have minded getting a bouquet from him myself -he was really cute.

The man refused my offer of a drink and a seat, and placed the briefcase on my coffee table. "This is yours."

"I don't think so." I examined the case. "Mine is brown, not black."

"I mean, I brought it for you." He walked up to me and briefly pressed his fingertips to the back of my neck. "It is time for you to wake up, Vanessa."

Mr. Cyprien is in great need - Your boss had me kidnapped? - I am something of a medical challenge - Jacques-Sebastien - She will not mind -

The smell of roses. The touch of his hands. The brush of his hair over my skin.

Pardonnez-moi, cherie

I remembered everything - the abduction, the house in New Orleans, the terribly scarred man, the illegal surgery I'd been forced to perform. And something worse. Something so horrifying that it couldn't have happened outside of a nightmare. But it had.

The son of a bitch had torn out my *throat*. With his *teeth*.

"You." I stumbled backward, banging into a chair and nearly falling on my backside. "What did you do? How did you make me forget all that?"

"It was necessary, to bring you back here." He watched me from the grave, beautiful face I'd given back to him. "Vanessa, I am so sorry."

"Sorry?" Rage pumped into my veins. "After what you did to me? After what . . . you did . . ." I touched the side of my neck. The skin was smooth and unbroken. My last memory was of him turning my face to the side and ripping into my throat with his teeth. No, his fangs. "You're a monster."

"Yes, I am." He didn't seem too worried about it. "You must make a choice now, *cherie*. I can make you forget everything for good, or you can agree to keep what happened confidential."

He'd torn into me with his teeth and drank my blood, and he wanted me to make that doctor-patient privileged?

"I am not so different from your other patients." He circled around me. "You operate on abnormal structures of the body, to improve function and approximate a normal appearance. In repairing the damage to my face, you restored my identity, my ability to function."

"Your function being to tear out the throats of women and drink their blood." I couldn't look away from his eyes. They were bright blue now, but I remembered them from before - those terrible, twin pits of black hell that had dragged me to him. "I can't believe these words are coming out of my mouth, but you're a . . . a vampire, aren't you?"

"I am *vrykolakas*. It is almost the same. I am what Nature decreed me to be." He studied me for a moment. "Without my features and my sight, I could not hunt. You gave me back my purpose, Vanessa.."

I felt sick. "And you tried to kill me for it."

"That was a mistake. My need was too great. I was only able to stop before I killed you because . . ." he trailed off and shook his head. "I cannot explain this now. Can you keep the matter private and tell no one?"

No one would believe me if I told them, and someone would have me committed if I ever tried. "Yes, damn it!"

He smiled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." I pointed to the door. "Get the hell out of my house."

Cyprien took a card from his pocket, and dropped it on the table beside the briefcase. "You will need to talk to me soon. Please call me.. *Au revoir*, Vanessa."

I didn't breathe until the door closed behind him. Then I kicked the coffee table, and the briefcase bounced to the floor and popped open. I didn't have to count the stacks of money that fell out to know how much it was.

One point five million dollars, cash.

* * *

Time passed, and things changed. Not for the better.

I never really recovered from my ordeal, and then I became very ill. I did some discreet tests and discovered that the transfusion that had saved my life also gave me a rare blood disease. Research to cure my condition obsessed me, and I spent long hours in the office at night, performing private tests. I lost weight and didn't sleep much at all. What I eventually learned from my experiments left me speechless.

If what I suspected was true, I had no options.

Two months after my abduction, I removed myself from the hospital call list, closed my office, found jobs for my staff, and referred my patients to other surgeons. I gave Cyprien's money to Luisa's mother, in trust for her daughter's treatment, and walked out of the housing project before she could finish sobbing out her thanks.

Then I did less orthodox research, and flew to Greece. There I spent a week mangling Greek from a phrase book until I found an elderly village Priest who could speak English. He and I discussed ancient superstitions about damned and corrupt souls in the garden outside his church. He gave me the last of the answers I needed before I returned to the States.

I never stopped smelling roses, the entire time I was traveling.

I knew I had reached the final stage of my disease when the taxi delivered me to *Le Petit Jardin*. Éleine met me at the door, and for a moment, I thought she might slam it in my face.

"Don't even think about it," I said, and pushed past her. I was so weak I could have happily dropped to the floor, curled up and died, but I thought of Luisa and kept shuffling forward. Phillipe appeared and, after a worried look at Éleine, helped me down the stairs to Cyprien's private chamber.

"Hello, Vanessa." Jacques-Sebastien was painting something gorgeous on a canvas, but set aside his pallet and dropped his brush in a jar of solvent. "I expected you to arrive weeks ago."

"I bet you did." I lowered myself into a comfortable chair, then sighed. "The condition is an interesting one. I had to burn about ten pounds of research notes before I went to Greece. I assume there are others?"

"Yes." He wiped his hands with a paint-stained cloth before coming over to sit across from me. He was barefoot, I noticed, absently admiring his feet. "You want to know how it will be."

"I've guessed most of it. My human blood cells are being replaced by some very unique aberrant cells. They look a little like cancer, but they're a hundred times more invasive and destructive. They in turn have altered my bone, tissue and nerves cells to accept my altered metabolism." I folded my arms, ignoring the gnawing pain in my limbs. "What I want to know is, why? Why did you transfuse me with your own blood?"

"I took too much from you, that night, after the surgery. You would have died without it." He stared at his toes. "It was wrong of me, I know."

I could see why someone would want to beat and burn the face off him. "So now I turn into what you are."

"Yes."

I already knew the answer to the next question, but I wanted to see him squirm. "There's no cure, no way to stop it, is there?" He shook his head. "When you came to me in Chicago, you weren't going to wipe out my memories. You were going to kill me before I transitioned. While I was still human enough to die."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you?"

"Kill you?" He met my gaze. "I thought if you could accept me being a monster, then you had a chance to accept what was happening to you."

I touched the tip of my tongue to the two abscesses forming in the roof of my mouth. Inside them were my newly-formed *dents acérées*.

AKA my fangs.

"I'll never be able to practice medicine again." I wondered how hard it would be to decapitate him. The Priest said that was one of the few ways we could be killed, and I was truly tempted. "You took that away from me. You took my life away from me."

"You are still alive. We have long needed a healer among our kind." Jacques-Sebastien leaned forward. "You can even continue to help humans, if you wish."

"By feeding on them, and killing them?" I rubbed my aching temple. "Terrific idea. I can see them lining up outside my new office in droves."

"There are other ways." He smiled a little. "I will teach you."

Phillipe came up to me, and knelt down beside my chair. "*Vous ferez un beau chasseur, Vanessa.*"

I didn't have to know French to understand what he was saying - a little side benefit of the disease, I could read people's thoughts, whatever language they spoke.

You will make a beautiful hunter, Vanessa.

I thought of Bryan's mother, Debbie's father, and Luisa's attackers.

"Maybe I will."

A Personal Injustice

"A personal injustice is stronger motivation than any instinct for philanthropy." -

--- "A Son of the Circus" by John Irving

"She's a little young for you, don't you think?"

The man kneeling over the unconscious teenager scowled up at me. "Get lost, bitch."

"As it happens, I am." I scanned the filthy alley from end to end, but we were alone. I set my medical case down, out of the way where it wouldn't get kicked or stomped. "I don't suppose you could stop assaulting that girl long enough to tell me how to get to Johnson Avenue."

He jumped up and came at me with the knife he'd been using on the girl's clothes. "I'll cut your fucking throat."

Child rapists. Always so cranky when someone interrupted their fun.

I waited until he was close, then grabbed his wrist. The knife quivered between us, a quarter inch from my neck. He grunted, pushed, and then froze in place – just like his blade.

"Where's this famous southern hospitality I've heard so much about?" I tightened my grip. "You're giving Atlanta a bad rep, you know."

"Fuh-uh-" his eyes bulged out, and the knife fell from his fingers. "Uh-uh-"

My probe rendered him temporarily incoherent - none of the other rapists, abusers and killers I'd met had been very chatty when I'd picked through their memories. I didn't like digging through his mind trash, but I needed to know if he

had any other girls stashed elsewhere. The one in California had locked three little boys in a cellar, and I'd barely gotten to them in time.

Happily, my attacker preferred the one-on-one approach, with desperate runaway girls as his main victim of choice. He was a real gem, too. None of his victims had ever come forward; only being caught in the act had earned him any jail time. He'd just been released from prison yesterday, after spending twenty months as a model prisoner and chaplain's aide.

"You're a bad boy, Raymond." I clamped my other hand around his neck, and walked him back toward the wall. "Swearing you found Christ when you hadn't even been looking for him." I tsked. "That parole officer of yours is going to be so disappointed."

Because I wasn't letting him have any air, all he could do was make little squeaky noises. His head bounced a little as the back of it hit brick, then he tried kicking me with one of his work boots. I pinned him with my knees, watching as fear and pain made his face into a cartoon. I could almost see the question mark form over the top of his head.

How? How? How? He was screaming behind his face.

"See, I don't look like it, Raymond, but I'm pretty strong." I broke his wrist and felt his carotid jump under my fingertips. "Bet that hurts. Well, you're really not going to like this part." I released him, then cradled his face between my palms. As he brought his good arm up to punch me, I jerked his head hard to the left. What breath there was left in his lungs emerged in a low liquid gurgle as he slid down the wall.

... warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife . . .

I stepped over his body, retrieved my case and went back to the girl. A quick exam revealed a nasty bump on her crown, some cuts and bruises, but no signs of oral or genital penetration. Since Raymond was not only a monster but also HIV positive, that was a small blessing.

The scent of her blood made me swallow hard.

I took out my cell phone, dialed 911 and requested an ambulance and the police. Before the operator could interrogate me, I ended the call. Climbing up to where I could observe without being detected was a bit of a bitch - I was wearing heels - but I refuse to use the other methods available to me. The paramedics arrived three minutes later, and once they had the girl strapped to a gurney I slipped down and silently retreated back to the street. That was where I smelled roses - deep, dark, full-blown roses, the kind you wanted to bury your face in.

"Vanessa."

I ignored the low, accented voice and kept walking.

"You promised to return and speak with me."

"I lied."

I knew he'd catch up to me. Cyprien never had learned how to take a brush-off. Of course, being five hundred years old and strong enough to toss a dumpster into orbit might have had something to do with that. "I don't need a coach. Go back to New Orleans."

He didn't. He caught up with me and paced me. I didn't have to look at him to know he was dressed in the usual black trench coat and Armani suit - standard uniform for the tasteful but trendy omnipotent immortal. Sometimes I wondered if they all went shopping together, like best girlfriends.

"We need you to come back to New Orleans."

I skirted around two prostitutes who eyed Cyprien like Santa had delivered early. "Do I really look that stupid to you?"

"You are a brilliant woman."

"I wasn't smart enough to dodge you, was I? And now look at me." I crossed the street against the light, making a taxi swerve. The driver stuck his head out the window and shouted his poor opinion of my mother. "Living the new life you gave me. Which sucks, by the way. Thank you very much."

He tugged me to a stop at the edge of the curb. "The child in that alley would disagree, I think."

"Would she? I was a heartbeat away from making her corpse number two." I finally looked up into his beautiful face - the face that I had reconstructed for him - then dragged in a deep breath. "You got what you wanted, Cyprien. I didn't. Fuck off."

"I would respect your privacy, but there is no one else who can do this." He dragged a hand through his hair, scattering the white strands around his face into the rest, which was long and black. "Some of our kind were captured and tortured. We need you to-"

"Our kind? We?" I wanted to grab the gun from my case and shoot him, but I hadn't loaded it. Stupid me. "You might want to rephrase that. Fast."

His brows, which had grown back in dark and nicely shaped, arched. "You cannot deny what you are, Vanessa. You are my *sygkenis*."

"You don't own me, you jerk. You victimized me." As the words left my lips, Phillipe and another of Cyprien's French thugs flanked me. "I won't be so easy to kidnap this time." I looked at Phillipe, who was giving me that faintly disapproving look. "What's your problem?"

"Vous ne devriez pas insulter le maître."

Good old Phillipe. Always the epitome of the devoted manservant. "He's not my master, and I can insult anyone I damn well feel like insulting." The threat of violence broke my shaky self-control, and two hollow, pointed teeth - my dents acérées - punched through the bilateral abscesses in my upper palate. I flashed my fangs for them. "Take a walk, boys. I'm hungry, and you're starting to resemble a double cheeseburger."

When Phillipe advanced, Cyprien lifted a hand, halting him in his tracks.. "You still wish to find the ones who attacked your burn patient in Chicago, don't you, Vanessa?"

I thought of Luisa Lopez, who had been raped, tortured, and nearly burned to death in a fire set to hide the crimes. Did I want to find the men responsible for that?

Hell, yes.

"I can find them myself." No, I couldn't, although I intended to keep trying.

"Your resources are limited; mine are not." Cyprien made a casual gesture. "Do this thing for me, and I will deliver these men into your hands.."

He had me. He had me and he knew it, the son of a bitch. "What thing? I want details this time. All the details."

"Come." He held out his arm. "I will tell you everything."

* * *

Cyprien whisked me off to Louisiana in his private jet. Another bonus of living for five hundred plus years, he had plenty of expensive toys. On the flight to New Orleans, he told me about the other vampires - he called them vrykolakas - whom he'd met in Europe five hundred years ago.

First he told me a about the fourteenth century, which had not been a happy time.

"Plague invaded every country through tainted meat and on the backs of rats. Twenty million died in only a few years, and most rotted where they dropped. Those of us who survived scattered. We traveled to exotic lands, hoping to escape the pestilence." He paused and looked out the small window at the rising sun. "Life was briefer then. Most women died giving birth. A man was old at thirty. It is ironic that the vrykolakas were born in such an age."

"Uh-huh." Daylight didn't instantly turn me to ash, but it did sting my eyes and irritate my skin. I reached over and pulled down the little window shade. "That would be when you and your pals became drunks, thieves, and murderers, then damned souls, doomed to rise from your graves, walk the earth forever, invade the dreams and live off the blood of the living."

"Yes."

"Excuse me for not weeping over this part of the fairytale." I yawned.

"Fairytale?" He stiffened. "You think I am lying to you?"

"I think you're a legend in your own mind, Cyprien. Have you or any of your fanged friends ever seen a doctor?" When he began to nod, I added, "Not the guy who doubled as the village barber - I mean a real, modern doctor?"

"No, of course not. We could not risk exposure." He leaned forward.

"Why?"

"I've seen a few since you infected me, and guess what? Damned souls have nothing to do with this."

"Indeed." He sounded mortally offended. "Then what, pray tell me, has made us what we are?"

"Disease. Five hundred years ago, you and the other members of the Dracula Club were all exposed to anthrax and bubonic plague. Your immune systems developed some very unusual antibodies that kept you from contracting those diseases. These same antibodies later became impregnated with another, as of yet unidentified virus - something much nastier than mad cow disease or the black death. Together, the viral-mutated antibodies accelerated your immune systems, eradicating cellular erosion, and did some even wonkier things to your DNA. You evolved into what you are as a result.

"Photo sensitivity is a bitch, but it doesn't kill you. The only thing that does that is dismemberment, burning or exposure to copper."

"There are other ways to kill us."

I folded my hands. "Name one."

"Holy water."

"It's not the holy part, Cyprien, it's the copper content that causes the dermal damage and, if ingested, poisons you." I closed my eyes. "Sorry to dispel another myth, but God really isn't pissed at you. You're just walking, talking pandemically-created mutants."

He was silent for a moment. "That does not explain how we are able to turn others into vrykolakas."

"Your blood passes the antibodies and the viral infection along." I opened my eyes and saw his expression. "Most people you try to turn don't make it, though, do they?"

"They do not. You are one of the few who have lived." His mouth curled. "Why, do you think, that is?"

"Not because I've been a bad girl. I went on a humanitarian visit to some Ethiopian refugee camps a few years ago. Before I went, I received vaccinations for anthrax and bubonic plague. I carry some of the same antibodies you did when you were infected." I felt the plane shift into a descent angle. "We're almost there. Cut to the chase and tell me what's happened."

He studied me for a moment. "Considering how quick you are to dismiss the mysteries of our kind-

"Providing a rational explanation for our condition is not dismissal, Cyprien. It's called medical science."

He put his cold hand over mine. "Science is not everything, Vanessa."

"You thought it was okay when you didn't have a face." When I'd first met Cyprien, someone had repeatedly crushed his skull and mutilated his face until he was no longer recognizable as anything remotely human. Recalling his injuries made me sigh. "Just tell me what's going on."

"The Church has long devoted itself to hunting the agents of Satan on earth – that would be us. In the fifteenth century, the Vatican created an order of soldier priests to identify, locate and destroy all vrykolakas. They are now called the special inquisitors."

I felt a surge of sympathy, and squeezed his hand. "And one of these wacko priests caught you."

"They did. They imprisoned me and tried to compel me to tell them where others could be found."

"But you got away."

Cyprien nodded at Phillipe, who was minding his own business at the front of the cabin. "I had help."

It was positively medieval. "What kind of torture do they use?"

"Beatings. Burnings. Long immersions in holy water. We do not drown, but as you say, the copper content has a detrimental effect on our skin. I was weakened from inadvertently swallowing some of it, as well." He studied his shoes. "Recently the inquisitors captured other vrykolakas. Phillipe and I were able to retrieve them."

Vampire medevac. I shook my head. "How many?"

"Four - Thierry Durand and three members of his immediate family.

Thierry's condition is more critical than the others."

"Define critical."

He removed an envelope from his breast pocket and withdrew a folded paper. "I made this the night we brought him to New Orleans."

Cyprien was an artist, and since vrykolakas have an aversion to being photographed, he had sketched what I assumed had once been a man.

"This is not an abstract, is it?" I stared at the wrecked, twisted body.

"Sadly, no."

The plane jostled us as the landing gear met runway and we touched down at New Orleans airport. "I'll take a look at them, but that's all I'll do."

Cyprien nodded. "Thank you, Vanessa."

* * *

An immortal alive since the dark ages had plenty of time to amass wealth, and Cyprien had used some of his to buy a beautiful mansion in New Orleans's Garden District. I'd only seen the grounds of Le Petite Jardin briefly, and at the time I hadn't been in the mood to appreciate the gorgeous gardens and manicured hedges of white tea roses.

It made me a little curious about him, too. "Why live in New Orleans? Wouldn't Paris be more suitable for an immortal artist?"

"I lived in Paris for three hundred years. America intrigued me." As the limo passed through the gates, he gave me a sideways look. "As do you, Vanessa."

I wasn't falling for that haunted thing he did with his eyes. "I'm here on business, Cyprien." I slid on my sunglasses. "Let's keep it that way."

Not everyone was happy to see me. Éline Servais, Cyprien's human secretary/companion/chief gopher looked down her nose as we walked in. She hadn't liked me from day one, but it was a girl competition thing.

"Dr. Whitman, what a pleasure to see you again." She inclined her head, showing off the smooth twisty thing she'd done to her pale hair.

Liar, liar, pants on fire, I thought back at her as I breezed by. "How's tricks, Blondie?"

"We have been very busy since your time with us." Her mind and face remained serene, but her voice chilled a few thousand degrees. She brushed some invisible lint off the sleeve of her immaculate navy blue suit. "I see you are well."

"Peachy." I was busy eyeing all the new guards. There were about a dozen of them manning the entrances and exits, and they were all carrying large caliber weapons. I glanced at Cyprien. "I haven't seen this many guns since I changed planes in D.C."

"A minor precaution. Thierry and the others were not supposed to escape. Rome wants them back." He guided me to an elegant drawing room filled with polished antiques. Everything was pale green and pink, with enough stripes and flowers and fussy things to make a house porn junkie foam at the mouth. "It will be a few hours before they wake. Would you care for some refreshment?"

"No thanks." Rather than sit, I put down my case on the nearest flat surface and opened it. "I brought my own."

Ever since I'd stopped being human, I had refused to bite people, and instead carried around copper-tipped syringes (stainless steel needles wouldn't penetrate my skin) and a small supply of plasma on ice. Experimentation made me discover that I could survive comfortably on 50 CCs of whole blood every day, or 100 CCs of plasma. I had no problem injecting myself in front of Cyprien, who watched with fascinated eyes.

"You use needles."

"It's like being a diabetic," I muttered as I felt the rejuvenating effects of the injection. I hated that part; I didn't want it to feel good.. "And most days, I almost believe that." I took out my other packs. "Would someone put these in the fridge? I don't feel like knocking over another blood bank today."

Phillipe came forward, took them from me, and disappeared.

Cyprien had poured himself a glass of very dark wine - from the smell, mostly blood with a little wine mixed in to preserve and/or dilute it. "I thought as a doctor, you could have free access to what you require."

"Since I'm no longer practicing medicine, I have no choice but to steal it." Another part of my new life that I despised. I watched him sip from his goblet.

"Who did you kill to get your fix?"

He made another of his elegant gestures. "We don't kill anymore, Vanessa. We convince humans to donate willingly."

"You mean, you hypnotize them, then you bleed them."

His mouth hitched. "You insist on putting everything into such stark terms."

"While you romance everything." The afterglow of transfusing usually made me languid, so I got to my feet and paced around the room. "What do you expect me to do for this Thierry guy and the others who were hurt?"

"Restore them, as you did me, if you can." He drained the glass and set it aside. "There is something else."

"I figured there was." I made a rolling motion with my hand.

"Thierry suffered a great deal of pain during his ordeal. He is . . ." Cyprien thought in French for a moment. *Fou . . . aliéné . . .*

"He's gone crazy?"

"He is . . . unbalanced." He met my gaze. "Thierry lost his wife to the inquisitors. They made him watch as they tortured her to death."

Like Luisa Lopez had watched her attackers murder her infant son. I rubbed a hand over my face. "Great."

* * *

Cyprien thought I should examine the other, less injured vrykolakas before assessing Thierry, but I overruled him - I wanted to see just how long I was going to be stuck here, and that meant taking a look at the worst case first. Éleine escorted me down into the basement level, which had once been Cyprien's private bedchamber and my makeshift trauma center. All my old equipment remained where I left it, and he had hired - or hypnotized - a human nurse to monitor the patient.

Thierry Durand was nowhere in sight.

"Debra," Éleine called out, and a young, redheaded woman in a nurse's uniform appeared. "Dr. Whitman is here to see your patient."

"Hello, doctor." The pale woman gave me a dreamy smile. "Nice to meet you." She handed me a chart. "This is what I have so far on Mr. Durand."

"Thanks." I opened the chart and read the top page. The well-written assessment made my stomach turn. "We need to prep the patient for x-rays and an abdominal ultrasound."

"That will be difficult." Something growled behind her, and she made a little face. "Mr. Cyprien said poor Mr. Durand be kept in his restraints."

"Under no circumstances is Mr. Durand to be released," Éleine added, stepping into my path as I headed for the sound. "Do you understand, doctor?"

"I understand that you're annoying me. Why don't you go make coffee or something?" I nudged her aside and saw an open section of floor with a copper grid over it.

Something hit the grid, and metal screech against metal.

"Debra, would you go upstairs and check on Madam Durand for me?" I heard Éleine ask.

"Yes, ma'am."

I felt like calling the nurse back, just to flex my authority, but decided to have a look at the patient first. I went over to the grid, knelt beside it, and looked into the recessed cell. A ruined body lurched beneath the grid, hobbling back and forth in the restricted space. There were lined copper manacles on his wrists.

Poor Mr. Durand snarled up at me.

I looked back at Éleine. "Was this your bright idea?"

"No." Cyprien appeared on the other side of the cell. "It was mine. He tries to kill anyone who comes near him." He gave me a troubled look. "No drug can anesthetize us. It took four of us to hold him down long enough for the nurse to assess him."

"Terrific." I pulled off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves as I went for my case and snapped on a pair of latex gloves. "Éleine, get me a bottle of saline."

Blondie's little nose elevated. "I am not a nurse."

"You are until Debra comes back. Get it."

Cyprien shadowed me, and eyed the vial of blue salts I took from my case. "What is that?"

"Nickel sulfate hexahydrate. It's used to plate nickel, dye and print fabrics, and to blacken zinc and brass. Nickel happens to be copper's next door neighbor on the periodic table of elements." I took a sterilized Pyrex beaker and shook a few blue crystals into it, then added 20 ccs of saline that Éleine brought to me and swirled it. "It's toxic to humans, but for us, it's more like a dose of Valium."

Cyprien's secretary made a hissy sound. "You cannot inject that into him – you don't know what it will do."

"I know exactly what it will do." I lifted the beaker to the light to make sure the salts had completely dissolved. "I've been using it to treat my insomnia."

"You tested this substance on yourself?" Cyprien sounded appalled.

"Why not?" I filled a pressure dart and took out my tranquilizer gun to load it. "I've had a lot of time on my hands lately." I went back to the grid. "Open it up."

"You mean to shoot him?"

I gave him an ironic look. "I don't think he's going to hold out his arm and let me stick him, do you?"

Cyprien knelt down and pressed some switch in the floor, and the copper mesh slid back. The man inside screeched like a furious animal.

I aimed and fired. The dart hit him squarely in the chest, and five seconds later, he dropped to the floor of the cell, unconscious.

"We've got about an hour before it wears off." I jumped in, lifted the crippled body into my arms, and jumped back out. "Élaine, get Debra back down here. Cyprien, put Phillipe and some of your muscle on standby, in case he wakes up early." I carried the unconscious vampire over to an exam table, laid him down, and switched on the overhead light. He was only wearing a pair of ragged trousers, so I cut those away.

And wished I hadn't, when I saw what they had done to him.

From the waist up, Thierry Durand was completely normal - a little thin, but well muscled and uninjured. The scar tissue started just above the groin area and extended to what might have once been the soles of his feet.

The blackened, jagged ends of his leg bones stuck out in various places where the flesh had healed around them. His feet had been crushed, his genitals badly burned.

Given the severity of his wounds, how he had been able to move at all was a terrifying miracle.

"I'll get pictures of the compound fractures first." I gently rolled him over, and saw what they'd done to his back. Hung him from a couple of meat hooks and left him there, from the nature of the deep tissue damage. "And a spine series." I looked up to see the pair still staring at me. "Clock is ticking, folks, get a move on."

Élaine and Cyprien disappeared. Debra returned a few minutes later and helped me position the x-ray over the table, and we got to work.

* * *

It took fifty minutes to complete some quick prelims, after which I put the unconscious Thierry back in the floor cell and left Debra to watch over him. Cyprien hadn't made another appearance, so I went upstairs to find him sitting and brooding in the fancy green and pink drawing room.

"Come here and look at this." I went to the glass doors that led out to the garden, and propped Thierry's x-rays against the panes. "Twenty-seven major fractures in his legs and most of them are compound." I pointed to the worst breaks. "His feet have been pulverized; there's no viable bone left. If he were human, I'd have to amputate. As it is, he'll need extensive bone repair, tissue grafts to fill in the holes in his back, and dermal restoration from the hips down. I'm not sure what I can do about the feet." I turned. "Where are the people who did this to him?"

"They are deceased."

"Thank you." I didn't feel a twinge of guilt about that. "The surgery will take time; I don't know how long. As for his mental state, the pain he suffered can only

be classified as beyond imagination. Add watching his wife die to that . . ." I shook my head.

"Then we must let him go, Jacques-Sebastien," a low, unfamiliar feminine voice said.

I turned to see Éleine standing just inside the room, with a woman who looked like her mother. The latter had silver-blond hair swept up in a complicated do, and wore a nice lavender suit. One of her arms was in a sling someone had fashioned from a matching lavender silk scarf.

"Liliette. You should not be up." Cyprien went to her and guided her to one of the velvet-covered sofas, then sat beside her. "Vanessa, this is Madam Liliette Durand, Thierry's aunt. Liliette, this is Dr. Vanessa Whitman."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you were listening." I went over and shook the uninjured hand she offered to me. "Let me take a look at that arm."

"Later." She made an imperious, shoo-shoo gesture, dismissing me. "Thierry's mind is gone, Jacques-Sebastien. Losing Anna was enough; I cannot bear to see him suffer any more. Let us release him from his pain."

"Perhaps that is the most compassionate thing we can do for your poor nephew," Éleine said, and gave me a pitying smile. "Seeing as the doctor cannot help him."

Just as I couldn't help Luisa Lopez. Blondie certainly knew where all my buttons were, and just how hard to punch them.

"I didn't say that." I ignored the urge to rip out the secretary's larynx and concentrated on Liliette. "Madam, your nephew has been through a terrible

ordeal, but I wouldn't write him off just yet. Once he's free of pain, he may become more lucid and rational. Right now, his body is telling him that he's still being tortured. His behavior is quite understandable, under the circumstances."

"You can repair his body, but not his mind." A big man in dark velvet robe hobbled in, followed by a slim teenage boy. The man wore a black eye patch and used a cane; the boy's hands were covered in bandages. Both were dark and resembled Thierry. "He will never be whole again."

Cyprien rose to his feet. "You don't know that, Marcel. We must try."

"Here, Denys." Marcel guided the silent boy over to stand beside Liliette. His hesitant movements made me wonder if Denys had gotten the hung-by-meat-hook treatment, too.

While Cyprien made the obligatory introductions, I scanned the minds of the group. Marcel and Liliette were convinced Thierry would not recover, and that killing him would be merciful. Oddly, I couldn't read the boy's mind at all.

"I should do the other exams now, Cyprien." I caught his gaze. And I'm not taking them downstairs. They don't need to see Thierry in that cage.

"Élaine has prepared a treatment room for you on this floor," he said, and offered his hand to Liliette. "Come, madam, let Vanessa see to your arm."

* * *

The other members of the Durand family had also been tortured, but their injuries were nowhere near as bad as Thierry's. Liliette's shoulder and elbow had been dislocated, so I only had to manipulate the joints so they could heal in

proper alignment. Although she had the vrykolakas' natural ability to spontaneously heal, I hated causing the old lady new pain, and said as much.

"Nonsense, my dear. This is nothing compared to what I endured when I was imprisoned in the eighteenth century." She extended her arm to test it.

"Happily, the Bastille had a plentiful supply of slow rats and stupid guards."

My jaw sagged a little. "The Bastille as in *The Tale of Two Cities* Bastille?"

"That imbecile Dickens. He memorized Carlyle to write that wretched novel - as if plagiarizing a history book made him an authority on the Terror." She sniffed. "It was not, I assure, the best or worst of times. It was years of endless butchery, especially for our kind."

I gently bent her arm at the elbow to check her range of motion. "So they went after vampires, too?"

"Vrykolakas," she corrected - just as picky as Cyprien about what you called them. "They wanted us more than the *artistos*. Rome actually commissioned Joseph Guillotin find an efficient way to dispatch our kind. We discovered this only after he submitted his proposition to the Assembly in 1789, recommending decapitation as the standard form of capital punishment in France."

"Nice guy." If she'd witnessed the French Revolution, Cyprien must have been there, too. It boggled the mind. "Everything seems to be working now. Try to get some rest, and take it easy on your arm for the next twenty-four hours."

Marcel limped in after Éleine escorted Liliette back to her rooms. "My eye was burned out of my head. You cannot fix that."

I nodded toward his cane. "What about the limp?"

"I am cursed by God." He scowled. "I do not need your help."

God must have been really pissed off during the Dark Ages. "Too bad, I've been hired at the group discount rate. Get up on the exam table." I changed my gloves, and when I turned around, he hadn't moved. "What, did they do something to your ears, too?"

He trudged over and planted himself on the table, sweeping back the robe. Instead of the wounded leg I'd expected to see, he showed me something quite different.

I went and took his foot in my hands, and manipulated it gently. "No midtarsal mobility, transverse crease, displaced navicular, calcaneocuboid and subtalar joints."

"What does that mean?"

"You weren't cursed by God, Mr. Durand. You were born with a clubfoot." I thought for a moment. "Under the circumstances, I should be able to perform an osteotomy of the distal part of calcaneus combined with a plantar fasciotomy and posteromedial release. I'll need a couple hours to correct and rearrange your joints, maybe a little wedge of skull bone, and a whole lot less lip from you."

His one eye rounded. "You would do this for me?"

The man had a congenital birth defect that had nothing to do with being a vampire. I could fix that without a crisis of conscience.

"Sure." I patted his cheek, then tapped his eye patch. "How about you show me what's under here now?"

He took off the patch. His eye and eyelid were missing. The healed eye socket had rough edges and burn scars, as if the inquisitors had gouged out the eyeball, then cauterized the area.

I tilted his head up and used a scope light to probe the cratered socket..
"What did they use on you?"

"A poker. They heated the end until it glowed red." He swallowed, and his voice went low. "They cut off my eyelid first."

"Bastards." I lowered the eye patch back into place. "You're right, I can't help you out with this. Your tissue will reject any type of prosthesis I try to implant. I'm sorry." I felt someone watching us, and saw Debra and Denys hovering in the doorway. "And my next patient is here."

"I should tell you what happened to Denys," Marcel said as he climbed down from the exam table.

"He can tell me himself."

"No, Dr. Whitman, he cannot." The big man took the boy's hand from Debra, and led him forward, and then he showed me why.

* * *

After I finished Denys's exam, I went upstairs to my old room, and showered. When I came out to dress, Cyprien was waiting for me.

"I need another lock on that door," I told him as I went to the closet. It was still stocked with the clothes he'd bought for me the last time I'd been here. "One that works from the inside."

"Marcel said you were upset."

"Oh, I'm way past upset. I'm cruising right around fully enraged." I marched back into the bathroom, slammed the door, and dressed. When I came back out, he was holding two glasses. The smell made my fangs emerge. "I told you, I don't drink blood."

"It will calm you." He waited a minute, then sighed and set the glasses down. "Very well, I apologize again. I should have prepared you."

Going over to the window seemed like a good idea - I needed some distance between us. "How many people have you killed over the years, Cyprien?"

"I never kept account of it, Vanessa."

"No, you wouldn't." I looked out into the garden. White roses were blooming - thousands of them - and the last rays of the sun were gilding their petals. "How about the Durands? You figure they've probably wiped out the equivalent of a small city by now, right?"

"We don't kill humans anymore."

I could feel him behind me. His thoughts were almost as snarled as mine. "I was human. You killed me."

"Yes, I did." He didn't sound sorry, just sad. "I tried to recompense for that, but you gave my money away."

His millions had bought Luisa Lopez the treatment I could no longer give her. "You can't purchase my forgiveness, Cyprien."

He didn't say anything for a long time. "If it were in my power to make you human again, I would."

I hardly heard him over the pounding inside my head. "I made my peace with this, you know? I didn't have to practice medicine anymore. I figured if I stuck to needle transfusions and nailed some bad guys hurting kids, that would be enough. If things got unbearable, I could even end it. Now you bring me here and show me these people and say, 'Hey, Vanessa, be a doctor again.'"

His hands touched the sides of my arms. "It is what you are."

"Do you know exactly what they did to that boy?" He shook his head.. "They crushed Denys's fingers, and whipped his back down to the bone.. But that wasn't enough." I shut my eyes tightly, but the images wouldn't go away. "They tore out his tongue, Cyprien. They ripped it out whole."

"What can be done?"

"Liliette's arm is fine. Marcel's eye can't be replaced, but I can straighten his foot and maybe get rid of his limp. I can fix Denys's hands and back, but he'll never speak again."

"Will you help them, Vanessa?"

I wanted to say no. I had every right to walk out of there. I didn't owe Jacques-Sebastien Cyprien a damn thing.

Denys's eyes - the same dark velvet brown as his father's - burned in my mind. I opened my own eyes so I wouldn't have to see them.

"All right," I said, forcing the words out. "I'll do what I can."

* * *

Setting up to perform the various procedures and surgeries the Durand family required was not a problem, as Debra turned out to have considerable

experience in and out of the operating room. The fact that she was helping a vampire operate on other vampires didn't bug her at all - but then, nothing really bothered her.

"Let's work on Denys in the mornings, and Thierry in the afternoons." I dictated the surgical protocols to her and outlined what I'd need for the first setups.

"I'll make out a procedure schedule and requisition what you need, doctor." She floated off to prep the exam table, humming a little under her breath.

I had Phillippe and the boys move what I needed to the first floor, so I could begin the work on Denys without him having to see his father in the basement cell. Liliette came with him that first morning, and politely demanded to know exactly what I'd be doing to her great-nephew.

I went over the techniques I'd first perfected on Cyprien and explained how the muscles of his back could be restored by seeding the damaged areas with grafts from his thigh muscles. The grafts would act as scaffolds, upon which his accelerated immune system would build new muscle tissue.

"All I know of doctors is that they were dirty, drunken men who were inordinately fond of leeches." She shook her head, then went over to kiss Denys's cheek.

"We've progressed a little but since then." As Debra positioned the instrument trays, I led the old lady to the door. "I'll be out to tell you how it went as soon as we're through here."

Once Liliette left, I scrubbed, then took out a syringe of prepared blue salt

solution. Debra already had Denys on a whole blood IV and stretched out on his stomach.

I still couldn't read the kid's mind, so I couldn't tell if he was worried or not. "This is going to help you go to sleep," I told him, "so you won't feel anything."

He only stared at the door, and didn't so much as blink when I injected him. Then his eyes fluttered closed and his breathing slowed.

His reactions bothered me on a couple of levels. Marcel and Liliette had shown a healthy amount of fear toward me. Given the amount of trauma he'd suffered, Denys should have been jumpy as a jackrabbit on amphetamines around a stranger who intended to mess with his body. Instead, the boy acted like I was invisible.

I knew what the inquisitors had done to his body - but what had they done to the boy's mind?

Debra dragged me back to reality. "Doctor? Is something wrong?"

"No. Let's start with the upper lumbar and work our way down," I said, and tugged my mask up over my mouth and nose. "Watch the monitors, we'll need to dose him again in sixty minutes to keep him under. Scalpel."

After I harvested the first graft from the back of his right thigh and immersed it in a blood-saline bath, I had to literally peel the scar tissue back from his spine, and prep the ruined muscle. The flap I'd cut away healed as I was placing the graft, but once the new tissue had attached itself to the damaged muscle, I abraded the underside of the flap and the foundation site and pressed them back together, forcing them to heal together.

"BP and heart rate low, but regular," Debra murmured. "The first unit of blood is nearly gone, doctor."

His body was sucking it up like Pepsi. "Rig two more units, but decrease the drip." Too much blood would saturate his tissues and make it harder to place the grafts.

I couldn't operate on too large an area, as the derma would close faster than I could cut, but I made steady progress. Debra administered blue salt solution into his intravenous line twice more before we finished the final grafts, and I began repairing the surface derma. I'd discovered from working on Cyprien that sanding the scar tissue in small segments, as if it were rough wood, actually eradicated it. New, unblemished skin immediately formed and healed in its place.

Even with her mind clouded, my nurse reacted with gratifying awe. "That's incredible work, Dr. Whitman."

"He's doing most of it." I frowned, picking up something coming from Denys. Images, dark and distorted. None of them made sense at first, but slowly they coalesced into more coherent order. What I saw made me take in a shaky breath and shut down the connection. "Clamp."

At last I tossed aside the copper-plated scalpel and pulled down my mask, eyeing the length of the boy's back. "Keep him quiet and on his belly until three, then I'll be in to check the grafts and see how they're doing.."

I stripped out of my gear and left Debra with Denys. Outside in the hall, Marcel, Cyprien, and Liliette were waiting for me. "Denys did very well. Barring complications, I should be able to begin the work on his hands tomorrow."

Marcel muttered something heartfelt under his breath. "And my brother?"

"I'll be performing the first of his surgeries this afternoon." I glanced at Cyprien. "Can I see you downstairs for a minute?"

We left the Durands and went to the basement level. Thierry wasn't making any noise, and I went over to the grid to check on him. He lay curled in a tight ball of misery in one corner.

Cyprien joined me. "What is wrong, Vanessa?"

"Have you been able to read Denys since he came here?" When Cyprien shook his head, I sighed. "He started dreaming while he was under. He was reliving the weeks they spent being tortured - him, his mom and dad. He saw everything, too. I think the reason none of us can read his thoughts is because he's not having any. He's shut down his conscious mind."

"I don't understand. He has shown no sign of distress."

"No apparent signs. Everyone reacts to trauma in different ways. What the inquisitors did drove Thierry crazy, but it's rendered Denys catatonic." I went to the fridge and took out a blood pack. "I should have picked it up from the way everyone has to guide him around. He's like a robot." I used a syringe to withdraw what I needed. "There's something else. I don't know what it is, but I can feel it, hovering at the edges of his dreams. It's not the torture - it's worse."

"What could be worse than what he endured?"

"I don't know. I'm simply passing along the warning." I went to stab the needle into my arm, but Cyprien caught my wrist.

"If you keep taking it like that, you'll never make a full transition."

"Give Dracula a cigar." When he didn't let go, I glared up at him. "I told you, I'm not drinking blood." He was concentrating on something - my brain. "And you can stay out of my damn head, too."

"My God, you've never tried." He snatched the syringe from my hand and tossed it aside. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what? I'm not a happy blood sucker?" I threw up my hands. "How many ways do I have to say it?"

"Very well." He pulled back his sleeve and bared his wrist. "You can practice on me."

I recoiled. "I'll pass, thanks."

"You cannot pass. This is what you are." He grabbed me by the back of the neck, held me in place, and pressed his wrist to my lips. "Take my blood, Vanessa."

Because of the grip he had on me, I couldn't turn my head. Saliva pooled in my mouth, and my fangs emerged, full and aching with emptiness. And still I kept my jaw clamped shut.

"With you, it is always the hard way." Cyprien bit his own wrist, then pressed it against my lips again. "Stop resisting, and take it."

A little of it seeped between my lips. From the movies I'd seen and the books I'd read, it was supposed to be like drinking ambrosia. Only it didn't - it was blood, and it tasted like blood.

So much for the Anne Rice bullshit. That made it a little easier to keep my mouth shut.

"Femme têtue." He took his wrist away, put it to his mouth, and then kissed me.

It wasn't a kiss, though - it was just another way to get his blood down my throat. I used my fists on him, hitting whatever I could reach until he pinned my arms by clamping his free arm around me. I tried to spit the blood out. He held on through it all, keeping his mouth sealed over mine, his pretty eyes staring directly into mine.

Take my blood, Vanessa.

Why I caved in, I would never know. I just did. I drank Cyprien's blood, felt it slam into my desiccated stomach like a hot fist. I didn't taste it anymore, I only felt it spreading through me, a lot like a really good orgasm. Better than an orgasm. Way better.

I drifted back to reality to find the blood exchange was over, but Cyprien was still kissing me. His thoughts were a tangle of French and English.

J'ai besoin de vous - I need you.

Je vous veux - I want you.

J'ai honte de ce que j'ai fait à vous, mais j'ai voulu que vous restassiez avec moi - I am ashamed of what I did to you, but I wanted you to stay with me.

Je suis si seul - I am so alone, Vanessa.

Maybe it was the combination of blood and French that demolished me, I didn't know. I just held on and lost myself in that kiss.

He had my hair in his fist and his other hand was sliding up the front of my blouse. He lifted his mouth to bury it against my throat, and I braced myself,

arching my head back to give him what he wanted. "Jack."

Thierry suddenly screamed in wordless rage.

That worked better than a bucket of iced holy water. Cyprien wrenched away and shuffled back a few steps. It took me a fraction of a second longer to recover, and then a red mist descended over everything.

Son of a bitch. He'd done it to me again.

I didn't waste time with words. I closed the gap between us and hit him in the face. Drinking the blood he'd forced down me put a little extra power behind the punch, and he went flying across the room, where he crashed into a storage cabinet. Glass shattered, liquid splashed. He was back on his feet in a blink, but fresh blood trickled from his mouth.

He didn't yell, he didn't try to hit me back. He held out his long, slim artist's hand. "Come to me, Vanessa."

Oh, shit. This was the part Anne Rice got right.

I wanted to. I might be a blood-dependent fanged mutant, but I still had nerve endings, and every one of them had gone to Code Red. He could deal with that for me, just as he'd dealt with my not drinking blood.

And somewhere along the way, I was pretty sure I'd lose what was left of my soul.

With the taste of him still hot in my mouth, I stalked back upstairs and strode out of the mansion.

Cyprien didn't chase me down himself - he sent someone else to do his dirty work. Like always.

Phillipe found me in a tourist bar in the quarter, where I was sitting in a dark corner pretending to drink Corona and listening to a Billie Holiday wannabe slaughter "I Cried for You."

I'd scanned the minds of the patrons, and found a heavysset man guzzling Jim Beam like it was water and planning to go home and kick the shit out of his wife for the third time that week.

"Le maître a besoin de vous, docteur."

I ignored Phillippe so I could further study the red-faced drinker. Should I add wife beaters to my list? He'd already put her in the hospital nine times since they'd gotten married - and last time, she'd nearly died.

"Vanessa."

"I heard you." It took a minute to switch my scanners to translate the French. *The master needs you, doctor.* "Your master can bite my ass."

"He try, but you break his nose." He made a face and sat down beside me. "My joke, not so good. Like my English."

"No, actually, it was pretty decent." I sighed. "Tell me something, Phil. Did Cyprien make you?"

"Oui."

A waitress paused by the table, but I shook my head. "When?"

"When he come back to Athens. From his grave."

"So you're five hundred years old, too?" He nodded, and I clenched my fist around my lukewarm beer. "Why have you stayed with him all this time?"

"No other place for me."

"But you're just as strong as he is." I gave him the once-over. "You're not bad looking, for the strong, silent tank type. Women love French accents. You could go anywhere, do anything, be anything that you wanted."

"I not say it right. Cyprien is master, but he is also . . . *ma seulement famille*." He covered my cool hand with his. "*Comprenez-vous?*"

Unfortunately, I did, and I tugged my hand away. "I didn't ask for this, Phillippe. My human life was fine, more than fine."

"Not so fine to be alone, no purpose. Marcel, the boy, Thierry - they need you for now." He hesitated for a moment before adding, "Cyprien need you for always, I think."

I made a disgusted sound and took a swig of the beer. I'd been able to tolerate small amounts of liquid before, but after a second I realized it wasn't going to stay down. Courtesy of Cyprien's bloody damn kiss, I'd bet. "Your boss should get some therapy."

"You are docteur." He shrugged, like that was all it would take.

Which reminded me - no matter how much I wanted to turn my back on it, forget about it, I was a doctor. And I had patients waiting for me. "Excuse me, I have to go throw up now."

Phillippe waited at the table while I went to the ladies and regurgitated the beer. Then I washed my face and stared at myself in the mirror - another myth, I could see myself just fine. There was a window above the sinks; I could climb up and out of it easily. Cyprien wouldn't chase me; it wasn't his style. He was a seducer, not a hunter.

Come to me, Vanessa.

I walked out of the ladies' room, and nearly bumped into the Jim Beam guzzler.

"Git out my way, ya twit." He gave me a hard shove to the side.

Not the wisest choice of action, given my mood. I grabbed a handful of his flannel shirt and used it to push him back into the mens' room. As his face turned dark purple, I kicked the door shut behind me. "You sure like knocking women around, don't you?"

He knotted a fist. "I'll knock you on your silly ass."

"You'll find" -I took his right forearm, and broke it- "it's a little harder" -I did the same to his left- "to do that, when you're in traction." As he shrieked and doubled over, I jerked him upright, then drove my foot into one knee, then the other, shattering both.

"You crazy! What you done to me!"

"This is called payback, asshole. I'll be checking on you, so be nice to your wife from now on." I let him fall to the floor and bent down. "Because if I see so much as a fingerprint on her, I'll hunt you down and break your neck. See how you like being helpless for the rest of your life."

I left him writhing on the floor and went back to Phillipe, who was standing and staring like everyone else at the men's room.

"Okay," I said, and took his arm. "We can go back now."

* * *

My disappearing act had one immediate benefit; Cyprien stayed clear of me. I split my days between Denys and Thierry, performing the operations to repair the boy's crushed hands in the morning and working on Thierry's shattered legs in the afternoon. Complicated bone graft procedures kept me totally preoccupied, and I ran poor Debra between both patients until she was staggering with exhaustion. I requested a second, backup nurse to spell her, and the next day Phillipe brought down a young black woman with the same dreamy expression in her eyes.

Marcel and his aunt hovered outside the separate operating rooms, both anxious to hear whatever progress I'd made that day. Denys remained in his catatonic state, but I was pulling more images from his subconscious every time I operated on him.

They weren't fun. He repeatedly dreamed of a lovely young brunette - his mother, I assumed - and his father Thierry, both being slowly tortured. Whatever else was in his head stayed out of the memories, but I could still feel it, skirting along the edges of his mind.

He had felt horrified at seeing his parents tortured, but that wasn't what had sent him into this vegetative state. It was the thing in the shadows, and if I didn't find out what it was, there was little hope of ever bringing him back.

When I finished repairing Denys's injuries, I went to work on Marcel. By then he was so enthusiastic he practically jumped on the operating table. I was able to correct his deformed foot with two procedures, and he walked normally for the first time in his life a day after the second one.

He made one trip down the hall and back, then pulled me into his arms and cried all over me. I held on, patted his back, and made some soothing noises. Over his shoulder, I saw Cyprien watching us from a distance. He kept his expression blank but I could tell he didn't like Marcel hugging me.

Tough. I accepted Marcel's watery thanks and gave him a little peck on the cheek for good measure. *We're not engaged, Cyprien.*

I got a jolt when he replied, the same way. *I must speak to you later, Vanessa.*

Later came after I finished checking on Thierry, and Cyprien summoned me to his library. I stayed near the door and braced myself for another go-round, but he merely shuffled some files and placed four on the edge of the desk.

"These are for you." He tapped the top folder. "They concern the men who attacked Luisa Lopez. As I promised."

Slowly I went over and picked up the first file. Inside were photographs and an in-depth report on a convicted burglar/rapist who currently resided about five blocks from Louisa's old apartment. The others were just as detailed.

"I will them kept under surveillance until you are finished here," Cyprien said. "Then my people can either deliver them to you, or you can go to them."

I picked up the rest and tucked them under my arm. "I thought you'd wait until I was done before giving me these."

He wouldn't look at me, and his thoughts were locked behind some kind of shield. "Consider it a gesture of faith."

I didn't like that. At all. "What do you want now, Cyprien?"

"Nothing but what you agreed to do." He got up and walked out.

I stuck the files in my room and tried to forget about them. Once Marcel was done, I could concentrate on Thierry's lower body exclusively, and began restoring form and function every inch of the way. Finally I got to his feet, which were the biggest challenge I faced.

"I would think this to be the simplest part of it," Liliette commented one afternoon after I'd given her a progress report. "His feet are small compared to his legs."

"They're small, but they're complicated," I told her. "Each foot has twenty-six bones, which together represent one-fourth of all the bones in the body. There are also one hundred and seven ligaments, thirty-three joints, thirty-one tendons and nineteen muscles, too. All of them work together, not just to hold the bones in place but to allow the foot to move and support the body." I put up the x-rays of Thierry's feet. "As you can see, the inquisitors wrecked just about all of them, too."

"Mon Dieu." Liliette paled. "How can you hope to fix this?"

"I'm going to build him new ones, from the inside out." The work involved was tedious, nerve-racking and risky, but the only alternative I had was amputation, and that was strictly last resort. "I'll be honest, I don't know if it will work, madam."

"Do what you can for him."

There was no piecing Thierry's original bones back together, so I set out to sculpt him new ones out of the old bone material. Harvesting the pulverized

fragments, I slowly grafted and formed seven thick, short, tarsal bones to give him a new heel and back instep. From there I formed five parallel metatarsal bones to form the front of the instep and serve as a platform for the front and ball of the foot.

As I progressed to the smaller phalanges, I realigned his torn muscles and repaired his shredded ligaments, allowing them to heal in place to connect and hold the new bones. After harvesting grafts from his buttocks and lower abdomen, I recreated the thick layer of fatty tissue under the sole of his foot, which would serve as shock absorbers when Thierry walked, ran, or jumped.

Assuming that he ever would.

When I finished with the right foot, I didn't wait but repeated the entire process on the left. It took another week of eighteen hour days over the operating table. I only left Thierry to transfuse myself or sleep for a few hours, but at last, his feet were whole again.

I left him with my nurses, gave Marcel and his aunt a brief report, then went up to my room.

Cyprien was waiting for me, but I was too tired to chase him out. "What?"

"Phillipe told me you finished with Thierry." He tucked his hands in his pockets. "Do you wish to return to Chicago? I can arrange a flight out tonight."

I stripped off my lab coat. "Jacques-Sebastien is too damn long to yell. What can I call you for short?"

"I liked it when you called me Jack."

"Right. Jack." I started unbuttoning my blouse. "Here's the deal, Jack: I'm tired, I'm grumpy, and I'm in no mood to fly, hunt down rapists or tango with you. So do I have to yell, or will you be a nice guy and leave now?"

"I would like to stay with you tonight."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "No mood to tango includes-

"Sex, I know." He came over, swept me off my feet and carried me to the bed. "I want to hold you, Vanessa. May I do that, for this night?"

The romantic gesture didn't impress me, but his thoughts did. He was worried - about me leaving, even though he expected me to.

"I'm not going to run out on Thierry. I want to see him and Denys snap out of this, same as you." There was something else, but all I could pick up was *Rome and betrayed*. "What's the deal with Rome?"

"I will tell you later." He tucked me up against his side, where I fit quite nicely. "I can feel how tired you are. Relax, you are safe with me."

I blinked and yawned. "No biting."

"No biting," he agreed. "Go to sleep, Vanessa."

And that's exactly what I did.

* * *

Since I'd become vrykolakas, I didn't have any dreams, but that night I had a whopper. I was standing over Thierry, grafting bone and snapping out orders to Debra, while everyone stood around watching - Phillipe, Marcel, Élane, even Denys. The only one missing was Cyprien.

We agreed you'd call me Jack.

I said I'd call you Jack when I yelled at you. I tossed my bloody scalpel aside and watched Thierry's leg heal shut. Can't I have a nice dream, like being on a beach surrounded by four nearly-naked lifeguards feeding me Piña Coladas and frozen grapes?

The operating room disappeared, and I found myself stretched out on a lounge chair. It was sitting on a completely deserted white-sand beach. The only thing in the immediate area besides sand and sea was a small table with a frosty white drink sitting on it.

Whoa. Be careful what you wish for, squared.

Motion caught my attention; someone rose from the turquoise water and walked up onto the beach. A very familiar, gorgeous male who was only wearing a brief pair of black swimming trunks.

A very wet and near-naked Jacques-Sebastien sauntered up over the sand to join me and looked around. *This is a nice dream. What kind of grapes do you like? White?* He produced a handful of picture-perfect green grapes.

Concord?

The grapes turned a dusky purple.

The edges of the beach were hazy, sort of wavering. I really was dreaming, and he was somehow manipulating the dream. *Okay, so where are my four nearly-naked lifeguards?*

I told them to go away or I would eat them.

I laughed. *Cute.*

He knelt beside me. *Vanessa, I must tell you something about the Durands. I could not risk doing it outside of a dream; that is why I asked to stay with you tonight.*

I stopped grinning. *What about the Durands?*

I have friends in Rome - human friends who have infiltrated the Vatican. They were the ones who saved me when I was imprisoned, and later alerted me when Thierry and his family were captured. Now they have sent me an urgent message, warning me that the inquisitors are coming here, to Le Petite Jardin. They are coming for the Durands, and for me. They will arrive tomorrow night.

I sat straight up. *Then we need to get everyone out of here now.*

I cannot take the Durands to another vrykolakas for safe-keeping. Not until I know who has betrayed us.

Betrayed us?

From the information I was given, someone in the Durand family made a deal with the inquisitors. They led them to Thierry's home in Paris in exchange for protection.

But they were all tortured . . . I thought of Liliette, and her dislocated arm. Of all the Durands, she had sustained the least amount of injuries. Could it have been the old lady? They hardly touched her.

I do not know, but I intend to find out. Will you help me?

The beach scene abruptly faded away, and we were standing together in some kind of dark, featureless place. I couldn't move and I could barely think. Something was hovering at the edges, the same thing I'd felt inside Denys's

mind.

Too late, I heard Cyprien think to me. *We have been drugged.*

* * *

My eyes didn't want to open, but I made them. I was downstairs, strapped to an exam table, and a dark man in a weird robe was looming over me.

"She is awake."

Élaine appeared and smiled down at me. "Doctor, how are you feeling?"

"Like biting off your face." I tested the restraints, which were evidently copper, from the way they were burning into my skin. "So you're the traitor?"

"One of them." She took a syringe and filled it from a vial of blue salt solution. "We need you to sleep a little longer, it is not yet your turn for questioning."

Somewhere to my left, Liliette cried out in agony.

"Where is Cyprien?" I jerked, but they had me clamped down good, and I couldn't break through the copper. "Where's Denys, and the others?"

"Locked in the floor cell, with Thierry. When they wake up, I'm sure he'll be very happy to do some of our work for us." Élaine jabbed me hard in the arm with the needle and gave me a double dose. "There, that should do it. This zinc sulfate works quite fast, Father Ignacio. You and your three companions should have no trouble with this one." She gave me a significant look.

The dark man grunted something that sounded like "good."

What was she talking about? Zinc sulfate wouldn't give me so much as a skin rash. As I stared up at her, she lowered her right eyelid in a slow, deliberate wink.

At the same time, I felt warmth flooding over me..

From my internal reaction, I guessed she'd stuck me with plasma, dyed blue to look like the real solution.

You're not a traitor.

No. I must free you. Pretend to sleep.

I played along, and let my eyes flutter closed and went limp. I felt her squeeze my arm, and through the touch felt more rapid-fire thoughts streaming from her mind.

All the guards are disabled. Six more inquisitors remain upstairs, searching for evidence. I will lure this one away. Go to Cyprien and free him immediately.

"Let me check her bonds." Éleine's cool fingers slid down to my left wrist, where she did something to the copper restraint cuff. I felt air on my burning skin. She went around and under the pretense of checking, released all the others. "She won't slip out of these. You wished to see Cyprien's library, did you not, Father? Let me take you upstairs; his collection is breathtaking, and quite valuable."

I waited until I heard the door at the top of the stair open and close before I turned my head and saw two other men in robes standing over Liliette, who was also strapped to an operating table. I didn't see anyone else in the room, only a

couple of still bodies on the floor. One of them looked like Phillipe.

A noise came from the floor cell. It sounded like someone groaning.

Thierry, waking up?

My fangs stretched out into my mouth as I slid my arms and legs free, then sat up and eased myself off the table. The other inquisitors were so busy poking at Liliette that they never saw me coming. I smashed their heads together and tossed their unconscious bodies aside.

The old lady's face was all battered and cut up; they'd been using their fists and maybe one of my scalpels on her. I covered her with a sheet of linen.

"They are coming," she whispered, her tired eyes moving in the direction of Thierry's cell. "Please, hurry."

I ran over and released the copper grid. Thierry, Marcel, and Denys lay unconscious in the bottom of the cell, but Cyprien looked up and reached for the edge. I helped him out before I grabbed a pair of scrubs and yanked them on, then went to the biggest body on the floor. It was Phillipe, also beaten and drugged, but still alive.

Something crashed behind me. "Vanessa!"

A heavy weight knocked me over and jumped on top of me. Thierry, his eyes filled with hatred, latched his hands around my throat.

"Anna," he screeched, and shook me like a rag doll. "Where is my Anna!"

"Anna's . . . dead," I wheezed. "I'm a . . . doctor . . . friend . . ." Everything turned a little gray.

Cyprien tackled Thierry and knocked him off me, and I rolled over, coughing and gasping for air. The two men fought like vicious animals, fangs bared, hammering at each other without mercy.

No, Papa! It was not Jacques-Sebastien.

Thierry lifted his head and looked at the floor cell. Denys was holding onto the edge, staring back at him. The boy's eyes moved to a point past his father and me, and widened.

"I knew you would tell." A lovely, dark-haired woman walked down the stairs, followed by a trio of men in dark robes. She smiled at Denys. "You never could keep a secret, you naughty little boy."

Thierry released Cyprien and slowly rose to his feet. "Anna," he said, smiling at her, the craziness leaving his face. "My Anna, not dead."

Anna Durand.

I spotted the tranquilizer guns the inquisitors were holding, and hoped Éleine had mixed up a really big batch of the fake drug, or all of this was going to be for nothing.

"Yes, darling, I'm quite alive. Sorry for the trick I played on you." Anna Durand turned to Cyprien. "Monsieur, you have a lovely home here. I shall very much enjoy living in it."

Cyprien edged away from Thierry. At the same time, Phillipe lifted his head and looked at me.

Somebody had to take this traitorous bitch out, and I'd be more than happy to do it. I picked up the spare, copper-plated blade to my rotary bone saw.

Wait, Vanessa, Liliette thought to me. Let her tell him first. He must hear this, for his own sanity.

"Anna?" Thierry frowned. "We live in Paris."

She made a shushing sound. "Not anymore, my dearest love. You see, they left me no choice." She spread her hands in a helpless way. "The inquisitors caught me two months ago, when we were vacationing in Provence. I had to make a bargain with them. You, Denys, and Liliette in exchange for my life, and my solemn promise to help them hunt down others like us. They're quite pleased with my performance so far."

"I saw you." Thierry scrubbed at his face. "I saw them hurt you."

"That was charade, darling - all part of the torture. I made a mistake, though, by coming to watch work on you after my 'death.' You didn't see me, but the boy did." She gave him a limpid smile. "That's why I had them tear out his tongue. He would have spoiled everything."

Now I understood what had shut down Denys's mind - the knowledge that his mother was still alive, and had faked her own death. Hearing her admit it made the boy jump out and launch himself at his mother, but Phillippe staggered up in time to stop him.

Good thing, too, because she produced a wicked-looking copper dagger.

Thierry staggered forward, then stopped and looked down at his legs. His eyes met mine for a moment. "You did this."

"Yes." I saw Cyprien moving into the shadows to one side of Anna, but he wasn't close enough yet. Plus he was unarmed. I, however, wasn't, and I had the perfect position. "Let me do one more thing for you, Mr. Durand." I curled my arm in, then flung the bone saw blade out like a Frisbee.

At first I thought I'd missed her - Anna only gasped, as if startled. Then a little trickle of blood appeared on her throat, widening as she bowed her head. It would have looked like she was praying, had her head stayed on her neck.

Instead, it tumbled to the floor, followed by her body.

Things got a little hairy after that. The inquisitors rushed downstairs, shooting darts at Cyprien and Thierry, who just kept coming. I went to release Liliette and protect her. Denys, Phillippe and Marcel went by me in a blur, following the other men upstairs. There were some distant, human screams.

I concentrated on Liliette, who had lost a great deal of blood. I didn't bother with an IV, but fed her directly from a whole unit bag. Her wounds were already closed, but it took a few minutes for the bruising to fade and the swelling to go down.

She sat up, still trembling, and let me help her dress. Then she took my hands in hers. "You are a brilliant docteur, but tonight you saved more than our lives. *Merci, Vanessa.*"

"You're welcome, madam."

* * *

We stayed downstairs, out of the way, and talked about her life in France. Because of Anna's treachery, Liliette and her family would have to abandon their chateau in Provence, but she didn't seem too concerned about it.

"I have always wanted to live in America. Florida, or California. I hear they are lovely places to reside." She cocked her head to one side. "Jacques-Sebastien will have to leave this place as well."

I tried to imagine Cyprien living anywhere other than New Orleans. And failed. "Probably. I wonder where he'll go."

She patted my hand. "Anywhere you are, I imagine." She glanced at the ceiling. "You should go to him now; they are finished up there." When I offered to stay with her, she waved me off. "I will be fine, my dear. Go to him."

So I went, and ran into Éleine along the way. "Nice work, Blondie. Thanks."

"You're welcome. I am leaving Mr. Cyprien's employ, tomorrow," she said, startling me. "He was never mine. I had hoped, but now . . . there is no reason for me to stay."

Admitting that had to hurt. "I'm sorry."

"I am not." She gave me one of her snide smiles. "He has given me more money than I could ever spend in one lifetime. That will be enough for me, Dr. Whitman."

I hoped so. "Take care, Éleine."

Whatever bodies there were had been removed, but the signs of violence were everywhere. Blood pretty much splattered through every room. I heard low voices in the kitchen - Thierry's and Marcel's voices, and caught some of Denys's thoughts. The Durands were angry and sad and happy - and they would survive this, together.

Cyprien was somewhere above me. I followed the feel of him, until I stopped in front of an open door down the hall from my bedroom. From the looks of it, it was his studio.

He was standing at the window, but he wasn't looking down into the garden. He was studying a picture sitting on an easel beside it. The half-finished portrait was a study in black and white and blue - and it looked a lot like me.

"Nice, but my skin is a little more on the caramel side." I joined him, and examined the canvas. "Does my hair look that long and messy? Ick. I should stop by SuperCuts or something."

"You came to say good-bye." He sounded depressed. "I didn't think you would."

"You kicking me out now?"

"I know you must go. Be careful in Chicago. Don't attempt to take on more than one of those men at a time." He glanced at me. "I would go with you, but I must relocate my household."

"I'm not going back to Chicago." I wrinkled my nose at the painting. "Come on, my hips aren't really that wide."

"You are not going back." He said that carefully, like it didn't make sense.

"I'm mailing the files to the Chicago P.D. The detective in charge of Luisa's case will be happy to get them. And, if justice fails, I can catch up with them later." I nudged him with an elbow. "You and me have unfinished business, Jack."

"We do?"

"Yeah. Like the fact that we haven't done anything but sleep together yet." I grinned. "You gotta at least show me how this vamp thing improves my sex life."

A beautiful smile appeared on the face I'd made for him. "I can do that."

"As for moving, how do you feel about Northern California? They have otters, sunsets, private art galleries, mountains, beaches, redwoods, the works." I thought for a moment. "In one place there's twenty-three miles of mansions to choose from. You could do Le Petite Jardin Deux."

The brows went north. "You'd live there with me?"

"I'd set up my lab there. Nothing too fancy, just a private research facility where I can study certain rare blood disorders and maybe help some other people like the Durands." I threaded my fingers through his. "If you can deal with that, you can live with me."

"I can deal with that - later." He lifted my hand to his lips. "Now about this vamp thing . . ."

Infusion

A carpenter who falls and impales himself on a two-by-four isn't *supposed* to burst into flame, but there he was: *construction worker kabob*.

"Maybe he spilled some solvent on his clothes," my partner Harry said as we contemplated the still-smoldering body. "Bumped into an acetylene torch, whoosh, he panics, then jumps off the seventh floor."

"That would work, except the welder went home for the night, and the security guard said the fire started *after* he landed." I checked the perimeter to assure the uniforms were cordoning off the area. The smell would probably keep people back as much as the crime scene tape; the air reeked of Eau de Extra Crispy Dead Guy. The coroner's white van pulled up to the curb, and I rubbed the sting of smoke from my eyes. "Tenderson's about to make his entrance."

Harry winced. "I'll go repeat with the guard."

I watched as Frank Tenderson jumped out of the van and stomped over, a scowl puckering his pudgy face. "Evening, doc."

"It's three a.m.," he said, lips peeling back from teeth his parents should have gotten fixed long ago. "Where's the body?" I pointed up at the scaffold platform where the carpenter had landed, three stories above us. "Shit. How the hell am I supposed to get up there?"

I'd have suggested inserting a pogo stick up his ass, but then I'd be tempted to help him with the installation. "Elevator's over here."

We took the open lift to the third floor, and walked across the newly-laid flooring to the scaffold. The stench made my stomach roll, but I'd smelled worse. You didn't work Fort Lauderdale homicide for eight years without smelling a *lot* worse.

"Christ." Tenderson set down his bag, held on to a support beam and leaned out over the body. "He's not burned, he's charcoal." He looked down.. "No accelerant, no heat source." He lifted his head. "Anything upstairs?"

I stood beside him and breathed through my mouth. "Nothing but wood, tools, and hardware. He was putting in wall studs."

The coroner reached out toward the body, then shrieked and pulled back his hand. At the same time, the victim's body disintegrated.

Tenderson and I stood there for a moment, staring at the small heap of ash. "You ever see anything like that before?" he asked me, eyes wide.

I'd seen three-week floaters, chainsaw dismemberments, and what happened when you pissed off Colombian drug dealers. But this was a first. "No." The wind picked up, and starting taking the ash with it. "Better get out your dustpan before he blows away."

* * *

"Sam, Harry." Captain Grant nodded toward his office.

We left our desks and followed him in. Harry, who was two weeks from retirement, got the only chair. I took my usual spot against the right wall, next to the rows of framed citations John Grant had earned over the years. He was a good cop; there were a lot of them.

The Captain had run Homicide for three of the seven years I'd worked there, but he remained something of a mystery man. He ran a tight, efficient squad, had zero tolerance for time wasting or bullshit, and didn't encourage anyone to get friendly. He kept his big frame in shape by lifting free weights and running five miles every morning before work - I knew that because I used the same gym three days a week myself. The guys thought he shaved his head to play up his resemblance to the actor, Vin Diesel, but I suspected he didn't want to waste time in the a.m. fooling with his hair.

"Prelim on Tyson, Albert, your barbecued carpenter." He tossed a file on his desk. "The ME's tagging it unknown cause."

"They took the guy out in an ashtray, Cap," Harry said. "Had to be some kind of fire, do that to a body. Blow torch, maybe?"

"Gasoline," was my suggestion. "Doused him, made him drink."

"No residue - and Amoco cocktail parties don't cremate the bones. Not in open air, anyway." Grant pushed the file toward Harry. "Pull his photo off DOT, check out the next of kin, see who'd be pissed enough to grill him. That's all."

"Can I have a minute, Cap?" I asked. At his nod, my partner slipped out and shut the door. "When Harry's out of here, I'd like to fly solo."

A flicker of surprise crossed the captain's face before it went back to impassive. "You know policy, Sam."

I also knew who'd be taking Harry's place. "It'll just be for a couple weeks, 'til Singer screws himself with IA."

"*Singer* got a transfer." It wasn't a question. I nodded, and he grabbed his phone. "How come you've got better spies than I do?"

I shrugged. "A lieu over in Admin owed me."

"This is Grant," he said into the receiver. "Who shoveled Richard Singer my way?" He listened for a minute. "Put me down for a nine a.m. with him tomorrow. I don't fucking care, just do it." He slammed down the phone.

I closed my eyes. The last time I'd worked with Singer, I'd ended up in the hospital for six weeks - two in intensive care. "I've got vacation time coming."

"Sit down, Sam."

I sat. Grant got up and shut the blinds before coming back around to lean against the edge of the desk. Although he didn't look sympathetic, his deep voice softened a couple of degrees. "How bad has he got it in for you?"

"Bad." I forced myself to recite what constituted the worst moments of my life. "I got him washed back at the Academy for sexual harassment in '93. Two formal reprimands for unprofessional conduct while we were in uniform. About a dozen unofficials after that, until the Hernandez case."

Wood creaked under his hands. "You had to kill Hernandez after he shot you."

"Which is why I couldn't prove Singer had ratted me out to him." I toed the carpet with my shoe. "Since they booted him down to Vice, I've heard he's kept his nose clean, did the mandatory psych, earned a few citations."

"You think he's been waiting for another chance?"

"Oh, yeah." I met Grant's gaze steadily. "You partner us, I'll be dead in a week."

"I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, keep it under wraps."

I'd been harassed, stalked and shot down in the street because of one unbalanced cop with a grudge, but I couldn't tell anyone. "Right." I got to my feet.

"Sam." Grant held up a hand. "I'm on your side. But you're the only woman I've got, and you've made rank faster than any guy here. He's always claimed you had the hots for him."

And the squad would believe Singer over me. That was the way it was.

"Singer made me want to puke, from day one. And I earned my rank with my brain, not my ass."

"I know. Which is why you're going to keep your head down until I can boot this nutcase off the force." He produced an ugly smile. "You're not the only one owed favors."

"Hope they're large ones, Cap." I walked out of the office.

* * *

"I still can't believe it. Deputy Dickless, working my desk," Harry said as we pulled up to Tyson's home. "Screw Grant; take the vacation time."

"I'm tired of running away." I saw him massage his chest. "Take your pills, partner. Your wife will kill me if you fuck up your trip to Acapulco."

"Don't know why I got to take Gloria to *Mexico*, for Christ's sake. Got all the goddamn beach in the world right here." Harry shook out a couple of the nitro tablets no one but me, his wife and his doctor knew he took and popped them in

his mouth. "She's planning another frigging surprise party, too, isn't she?"

"Next Friday, right after our shift. She said you'd better look surprised, too, or else." I called in our twenty to dispatch. "Who's the next of kin?"

Harry checked his notepad. "Victim's mother, Rebecca Tyson. Called in the MPR last night." He sighed. "I hate it when it's the mothers."

So did I. "Let's get it over with."

The elderly woman who answered the door looked terrible - withered face, straggly white hair, ashy skin. She looked at Harry, then me. "Yes? Is this about my Albert?"

"Yes, ma'am." We'd have to be really careful telling her; she looked like one good shock would finish her off. "I'm Detective Farrell, Mrs. Tyson, and this is my partner, Detective Halloway. May we come in?"

Her gnarled hand crept to her throat. "Of course, please, come in." Momma Tyson had a nice, if rather sparsely furnished home - from what I could see of it. It was so dark inside I nearly tripped over a footstool on the way into the living room.

The old lady gestured to a sofa, then carefully lowered herself into an overstuffed armchair. "He's dead, isn't he?"

Harry and I exchanged a glance. "Yes, ma'am," I said. "He was killed last night at the construction site. We're very sorry for your loss."

She pulled a lacy handkerchief from her sleeve and pressed a corner to each eye. Her hand shook badly. "How did he die?"

"He fell, ma'am, and his body was burned."

Her cloudy eyes widened. "Burned?"

"We're still trying to determine the circumstances involved, Mrs. Tyson." I took out my notepad. "Do you know if anyone might want to hurt your son? Someone at work, maybe?"

"No, everyone liked Albert. He was a hard worker. And a good man." She turned to Harry. "Albert was a very good man. He loved me."

"I'm sure he did, Mrs. Tyson." My partner kept his tone gentle and sympathetic. "Did Albert go out a lot? Was he having any problems with friends?"

Something changed in the old lady's face, and she sat up a little straighter. "He didn't have time for friends. He never wanted to go out anywhere. We were happy together."

Like most bereaved parents, she'd already made Albert a complete angel. Which was understandable, but not helping. "Thank you, ma'am." I pocketed my notebook. "May we take a look in Albert's room?"

A knotty hand waved toward the back of the house. "It's at the end of the hall. But - my sweet Albert -" She finally crumpled and began to cry.

Harry rose and gave me a nod before going to the old lady's side to offer what comforting words he could. I went to check out the room.

Albert Tyson had a big bed, a dresser, a small bookcase sparsely stacked with a few copies of Popular Mechanics. Inside his closet I found two pairs of dress shoes and a couple dozen jeans and t-shirts. That was all.

Harry poked his head in. "She's gone to lay down. Anything?"

"Not much." I checked each drawer, under the mattress and in the shoes, then gazed around. "No photos, no personal effects. Not even a dust mote." I glanced at the king-sized bed. "He liked room when he slept, though."

Harry ducked into the adjoining bathroom, then emerged. "A toilet, a sink, and a roll of Charmin. You could eat off the seat in there."

"Try to restrain yourself." I went over to the bookcase, and pulled a book of matches Albert had used as a bookmark from one of the magazines. "Infusion," I read off the cover. The back side listed an address on A1A. "Sounds like a nightclub."

Harry rubbed his jaw. "Maybe Albert wasn't such a good boy."

"Could be." I pocketed the matches. "Let's take a ride."

* * *

One phone call confirmed that Infusion didn't open until after dark, so Harry and I went back to the construction site to interview the work crew.. Spending six hours in a cramped trailer listening to what a great guy Albert was bad enough, but one of the last guys decided to get cute with me.

"Yeah, he was okay." Hector Ladega slouched in his chair, which did nothing for his paunchy form. "You know what burned him up like that?"

"No. Do you?"

"Maybe it was the hole in the ozone." Four gold front teeth flashed. "You know, you too good lookin' for a cop, *chica*."

Harry had stepped out for a smoke, or I'd have turned Ladega over to him right then. "Did he have trouble with any of the crew? Ever hear him arguing with

anyone?"

"Nah. Al never talk much to anybody." He used one dirty hand to casually adjust his crotch. "You single? You like to dance?"

What was it about me that drew assholes like a magnet? I put down my notepad. "Know a club on the beach called Infusion?"

"That goth shit?" He shook his head. "I hang at the salsa clubs down on Calle Ocho. You should go with me tonight, *chica*." His hand patted his thigh. "We have a real good time."

Singer had said that to me once. *Someday, Samantha, I'm going to show you how to have a real good time.* "Was Albert into that goth shit?"

"If his new *mamacita* found out, she woulda whupped his ass." Hector laughed. "He said she like him to stay home with her."

"Who was his new *mamacita*?"

"Some *chica* he met, few weeks ago." Hector shrugged. "Mabel. No, Rebel."

I questioned him about the girl, but he didn't know anything more about her than the name. When I told him he could go, he leaned across the desk instead. Close enough for me to smell the garlic and onions on his breath.

"What you think, *chica*?" He fingered a piece of my hair that had come loose from my ponytail and tried to stare down the front of my blouse. "Wanna come dance with me? We can go to my place, do the nasty tango - "

I curled my fingers around his wrist, then slammed his hand down on the desk and held it there. With my other hand, I twisted his collar until I cut off his

air. "I can dance on your face, then book you for assault. Want me to do that?" He choked and shook his head, and I let go. "Pity. Get out of here."

Hector shot out of the trailer like a bullet, nearly knocking over Harry on his way in.

"What's his deal?" my partner asked.

"He needs to get laid." I clamped down on my temper. The prospect of Singer on the squad had me too riled. "That's your third cigarette today, Har. Make it the last, or I call your wife."

"You would, you bitch," he said without heat. "We hitting this club later?"

I glanced at the driver's license photo we'd pulled off the computer; Albert Tyson had been an average looking, clean-cut type of guy. Religious, too, judging by the big gold crucifix he'd worn around his neck. Then I took out the book of matches. A good Catholic boy, into goth. "Yeah. I'll pick you up at nine-thirty. Wear your spiked collar."

* * *

A long line of patrons were waiting outside Infusion when we pulled up to the curb that night. I flipped down the visor to display our unit ID card before heading toward the main entrance with Harry.

"What is this, like that Rocky Horror movie?" my partner asked as he scanned the waiting crowd.

"That was thirty years ago, pal." I checked out a woman dressed like Elvira on acid, wearing a Rolex, and arguing with her boyfriend about where they'd parked the Lexus. "This is yuppie goth." And not the kind of place I'd have

expected a blue collar carpenter to have the cash to frequent. According to the sign by the door, the cover alone was twenty bucks.

Maybe Albert had himself a secret life going. Or a second income.

The bouncer, who resembled a tank in a surprisingly nice tux, stepped in front of the door as we approached. The one inch of skin that passed as his brow lowered over mean eyes. "You two gotta wait in line like everybody else."

"But we have special invitations from the city." I flashed my shield. He made a rude sound, but moved sideways. "Thanks."

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the near total darkness inside, then I took in the layout: plenty of tiny tables and stools crowded around a huge dance floor,. Bars that stretched the length of the walls. Everything was hung with tiny red Christmas lights. The bartenders wore tuxes, and had their hair slicked down. The waitresses sported abbreviated French maid outfits. The basic décor was red and black. Lots of black.

And the noise - Harry was almost reeling from the heavy metal music pouring out of the oversized speakers above our heads. "See the office?"

I spotted a plain door off to one side. "Over there," I yelled back.

We found the door locked, and a shouted inquiry at one of the bartenders revealed that the owner had not yet arrived. Harry jerked his head toward the entrance. "I'll go canvas the line."

I nodded and caught the arm of a passing waitress, then showed her the photo. "Recognize this guy?"

She glanced, then shook her head. "Sorry." She hurried off.

That was the same answer I got from everyone, and after an hour of coming up empty, I was ready to leave. The pounding music and clouds of cigarette smoke had given me a headache, and if Albert Tyson had ever come to Infusion, he'd apparently done it invisibly.

"Sam." Harry appeared and watched the gyrating bodies on the dance floor for a moment. "No luck outside. You?"

I shook my head. "Manager still hasn't shown up. I think we'd better -" A huddle in one corner caught my eye. "We got a deal going down over there."

Harry squinted. "Yeah. Take two o'clock, I'll come up from nine."

The five men and women stood shoulder-to-shoulder, half-hidden between a square column and the wall. I strolled up, looked over one shoulder and saw a woman in the center. Ten hands were groping her, big time.

I prodded a back. "Hey. Time for a cigarette."

"I don't smoke." The man glanced over his shoulder and bared some fake plastic fangs. "Would you care to join us?"

"Sorry, she's my date tonight," Harry said, coming up from the other side. He peered at the guy's mouth. "You need an orthodontist, friend."

I didn't see any sign of drugs, or drug use, which puzzled me. "Let me talk to the lady." I pushed two shoulders apart and stepped into the huddle. "You all right, hon?" The young girl's dress was open to the waist, but nothing was hanging out.

Her eyes focused on me after a couple of seconds. "Oh, I'm fine." She smiled and leaned back against one of the men, who cupped her breasts. "So . . . fine."

Everyone smiled. Everyone had fangs.

"Right." Swingers playing oversexed vampires. It took all kinds. "Look, why don't you folks get a room?"

"Is there a problem here, officer?"

I swiveled and nearly slammed into a broad chest. Then I looked up, and blinked. "And you are . . . ?"

Tall, dark and handsome nodded, and somehow got my hand in his. Cool, strong fingers squeezed mine. "G. Gordon Norby, the owner."

"Detective Farrell, Fort Lauderdale homicide. My partner, Detective Halloway." I extracted my hand. "We need to ask you a couple of questions, Mr. Norby."

"Shall we go to my office?" Pale eyes briefly flashed up at the speakers. "That way, you'll be able to actually hear my answers."

My partner was rubbing his chest again, so I sent him outside, then followed Norby to his office. The interior matched the club in style, décor, and darkness.

He turned on a small desk lamp before offering me a drink and a seat on a sinfully comfortable-looking black leather sofa.

I refused both, and checked him out while he poured some wine. The full sleeved, white shirt and plain black trousers were retro 19th century, but it was a goth club; he fit right in. The thick, curly black hair could have been Cuban, but his voice sounded British. He was really tall, too -- I was six foot one in my socks, but he had at least seven inches on me. "How did you know we were cops?"

"You're not wearing black lipstick." He sat on the sofa and sipped his wine before inspecting me with his spooky, colorless eyes. "And judging by your suits, you were either bill collectors or police officers. What can I do for you, detective?"

"I'm looking for someone." I showed him the photo. "Recognize him?"

Norby studied the image. "Yes. I hired him to do some work before I opened the club. His name is Albert Tyson."

So Albert had worked here, which explained why none of the customers had seen him. But the bartenders and waitresses should have. "When did Albert work for you, what did he do, and how long was the job?"

"I opened the club six weeks ago, so, he would have been here for the two week period before that. He installed the bar counters and the stage lighting. He came every night after he finished at his day job, I believe." He handed me the photo. "Is he in some sort of trouble?"

"Not anymore."

The door burst open behind me, and I turned to see a gorgeous redhead in a skimpy black dress. "Norby, I must speak to -" she stopped and looked at me, stunned.

"Rebel." Norby put his glass aside. "Meet Detective Farrell."

Bloodshot green eyes narrowed. "You're here about Albert."

"Yes." I wondered how much crack she'd smoked - her voice was a raspy, cracked ruin, and she was weaving on her feet - then nodded. "He was a friend of yours, wasn't he? When was the last time you saw him?"

"Three days ago, when he walked out. He was an idiot." The woman shook back her heavy mane and planted her long-nailed hands on her hips. "Tell her to leave, Norby. We have to settle this."

"You want to come downtown and tell me about you and Albert there?" I asked, and zeroed in on the fear in her eyes. "Or maybe you want to do it now?"

Without another word, Rebel pivoted and ran out the door. I followed, but as soon as I got outside the office, I lost sight of her in the crowd.

After combing the entire club twice for the redhead with no luck, I went back to talk to Norby, but found his door locked again. The nearest bartender said he'd left for the evening.

"Great." Feeling like a rookie, I stomped outside and saw Harry snoozing in the unit, chin against his chest. My watch read two a.m., and my partner wasn't getting any younger, so I decided to call it a night.

I still slammed the door as I climbed in. "You see a redhead fly out of there?" Harry didn't answer, so I shook his shoulder to wake him up. "Come on, old man, wake -" I pulled back my wet, red hand, then pushed my partner's head up.

The blood had come from his slashed throat.

* * *

Four days later, I helped carry my partner's casket to his grave. Hundreds of officers from Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties attended, as I did, in full dress uniform. I listened to the eulogies, placed my rookie shield on the huge bouquet of white lilies Harry would have loathed, and suffered the stares and whispers.

I endured them because in spite of ninety-six hours on the clock, I still had no idea who had killed my partner - or why.

"Sam." As the funeral directory flipped the switch that lowered Harry into his grave, Grant tugged me off to the side. "I'm taking you home."

I looked over his shoulder at the white-faced, middle-aged woman accepting a folded flag from the Commissioner of Police. "Gloria -"

"-will be with her kids. You haven't slept since it happened." He ignored a short man in a dark suit who had approached us and gave me a little shake. "It wasn't your fault."

Oh yes, it was. "I know." In spite of my heavy uniform, I couldn't feel anything but cold. "I'm going back to Infusion tonight. I'll find witnesses."

"Perhaps Detective Farrell will allow me to give her a lift?" the dark suit said, drawing my attention. He sounded a little Latino, but not quite. Something else. "I am going that way."

If he was another obnoxious reporter, I was going to punch him out. "Who are you?"

The captain's hand tightened, then dropped away. "Samantha Farrell, Matteo Dante. He's working with the local INS on Norby."

I frowned as he shook my hand. "What, his green card expire?"

"Something like that." Dante gestured toward a black late model caddy parked at the fringe of the cemetery. "Are you ready to go?"

Grant started to say something, hesitated, then nodded. "I'll see you back at the station."

Dante didn't get in behind the driver's wheel, and I glanced at the discreetly uniformed driver as we climbed in the back. "The INS must pay pretty good these days."

"Your Immigration service does not employ me," he said as the driver pulled away from the curb. "I work in Rome. I just flew in last night."

I couldn't seem to concentrate, but then, I'd just watched them put my partner in the ground. "Norby's Italian?"

"British, before his citizenship was revoked." Dante removed a small tape unit from his pocket and set it to record. "Do you mind?"

Some cops used them instead of notepads, but not with other cops. Maybe it was an Italian thing. "Why not."

"The authorities in Rome are interested in locating Mr. Norby and questioning him regarding his activities." Dante sounded more like a politician than a cop. "Can you describe his present appearance to me?"

I gave him a short description of the nightclub owner, then clued in on the word present. "Does he change how he looks to avoid arrest?"

"Occasionally he appears, ah, older. Sometimes he limps." Dante leaned forward and said something in rapid Italian to the driver. "The redheaded woman you reported meeting in his office, her name was Rebel?"

"That's what he called her." He knew an awful lot for a guy who just flew in from Rome. "Who did you say you work for, Mr. Dante? The Italian cops? Interpol?"

"That doesn't matter -"

"I'm giving you confidential information from a police investigation, I think it does." I noticed the driver had taken a subtle turn and was now headed toward the beach. "Where are we going?"

Dante clicked off the recorder. "You said you wished to return to Infusion, no?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't open until ten tonight. So why are we going there?"

"I don't suppose you are a Catholic, Detective Farrell." When I shook my head, he smiled a little. "Do you know anything about Greek legends?"

I knew the guy was starting to piss me off. "No, and you didn't answer my question."

He considered that for a moment before he said, "We cannot wait for it to open."

"You've got a warrant?" When he shook his head, I leaned over and said to the driver, "Stop the car." He kept driving, and I turned to Dante.. "Doesn't he speak English? Tell him to stop the car."

"Calm down, detective."

Now I was tired. And angry. Why had Grant stuck me with this Euro-jerk?
"Look, according to our laws, you can't go busting into someone's home or club without probable cause or a warrant. You'll blow the case."

"I answer to a higher authority. We have been trying to locate Mr. Norby for some time. Albert Tyson reported his presence here in Florida -"

"Tyson called Italy?"

"His report was forwarded to us. It took several days, but I came as soon as the message arrived." That was when Dante did something very bizarre. He took a chain of beads out of his pocket, kissed it, then hung it around his neck.

Not a chain of beads - a rosary.

"Okay." I leaned over the seat again. "You. Pisano. Stop the damn car right now." Instead of stopping, the driver pulled into an alley, and parked beside a service entrance discreetly marked Infusion. "You can't go in there, Dante. You don't have jurisdiction. It's breaking and entering."

Dante bent over to grab a small black gym bag from under the seat. "It is my duty, Detective Farrell. You may wait in the car with my driver, if you wish."

"What's in the bag?" I asked, but he was already climbing out. "God damn it, wait!" Dante had the service door open by the time I caught up. "What do I have to do? Put cuffs on you?"

"Wait in the car," was all he said before he moved inside and the door swung shut.

Swearing again, I pulled the door open and went after him.

* * *

The interior of the club was pitch black, but Dante turned on a flashlight and handed it to me before retrieving another from his gym bag. "Be quiet," he murmured as he entered what looked like a storage room.

"Why? There's no one here." A familiar odor hit my nose, and I swung the light around. "That smells like . . . oh, *shit*."

The body of a woman lay propped against a wall. As I knelt down, I saw no visible wounds, but from the odor, she'd been dead for days. I checked her face, and sighed. She'd been the girl in the center of the grope-fest.

I automatically reached to close her eyes, but Dante yanked my hand away. "Don't touch her," he said.

"She's dead." I got to my feet. "I have to call this in."

"Later. Come with me now." He held on to my wrist and led me out of the storage room. "Don't touch any of them," he said as we entered the main room of the nightclub.

"Any of who?"

He moved his flashlight around the room. Two bartenders lay sleeping on top of the bar, while one waitress sat snoozing with her head down at a nearby table.

"Is everybody who works here fucking homeless?" I turned to see Dante take a large coil of dark colored wire out of the gym bag. "What is that?"

"The only thing that binds them." He started toward for Norby's office.

"I've got handcuffs," I told him as he efficiently picked the lock on the office door. "Look, let me call in this dead girl and get a forensic unit out here."

"She's not dead." He went inside, and put the bag on Norby's desk. "I don't have a great deal of time to explain this to you."

Now he was in a hurry. "Try."

"Norby and his *vrykolakes* are powerful, dangerous killers - ancient, extremely strong, and aided by unnatural forces." He kissed his rosary and unzipped the bag. "Your weapon will not work on them."

Ancient killers. Unnatural forces. And what was that first thing - *fries and colas*? I took out my cuffs. "Dante, I respect religion and all, but you can't do this ritual thing on private property. Plus we've got a body out there, and it's really dead."

"Not exactly." He took another coil of the dark wire from the bag, then a pair of leather gloves, and a small spray bottle of water. "Wrap the wire around their bodies, then spray them with this." He tugged on his own pair of thick gloves. "Do not touch them with your skin. I will pierce their hearts with these." He took out a handful of thin, sharp wooden stakes.

"Let me guess." The guy was full scale loony tunes. "You've a big fan of Buffy, right?"

"No, but I am," a deep voice said. "Matteo. What a pleasure to see you again."

I pulled out my gun, but Dante moved in front of me as Norby came in and leaned back against the door, blocking our only exit. "*Alastore*."

Norby smiled, showing a pair of plastic fangs. "Not according to the gospel of *Relation de l'Isle de Sant-erini*, my friend. Father Francois called me the devil

himself, did he not?"

Dante began to chant out loud in what sounded like Latin.

"I need to talk to you, Norby." I tried to get around the Italian, but he pushed me back. "Enough with praying, okay?"

The big man's pale gaze settled on me. "My friend here believes I am a minion of the devil, my dear."

"You are not my friend, Norby. And I will send you back to hell where you belong."

I looked from Norby to Dante. Nope. They weren't kidding. I stepped back and lifted my weapon. "Both of you, up against the wall. Right now."

"It is true, detective. Satan keeps certain bodies incorrupt and animates them after they die. He sends the demons to wander the earth - to feed on humanity." The Italian lifted a spray bottle like it was a .357 magnum. "Norby and his kind are *vrykolakes*, blood drinkers - the incarnate of evil."

Obviously, I was going to need some backup with straight jackets, so I kept my eyes on the crazy men and groped for the phone.

"Tell her the rest, Matteo. When such a *vrykolakas* is identified, the Vatican sends the good Father or one of his brothers to destroy it." Norby smiled wider, and the plastic fangs looked a little larger. "Are you still restricted to killing only six days each week? Or has His Holiness finally allowed you to violate the Sabbath?"

"You're both going to take a little trip to the Thorazine dispensary," I said as I found and picked up the phone.

That was the exact moment the lights dimmed, and Dante shouted something in Italian at me. Norby was suddenly right there, grabbing me, yanking the phone from my hand. I got one shot off before he knocked it away and yanked me back against him. A couple of bartenders ran in and tackled Dante. To add the final bizarre twist, the bartenders were wearing welding masks and raincoats.

Be still, Samantha. The voice in my head was Norby's, and it made me turn to stone.

"Don't kill the priest," I heard him say, and then a big hand covered my face and the world turned silent and black.

* * *

When I opened my eyes, I discovered I was still in Norby's office. Someone had taken off my dress jacket, my tie, and unbuttoned the collar of my starched shirt. The nightclub owner was sitting behind his desk, writing something in a ledger. His sleeves were rolled up and he was wearing reading glasses.

"What the fuck?" I sat up and grabbed my head. Pain hammered into it from both sides in a category five migraine. "Where's Dante? What did you do to me?"

"Father Matteo is quite safe, if a little out of sorts. My men escorted him off the premises." Norby closed the ledger. "His beliefs are quite sacred to him, you know. He doesn't like being proved wrong."

I pushed myself off the sofa and looked around for something I could use to knock him out. "Where's your girlfriend, the redhead?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Rebel comes and goes as she pleases." He rose and swept out his arms. "Feel free to search the club, of course."

I felt like searching his mouth with my fist. "Did you kill my partner?"

"No." He stepped around the desk and came toward me. "How is your head?"

"Sore. Was she upset with Albert Tyson? Did they have a fight?" I backed up a step before I realized what I was doing. He wasn't listening to me. He was touching my hair, which someone had taken down - probably him. Then he smiled, and that close, I could see the fangs looked pretty real.

"Are you incorruptible, Samantha?"

"Back off." Amazing what they could do with caps these days. "Right now."

Norby looked down, and his hair brushed my face. "I think you are." His mouth came up, hovered just an inch above mine. "Do you really think I'm the devil? Father Matteo does. He thinks if I touch you, I'll corrupt you with my evil."

"Dante needs help. So do you." I smelled wine, and something else on his cool breath. And the pain in my head intensified, to the point of where I could barely speak. "Every cop in Fort Lauderdale will be here within an hour, pal. I think you'd better give yourself up."

"You're an interesting puzzle, Detective Farrell. Beautiful woman, ugly job. But perhaps you think too much." He touched my face with his fingers, then frowned. "Who is Richard Singer?"

Before I could ask how he knew about Singer, the world went away again.

* * *

Sometime during that long stretch of darkness, I dreamed -- strange dreams. I saw beautiful women in long gowns. Men in suits with lace around their throats. I heard low, cultured voices speaking with British accents, like Norby's. An ocean voyage in an incredibly nasty-looking wooden ship. Islands. Black sands. Dark men in ragged clothes fighting in hills, hiding behind scraggly-looking trees.

Norby was there, too, but only his voice, at first. *You've never been made to leave your homeland, Samantha. You are fortunate in that.*

I turned around, trying to see him. *As soon as I wake up, you're going to jail.*

Wouldn't you rather stay with me?

I felt hands touching my face, a mouth pressed against my throat. *This how you get your jollies? Can't you do it when the woman's conscious?*

Laughter vibrated against my neck. *You simply won't give in. Such an astonishing will.*

Get off me!

The laughter died away. *I could make you mine with a single thought.*

For some reason, that made me think of Singer, and how I felt every time he'd put his slimy hands on me. *Try it, and see what happens.*

No, Samantha. I am not like him. But I will give you a taste of what you can have.

Another explosion of images filled my head, this time of me and Norby. I wore the long gown this time, and he held me in his arms and waltzed me around a room. That blurred into something darker, a bedroom filled with huge, ornate furniture, and I fell back against an enormous bed. Norby was on top of me, kissing me, pulling down the bodice of my gown -

He lifted his head, and smiled down at me, white fangs gleaming. *Now you give me a taste.*

* * *

"Then he bit me on the neck, and that's all I remember. I woke up in my apartment, in my own bed, and it was Tuesday morning." I rubbed the side of my throat, where it should have hurt - but there were no bite wounds. "I figure he drugged me with a hallucinogenic."

Grant had listened to my ridiculous story in complete silence. "I checked out Matteo Dante. He is a priest, and he works for the Vatican. He's some kind of investigator, and the INS story checks out. However, he hasn't been seen since he left the funeral with you. I sent a unit down to search the nightclub, but it was empty. As was your apartment."

I didn't want to ask, but I had to know. "Do you believe me?"

He nodded. "A lot of these goth types get into the vampire fantasy. He definitely drugged you."

"There's no way to know." I'd gone to the ER before checking in, but the exam and blood tests came out clean. Norby had used something untraceable. "I'm sorry, captain. I should have slapped the cuffs on Dante in the alley." I saw a

shadow hovering outside Grant's door. "What about Singer?"

"I put him on desk duty, but he filed a grievance with the union." The captain pulled out a file. "All he has to do is twitch the wrong way with you, and I can nail him. But he has to twitch first, Sam. Until he does - "

"I know." I got up and made a point to check my weapon in front of the window where one blind strip was bent. "If he moves on me, I'll defend myself."

He nodded. "Get witnesses."

It wasn't hard to walk out and face Singer - physically. I went on automatic, the same way I had during my partner's funeral. Though I hated the tall, skinny, rat-faced son of a bitch almost as much as whoever had killed poor Harry.

"Detective Farrell." Singer's voice dripped saccharine. "So nice you could make it into work today."

"Detective Singer." Conscious of the many eyes watching us around the squad room, I walked over to my desk and sat down. The file on Albert and Harry were there, but someone had gone through them. Probably the dickhead, who now hovered behind me. "Excuse me, I have to type up some reports."

"I already did them for you." He dropped a small stack of completed forms in front of me. "Tyson's mother called while you were in bitching, I mean, talking, to the captain. She says she knows who killed Albert."

Which meant getting into a car with Singer and driving out there. *He has to twitch first, Sam.* I grabbed my keys and my jacket. "Let's go."

I'd set up a voice-activated recorder in the unmarked unit I usually drove, but Singer must have anticipated that, because he didn't threaten me at all on the drive to Tyson's house.

Instead, he chatted. Like we were old pals.

"Vice has twice the caseload, but they don't have half the floor space Homicide gets," Singer said as he watched me drive. "While I was down there, I had to share a desk and file cabinets with Burglary and Traffic. And my last partner was a slob, always spilling whatever he was drinking on the reports. I must have retyped a thousand of them." He chuckled a little. "I was really glad to get the transfer."

He'd been just as chatty back at the Academy, right up until he broke into my dorm room one night. After I'd kicked his ass, he'd claimed I'd come on to him. Luckily, my roommate had backed me up.

"I'm also glad I have a chance to work with you again," he added. "We should let bygones be bygones."

The same thing he'd said, just before sending Hernandez after me. *I'm not falling for your shit this time.* I parked in front of Rebecca Tyson's home. "We're here."

On the walk up to the door, Singer stepped in front of me, forcing me to stop. "I'm dying to know, are you wearing a wire, Detective Farrell?"

I opened my jacket so he could see my weapon. "Put your hands on me, Dickhead, and I'll blow your balls off."

"Oh, really?" Singer grinned. "What if I'm wearing a wire, Detective Farrell?"

I pushed him aside and went to the door. After ringing the bell and knocking for a few minutes, I heard a shuffling sound on the other side.

"Lazy broad takes her time, doesn't she?" Singer commented.

"Shut up, she's old." I stepped back as the door opened and Albert's mother peered out. She looked ten times worse than the last time I'd seen her. "Hello, Mrs. Tyson. Detective Farrell, remember me?"

"You came to tell me about Albert," she said, then looked at Singer. "I don't know you."

"Detective Farrell got her partner - I mean, Detective Farrell's partner was murdered," Singer said.

I controlled a wave of rage. Barely. "You wanted to talk to us, ma'am?"

"Come inside."

The house was just as stark and dark as before, but I noticed a distinct, unpleasant odor - like someone had thrown up. Then the old lady passed in front of me, and I saw some vomit stains on the front of her house dress. "Are you feeling okay, Mrs. Tyson?"

"No," she said bluntly. "I know who killed Albert. It was that man he worked for at the nightclub. Norby."

So she was ready to admit Albert wasn't such an angel, after all. "The last time I spoke to you, Mrs. Tyson, you said Albert didn't have time to go out - that he never went out anywhere."

"I forgot." She pushed back a handful of her ratty hair. "Albert did work for Norby. I know he killed my son."

"You don't have any evidence, lady," Singer said.

"Go and search his office." Her withered face turned an alarming shade of purple, and she dug her twisted fingers into the chair arms. "You'll find all the evidence you need."

I heard upholstery rip. "How would you know that, Mrs. Tyson?"

"One of the girls who works for him called me." She let go of the chair and folded her arms tightly over her shrunken abdomen. "She said she saw things. Things in Norby's desk."

Singer got to his feet. "Right. Thanks for the tip."

I wasn't ready to go just yet. "What motive would Norby have to kill Albert? Was there a problem with the work he did for him?" "He wanted Albert all for himself, the disgusting man." The old lady's voice dropped to a whisper. "He was jealous of me."

Singer sputtered out a laugh. "Of you?"

Mrs. Tyson's head snapped up. "Yes! Albert loved me! Only me!"

I felt sorry for her, but I got to my feet. "Okay, ma'am. We'll check it out."

"He'll be at that club of his tonight." Mrs. Tyson's eyes gleamed. "The girl told me. After sunset." As we left, she called out, "You can only catch him after sunset."

I wondered if Tyson's mother thought Norby was a vampire, too.

* * *

Singer behaved himself for the rest of our shift, but informed me he was going with me to Infusion.

"Department policy," he said when I told him I could handle taking in Norby with the help of a couple of uniforms. "You don't want me to file another grievance, do you, Detective Farrell?" As we were in the squad room, he said it loud enough for everyone to hear. "You can pick me up at my place, after dark."

Like I'd ever go within ten miles of his place. "I'll meet you here."

I went home, and paced around my apartment for a couple of hours. My neck still hurt where there should have been a bite. The dream images kept bugging me.

Singer was a bomb, waiting to go off in my face. Dante was still missing and probably dead. And I still didn't know who killed Albert Tyson, or Harry, or the girl we found in the storage room.

You think too much, Norby's voice whispered in my head.

Rat Face was waiting by my unit when I came back to headquarters that night. I glanced at his change of clothes and slicked-back hair - I was still wearing the same, wilted suit -- but didn't comment. Which irked him. "Don't you like my new Armani? I got it cheap from the last DEA auction."

Only a guy like Singer would buy clothes that once belonged to a pusher. "It's not Armani," I said, mouth-breathing to avoid the smell of his musk cologne. "It's a knock-off."

"How do you know?" His beady gaze crawled over me. "Does Grant wear the real thing?"

Responding to that was useless - he was already working himself up to be jealous of any man I spoke to. Just like every time before. I made a mental note to warn the captain, then drove down Broward Boulevard toward the beach.

Singer chatted again, but this time about his conquests.

"That's what's good about working Vice - it's wall to wall women." He alternated between staring at my face and staring at my crotch. "Hookers, crack heads, runaways - and you wouldn't believe how friendly some of them can get. Oh, but I forgot - you don't like sex."

He'd probably raped a few suspects before bringing them in for booking, the sick bastard.

"You're not listening to me." He sounded vaguely upset. "You're ignoring me. You can't ignore me like this."

"Watch me." I stopped at a red light, then felt Singer's hand snake over my thigh. "Get your fucking hand off my leg."

"Not yet." He kept it there, and edged a little closer. "Did I mention that I ripped out the recorder?" He pressed something harder into my side. "I've waited too long for this, Samantha. Don't," he tagged on when I reached for my weapon. He jerked it out of my grip. "I can shoot you in the side and dump you in an alley, too."

"You need help, Singer." I looked up at the light, which had turned green. "Why do this to yourself again?"

"I haven't done anything yet. Just you wait." His gun dug into my ribs as he reached down and pulled my backup piece from my ankle holster. "Drive to the nightclub."

I drove. I was betting Singer couldn't keep his weapon on me once I was out of the car, and he didn't know about the blade I had strapped to the small of my back. "You'll either die or fry for this, Singer. Don't do it."

"Norby will take the heat. I promise, I'll be one of your pall bearers, Samantha. Like you were for poor old Harry." He kissed my cheek and stroked my thigh. "You shouldn't have turned me down at the academy. You shouldn't have tried to ruin my career."

I stopped the car in front of Infusion and tried to get out, but Singer curled his free arm around my shoulders. "You come out this way, with me." He moved the gun hand to open the door, and I tried to drive an elbow into his throat. An instant later, the gun was under my chin. "Bitch. Move your ass."

He got me out of the car and into a one-armed hold, then marched me up to the door. "I'll shoot the bouncer between the eyes if you say a word," he whispered into my hair. "One word."

The bouncer didn't even try to stop us, he just opened the door. Inside, the heavy metal music had been replaced by Mozart, and there were candles burning everywhere. No bartenders or waitresses, only a man gagged and tied to a chair in the center of the dance floor.

Dante.

As Singer took this in, the door swung shut behind us and the bouncer locked it from the outside.

"Detective Farrell." Norby stepped out from behind one of the bars, carrying a glass of wine. "How nice to see you again. You remember Father Matteo. And who is this charming gentleman?"

"Norby, get out of here!" I yelled.

"Oh, no." Singer calmly shot the nightclub owner in the chest. "I need his body."

Norby staggered back for a moment, then straightened and placed the wine glass on a nearby table. "That wasn't very polite."

I'd seen the bullet hit. He'd taken a direct shot to the heart - was he wearing a vest? Had to be -

Singer shot him again, over and over until he emptied his clip. All Norby did was jerk a little as each bullet hit him. In the chest, in the groin, and twice in the head.

He didn't bleed. He didn't fall down. He didn't die. He just waited until Singer's gun clicked on an empty chamber, and then he smiled.

Those long, sharp fangs weren't plastic or caps. They were for real. *He* was for real.

"Finished?" Norby asked. He wasn't even winded.

With a bellow of outrage, Singer knocked me to the floor and ran toward Norby. I scrambled up in time to see the nightclub owner catch him and lift him off the floor by the front of his cheap suit.

"This is Richard Singer, is it not?" Norby asked me. Singer just sort of hung there, his face comical with surprise. "The one who has been trying to kill you?"

"He's a very sick man." I moved in, ready to kill myself. "Put him down, I'll deal with him."

"You've tried before, Samantha." Norby transferred his gaze to Singer. "He murdered your partner, you know. Tell her."

"I . . . killed . . . Halloway." The words exploded from Singer's white lips. "Old fuck . . . kept me . . . from Samantha. Tired . . . of waiting."

Matteo made a harsh sound from behind his gag.

A strange humming sound filled my ears. "How did you know that?"

"I'm a bit of a psychic, actually." Norby lowered Singer to the ground, then cradled his face between his palms. "Enjoy hell, Richard. Try not to take it over." With one brutal jerk, he snapped Singer's head around, and broke his neck, then let the body fall to the floor. "Come here, Samantha."

I went over to Dante instead, stripped off his gag and tugged at knot binding his wrists. There was blood on his mouth, and he was pale. "Are you all right?"

He swallowed, then pushed what looked like a little bottle of breath spray in my hand. "Holy . . . water . . ." then he sagged forward, unconscious.

Someone seized me from behind, and I felt sharp nails dig into my neck. "I told you to search his office!" a raspy voice shouted in my ear. "You stupid cow, you've ruined everything!"

I turned my head, grimacing as the nails dug deeper, and saw Rebel's furious face. "What?"

"We age," Norby said. "In the daylight, when we're denied blood."

"As you denied me. Making me drink the blood of animals for weeks, making me sick." Rebel dragged me back against her, and edged away from the dance floor and Norby. She was so strong I couldn't move an inch. "You want her, don't you, Gordon? Just like Albert. You couldn't leave my Albert alone."

"I never touched the boy." For the first time, Norby sounded angry. "He was yours, Rebecca. You knew how devoted he was to the church, and you still changed him against his will. Your lies drove him to suicide."

Rebecca?

The dead girl from the storage room appeared beside Rebel, adding one more bizarre note to the entire scene. "Let go of her!"

The redhead reached out and clawed the girl across the face, then dragged me away, heading for the entrance. No one tried to follow us.

"He wants you, but he can't have you." She let go of my throat, whirled me around and stuck her face in mine. The wrinkled face was smoothing out; the white hair was turning red. "You want to love me, don't you?" she asked in her old lady's rasp. "You want to live forever with me?"

I pulled my blade and pressed it against her belly. "No."

She giggled as she wrapped her hand around mine, and forced me to stab her. "That won't kill me." A gun fired from somewhere, and she jerked. "Or that."

"This might." I sprayed her in the face with Dante's holy water.

I thought it might blind her, but I was wrong. Holy water worked like acid, from the way she clawed at her cheeks and screamed and fell to the floor.

"Jesus." I dropped the sprayer, whipped off my jacket and tried to wipe her face, but her flesh was smoking and . . . melting.

"You can't save her." Cool fingers enclosed mine. "Come, Samantha."

* * *

I ended up in Norby's office, calmly sitting on his leather sofa while he poured me a glass of wine. I didn't want to be there, but I was in shock. Or something. I wasn't too sure what kind of control Norby had over me at that point.

"I owe you an apology." Norby handed me a glass. "I punished Rebel for forcing Albert to undergo the blood exchange, when I should have simply destroyed her."

I drank half the glass in one swallow. "So it's true, what the priest said. You're vampires. You, Rebel, the bartenders. That dead girl."

"Vrykolakes. There are some functional differences, but yes, that's the general idea." He straightened his sleeves. "It was the two-by-four that killed Albert, not the fall. Wood through the heart causes our bodies to spontaneously combust. As does holy water."

I drank the rest of the wine. "Albert Tyson wasn't a vampire, though, until he met up with your friend Rebel. She made him into one, he couldn't stand it, and killed himself. And Singer killed Harry."

"I believe so." He sat on the edge of the desk.

"What about the Vatican cop?"

"Alas, Father Matteo chose to return and attack me a second time. However, he hasn't been harmed. In fact, I'm sending him back to Rome with a message for the Pope." He studied me for a moment. "Now I must decide what to do with you."

"Nothing. You're not going to do a fucking thing," John Grant said as he stepped out of the shadows, gun drawn. "Get up, Sam."

I didn't look away from Norby's pale eyes. "Rebel for Singer - that makes us even. I don't know what the rest of your deal is, but I don't want any part of it."

His mouth hitched. "Not even the promise of immortality?"

I thought of the dreams, then Rebel's face, melting. "Goth isn't my thing. Neither is blood or serving the devil. I'm a cop."

Norby laughed. "That you are." He inclined his head toward the captain. "I yield her to your prior claim, sir." He looked at my neck. "For now."

Grant covered me as we backed out of the room. I looked around to see the bodies, along with the priest, were gone. The captain didn't let go of me until we were outside the club, surrounded by uniforms and lights from a dozen patrol cars. The SWAT team moved in, but emerged a short time later.

They'd found no one inside - the club was completely deserted.

"You had someone tailing us," I said as Grant guided me toward his car. "The whole time?"

"And a backup recorder. I was with you every step of the way, Sam." He opened the door for me, then had a word with the officer in charge before getting

in. He didn't turn on the engine, though. He sat for a full minute, staring at the steering wheel. "I thought I'd seen everything, before tonight."

"Me too." I fell silent for a while as he drove back to the station. Vampires committing suicide, priest cops, and my own captain tailing me. As he parked, I decided I had to know. "What did he mean, your prior claim?"

"Nosy bastard," the captain said in disgust, then pulled me across the seat until our nose bumped. "I was going to transfer you out to Missing Persons before I did anything." Then he kissed me, quick and hard. "Tell me you don't want any part of this, and we'll forget about it."

It was the final shock of the evening, but a good one. "I stay in Homicide."

He drew back a little. "Yeah. Okay."

"If it works out" --I smiled and patted his cheek before I kissed him back-- "you'd better make Commissioner."

* * *

It worked out.

To protect both our futures, John and I had to write some very creative, edited reports about what had happened to us. As a result, Richard Singer, Rebecca Tyson, and the girl from the storage room were reported as missing persons. To date, their bodies have never been recovered.

Infusion never reopened, and was sold by an anonymous property management company a few months later. Well-paid attorneys handled everything.

Norby kept his promise, and sent Father Matteo back to Rome. I knew that

because the priest called me from the Vatican to see if I had any further leads on the nightclub owner's whereabouts. He didn't say what Norby's message had been, but I remembered the blood on the priest's mouth, and wondered if it had been his - or Norby's.

A few months after the final showdown at Infusion, Singer's sister called IA. Apparently she had moved into her brother's house and found a disturbing room wallpapered with photos of me, along with evidence that proved every allegation I'd made against him. There was a bit of a media flare, and a couple of true crime authors contacted me, wanting to write my story. I politely declined.

John and I kept our relationship quiet for a year, while we were figuring out what we wanted. Then he made Chief of Police, and I resigned from the force to start my own security firm. We got married six months later.

We spent our honeymoon at a bed and breakfast in the Key West, mostly in bed. I didn't have trouble sleeping, although my new husband did one night, after a beautiful arrangement of white roses were delivered. No card came with the flowers, but the hotel manager confirmed that they were definitely sent for us.

When John finally fell asleep, I got up, and went to sit out on the balcony. He'd insisted on putting the flowers out there, then I remembered him tossing something in the trash. I studied the roses, then went in and picked up the little trash can by the bed. In the bottom was the card, crumpled up. I understood everything when I read the two words someone had written on it.

For now.

Abbadon

“There’s a cobweb up there,” Father Carlo murmured as he passed by me. I was on my hands and knees, scrubbing the old mosaic tile. “Be sure to take care of that before you leave today.”

Like one little cobweb was going to make the old place collapse.

I looked up at the saint statues carved in the low arch overhead and spotted the thin, dusty strand hanging from St. Paul’s receding chin. St. Luke’s church had been built to look just the ones my grandparents had left behind in Ireland, but the inside was pure Italian. Mama had said that was because the Vatican had paid to rebuild the church after the Chicago Fire of 1871. It was a heavy, gloomy place, with looming vaulted ceilings and walls of load-bearing brick covered with stucco and tons of gilded plaster. The fussy baroque Italian stuff collected a lot of dust but did nothing to cheer the place up. The two-story rectory behind the sanctuary had the same unyielding, grim atmosphere.

Maybe it was the scorched brick you could still see near the foundations, or the smell from the prayer candles, but the only warmth St. Luke’s seemed to offer was the promise of eternal hellfire for all of us sinners.

City tours often brought tourists by to walk through the sanctuary, which the guides said was a bastion of late-19th architecture. St. Paul and the thirteen other martyrs had been installed above the huge altar, one said, right after the flu epidemic that had killed so many people after World War I.

“Saints ward off evil,” my mother had told me, “and Lord knows in this neighborhood, that’s a full-time job.”

All I knew was, they were ugly and a bitch to keep clean. But then, who was I to judge things for their beauty? “I will, Father.” I’d need the dust mop with the long handle, which meant another trip into the basement.

I *really* didn’t like the basement.

I’d sort of inherited my job at St. Luke’s from my mother, who had spent years on her knees there praying for my affliction or my Father’s soul, and scouring away the heel marks of the faithful. Usually she assumed the position to scrub the floors — my problem was permanent and Mama felt certain that Dad had gone straight to hell. Still, sometimes she scraped up enough spare change to light a candle.

“Dear Lord, forgive my dear departed husband Francis Patrick Murphy for his sins and try not to let him aggravate you as much as he did me,” she’d say as she lit the wick and bowed her head. Or, more seriously, “My Nia’s a sweet girl, please take His mark away.”

The doctor at the free clinic had assured Mama that *His mark* was just a birth defect, and not because my Dad had been a good-for-nothing drunk and gambler. Mama never argued with the doctor; she said he was a Jew and of course those people were all screwed up about religion.

Before I found out otherwise, I didn’t know how to feel about my affliction. I felt like I was a good person, and I hadn’t killed anyone. I absolutely adored my little brother, so it couldn’t be like a Caine thing. I’d never been as big on God as

Mama was, though, so maybe He wanted to point that out to the rest of the world. Naturally I'd always assumed *His mark* meant *God's mark*.

The Jews weren't the only ones who were screwed up.

Mama cleaned the sanctuary at St. Luke's on Wednesday and Saturday mornings, and she took me and my brother with her on the weekends. It was only five blocks from our apartment, so we'd walk. As long as we were quiet, we were invisible; the priests only spoke to Mama if we made noise or if she missed something: "The children should not laugh so loudly, Mrs. Murphy" or "Remove that dripped wax from the candle stand by the Holy Mother's statue if you would."

Teag and I never liked St. Luke's. Aside from the dismal feel of the place, sometimes there were strange noises that came out of nowhere; bangs, rattling, and what sounded like whispering voices. Mama always said it was just the old pipes or the wind, but they gave my little brother nightmares. Teag would wake up screaming about monsters under his bed – and always on the nights when we'd been at the church.

Mama told him his imagination was running wild, but I borrowed a pocket flashlight from our landlord Mr. Cipella and slipped it to Teag on the sly. "When you wake up, shine it under the bed," I told him. "Monsters are allergic to light and they'll run."

"What if the light doesn't work?" he asked me, his eyes wide.

"Call me, and I'll give them a great big kiss." I made a hideous face – not a hard thing for me – and he giggled, bless him.

We were allowed to go anywhere we wanted at the church, except into the rectory, on the altar or down into the basement. The rectory was where the priests lived, the altar was sacred, and the basement was simply off-limits. Mama always went by herself with her to get the mops and buckets from downstairs, and she scolded us if we even got near the door.

“It’s dark and dirty and no place for you to play,” she’d always tell us. Mama herself never stayed down there more than a minute. When she went there, I could hear her footsteps pounding on the stairs, like she was running up and down them.

We also went to St. Luke’s on Sundays, but that was different. That was church going. I had to wear a dress and a long lace veil, and a pair of Mama’s shiny black shoes that always pinched my toes. Teag had to wear a little suit and tie and have his hair wet-combed. We sat all the way in the back with the other poor people, and stand and kneel and listen to the priests pray and talk about God and sinners and salvation. Most of it was pretty boring, but the choir sounded nice. I never got to be around many people, either, so I liked watching them through the lace of my veil.

I got caught once, when I was about ten.

An old lady came up to our pew after mass. “Your girl was staring at me, Fiona Murphy,” she said, her voice all dried up and cranky. “You tell her to stop.”

My mother put an arm around me. “She can look where she wants, Mrs. Reilly.”

She pointed a bony finger at my face. “Marked her for his own, Abbadon has. I don’t want her evil eye cast on me.”

Mama stood up and folded her arms. “Then maybe you should be moving on.”

Later at home I asked my mother who Abbadon was, but she wouldn’t say. When I pestered her, she told me there were plenty of crotchety old ladies in the world who had nothing good to say to anyone, and to stop harping or she’d make me stay in my room for the day.

The old lady wasn’t the only one who said things. The kids in our neighborhood would too, whenever I walked with Mama to church or the store. We lived on the other side of Washington Square in the row houses behind the Newberry Library. The library and St. Luke’s faced each other on opposite sides of open park everyone called “Bughouse Square.” Mama said it was because in the old days people would gather there to hear soapbox prophets and libertarians, but now it was the exclusive territory of high school dropouts, hookers and drug dealers.

The O’Brien brothers – Ian and Avery – were the worst, and always did their very best to bug me.

“That’s a pretty dress, Two-Tone.” Ian was a scrawny red-headed boy with liver-colored freckles and beady brown eyes. “Why don’t you give it to someone who’ll look good in it?” He snatched at my skirt.

“Little snot.” Mama smacked him in the head with her purse. “Keep your hands to yourself.”

Ian's brother yanked him away, but looked back to yell, "Freak! Look at the freak! Free freak show!"

"You're such a prize, Avery O'Brien?" my mother shouted in return. "Go back to school; you'll get a bigger vocabulary!"

The most important priest at St. Luke's was Father Augustus Tower, who gave mass only on high holy days. He was going to be our next bishop, Mama said, and sure enough by the time I started taking my high school home courses, he went off to Italy. He came back a year later wearing a different dress (Mama said they were called cassocks but Teag called them dresses, which tickled me.) People started calling him "Bishop Tower" and "Your Eminence" instead of Father Augustus. He brought back a couple of new Italian priests, though I don't know why. Neither of them would have anything to do with the parishioners.

"They're mean, too," Teag told me once after Sunday school. "Tommy Harliss gave Roy Kelly the finger in class and Father Carlo was walking by and saw and came in and beat Tommy's hand with a ruler. Until it bled and everything."

I told Mama that, and she said Teag could stay home from Sunday school with me from then on. Which was fine with my brother; he'd never thought it was fair that he had to go when I didn't.

That was about the same time when Mama stopped bringing us with her on her cleaning jobs. She said I was old enough to stay home and watch Teag by myself. She started feeling bad soon after that, would come home at the end of the day so pale and exhausted she could barely eat.

“That cut on your arm isn’t healing, Mama,” I said one night. She’d said she’d gotten it cleaning up some broken beer bottles after a party at one of the office buildings she worked. “Why don’t I call the doctor?”

She covered the raw gash with her hand. “Don’t fuss, Nia. I’m just getting older, takes me longer to heal.”

Mama collapsed one morning, right in front of the stove, and threw up blood all over the floor. I rolled her on her side and made Teag call 911 while I kept her from choking on it. The paramedics let us ride with her in the ambulance to the hospital, but even after she stopped puking in the ER they said she had to stay. I had to take Teag home by myself. We went every night to see her, and on the third night a doctor came and said my mother had stomach cancer, the bad kind.

Mama never came home again.

Days stretched into weeks. Father George came every day, but he mostly stayed with Teag and watched cartoons with him in the waiting room. Bishop Tower came to see Mama twice, and both times she asked me to leave the room. When I came back the second time, she was crying. I wanted to yell at the bishop for upsetting Mama, but she smiled through her tears and said he’d given her absolution, and she was going to heaven.

“His Eminence says you can take my place, Nia,” she added as she was drifting off. “You’ll always have work.”

I’d already taken over her cleaning jobs, working at night so people wouldn’t have to see me. I didn’t want to spend my life scrubbing floors at places

like St. Luke's, but with my face no one else would hire me and we needed the money. "That's great, Mama, but you're not going anywhere."

"You'll be safe." She closed her eyes. "Just do the work, look after your brother, and say your prayers."

I'd said three rosaries on my knees every night since she'd gotten sick, but God hadn't paid any attention to me. Maybe I disgusted him too, or maybe he wasn't such a great God. My mother had worked all her life, had gone to church all her life, and had never hurt another person. And He was letting her die.

"What's the use in praying, Mama?"

Her eyes opened wide, and her bony hand grabbed my wrist. "You'll pray and you'll be a good girl." Spit flew from her lips and her whole face turned red. "Swear to me you will, or the he'll have you. He won't just mark you this time – Abbadon will take your *soul*."

"Who is Abbadon?"

Her eyes went glassy. "Those whops will see to him. You just do as I say." A wet cough seized her, making her choke.

I didn't understand but I didn't want her throwing up blood again. "I'll pray, Mama. Every night. I promise." I felt like crying. "He won't get me."

"I know he won't." She stopped coughing and subsided, her fingers limp on my wrist. "You're my good girl."

Mama died three days later.

St. Luke's had a mass for her, conducted by the bishop himself, and that afternoon Father George presided over the funeral. He called Mama a good

Catholic woman who had gone to her reward. We didn't have any family, but the other people who worked at St. Luke's came to pay their last respects. Hardly anyone stared at me. Bishop Tower met me and Teag as we were walking from the cemetery.

"Your Eminence."

"Fiona was a good woman, Niamh Murphy." He said my name the old Irish way, Nee-uv, instead of Nia like Mama and Teag called me. He held out his hand. "Will you serve St. Luke's as well as your mother did?"

Teag was only twelve; I'd just turned seventeen. I'd nearly finished my high school equivalency but people wouldn't look at my GED when I went to job interviews. They'd look at my face. The only way the Family Services people would let me keep Teag was if I had steady work. I'd fry in hell with Daddy before I let them put him in some foster home.

"Yes, Your Eminence." I bent over when he held out his hand, and pressed my lips to his ring. "Thank you."

#

I went to St. Luke's the following Wednesday evening. Our neighbor Mrs. Harris had agreed to baby sit on nights while I worked; our television was better than hers and she had no kids of her own so she liked fussing over my brother.

Even with Mrs. Harris bringing over popcorn balls and her homemade snicker doodles, Teag didn't like me leaving him behind. "What if something bad happens to you? What if someone tries to jump you?"

I thought of Ian O'Brien and his brother, who were still hanging out with their thug friends at Bughouse Square. "I'm too poor to rob, little brother, and too ugly for anything else."

"Aw, Nia." Teag put his hand on my left cheek. "It's not so bad." He ran his finger down the uneven border of my affliction, which started on my forehead, went down the side of nose, over the middle of my mouth and chin and disappeared into the collar of my t-shirt. "You're pretty to me."

"Don't say that, I can't afford eyeglasses for you just yet." I kissed the end of his nose. "Be good and go to bed when Mrs. Harris says, okay?"

I left my hair in a ponytail when I rode my bike down to St. Luke's. Mama always had me wear my hair loose whenever we went out, but I was tired of hiding behind it. Like Teag said, it wasn't so bad – maybe if I stopped hiding people would get used to it.

When I passed Bughouse Square the O'Briens were at the corner, as usual.

Ian grabbed his crotch and grin at me. "Wanna pump on this?" he shouted.

"Why? Is your hand sore?" I yelled back.

I locked my bike at the rack in the parking lot of St. Luke's and met Father George in the church office. Father Rocca and Father Carlo were there, too, although they just eyed me before going back to talking to each other in Italian.

Father George was a big teddy-bear kind of priest with lots of bushy white hair and a big nose that was always drinker-pink. I always went to Father

George for confession because he gave the easiest penance. He waved me into the chair in front of his desk. “How are you and your brother getting along, Miss Murphy?”

“We’re doing well, Father, thank you for asking.” Teag was still having nightmares, this time about Mama, and I was tired from all the extra work, but I didn’t want to burden him. He’d done enough, keeping watch with us at the hospital and taking care of the funeral.

“That’s good. Things will get better in time, my dear.” He sat back in his chair. “As you know it was Fiona’s wish that you take over cleaning the sanctuary for us, and we’re happy to offer you the job.” He named a fairly decent weekly wage, enough to let me drop two of my other night jobs. “I don’t think I have to go over the particulars; you’ve seen what your mother’s done over the years.”

Father Carlo came over and put something on the desk in front of me. “She has to wear this.”

I picked up the material and unfolded it. It was a long black cotton scarf, the kind old ladies wore. “But Mama never—“ I stopped and looked at Father George.

“The bishop receives visitors here sometimes.” Father George looked terribly embarrassed. “Likely he doesn’t want you to . . .startle anyone.”

“It won’t cover everything. For that I’ll need a grocery bag.”

“Don’t be fresh, girl.” Father Carlo looked like he wanted to beat me with a ruler. “Be glad you have the work.”

“That’s enough, Carlo.” Father George’s whole face was pink now. “I could speak to the bishop, Nia.”

“No, that’s okay.” Slowly I draped the scarf on my head and tied the ends under my chin. “I need to see the supply closet downstairs. Mama never let us go down there with her.”

Father George cleared his throat. “Of course. I’ll take you down and show you everything.”

The stairway to the basement was to the right of the altar, partially concealed by the life-sized statue of Blessed Mother. Automatically I genuflected in front of the altar before following Father George to the door. There was a new deadbolt on it, and he noticed my surprise as he took out a set of keys.

“The bishop has been storing some research in the basement,” he said as he unlocked the door and opened it, then took a key off his ring and handed it to me. “He’s asked us to keep it locked at all times.”

He turned on a light switch before we went down the stairs. The basement was dingy and cold, and the one bulb in the ceiling didn’t push back the shadows much. It was also kind of empty, except for some old beat-up chairs, a big old wooden cabinet against one wall, and a metal tub in one corner. It smelled dank and a little moldy, like all basements did. There were three doors to the side, all of which were also locked with padlocks, and he opened the left, smallest one with the same key that he’d used on the door.

“The supplies you need are here.” He tugged on a chain to light up the inside. “All we ask is that you keep it neat and remember to lock the door when you’re finished for the day.”

I took out the bucket, mop, scrub brush and cleaner that I needed, and then heard something bump. It sounded like it was coming from inside the wall. “What was that?”

“Mice, I’m afraid.” He chuckled. “Even in the house of the Lord, we have our fair share.”

I carried everything upstairs and remembered to lock the door behind me and Father George. He told me to let him know if I needed anything else, then went back to the office. All I had to do was fill the bucket at the big sink in the church kitchen before I got to work.

Cleaning the sanctuary took Mama at least three hours, but I was younger, stronger and faster, and finished it in two. After I squeezed out the mop and emptied the bucket, I gathered up everything to take it back downstairs.

The padlocks kind of bothered me. The priests had never locked anything before, except the outside doors at night to keep the homeless drunks from sleeping in the pews. I’d never seen any sign of vandalism at the church either, but I had been spending a lot of time lately at the hospital.

I carried my stuff down to the cleaning closet and put it away. *What is there to steal, anyway? The cheap pine cleaner? The old bucket?*

Maybe there was something inside the big cabinet. It wasn’t locked, so I before I went upstairs I gave into the urge to have a peek inside. It had four

shelves at the top packed with dusty old books and three long drawers at the bottom – the bishop’s research, maybe? I couldn’t see any droppings. Cleaning it out might uncover the nest, but Father George had said not to bother with it.

I peered at the book spines, but they were written in another language – *Le Voyage d'Hiver -- Quand Je Dors -- Amour Immortel*. Evidently the bishop was studying something like French.

Mrs. Harris wanted to be home by midnight, so I didn’t have time to poke around much. I closed the door and then jumped as something bumped inside the cleaning closet behind me. I backed away and hurried up the stairs. Maybe I’d ask Father George if we could put down some traps.

#

Things got better over the next couple of weeks. Mrs. Harris said Teag was sleeping through the night instead of waking up crying for Mama three and four times, and I adjusted to the late hours and the heavy work. The bills were still pretty bad, but the doctor wrote off the money we owed him and the hospital let me pay what I could without sticking me with late charges. A social worker came once to check on me and my brother, looked at my face and muttered something about Medicare, then left. Family Services seemed to forget about us after that.

“Mama’s an angel now, and she’s watching over us,” I promised my little brother. “Between her and me, everything will be fine.”

Cleaning places at night wasn’t a hard job. The only one I really hated was going to St. Luke’s. I always had to pass by Bughouse Square and the

O'Briens to get there, and even when I rode on the other side of the street Ian or his brother would yell something lewd at me. I hated the scarf and the way it made me feel – like I was a leper or something – plus the sounds in the basement never went away, and sometimes they were really loud. Father George had someone put out some traps in the cleaning closet but they stayed empty.

Father George was always nice to me, but the Italian priests watched me like I was going to steal the communion chalice. I don't know why. I'd never taken so much as a penny from the poor box, so they had no reason to suspect me. Maybe they just didn't like me.

Priests I'd never seen before started coming to the church at night. One of the Italians would meet them in front, and sometimes they'd walk through the church to go to the rectory. A few stared at me – the scarf really didn't cover a lot – and whispered things to whoever they were with.

Usually they spoke in Italian – *Quel bambino non dovrebbe essere qui. La ragazza è nessuno*. Once I heard one with a British accent say, *You're not thinking of trying again, are you?*

Mostly they ignored me. I wished other people would. One Saturday night Ian O'Brien actually ran into the street and chased after my bike, but I could pedal faster than he could run, so he didn't catch me.

"I'll get you next time!" he yelled out.

I was out of breath by the time I got to church and locked up my bike. Maybe I'd have a word with our landlord about the O'Briens; Mr. Cipella was big

and mean enough to put a little scare into them. As I walked up to the sanctuary I saw a well-dressed woman standing outside the entrance, as if she was waiting for someone. I turned my face away as I went past her, but she spoke to me.

“Excuse me?”

I stopped and kept my head down. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Sorry to bother you, but I’m looking for a friend of mine.” She stepped closer, and I got a glimpse of her face. She was a very light-skinned black woman with long, curly dark hair and beautiful eyes. “His name is Gage Seran, and he was in this area around four months ago.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“Have you noticed, um, a lot of bugs inside the church?”

“No. I’m the cleaning lady, and I do my job. There aren’t any bugs.” A little offended, I tried to go around her.

“I’m sorry – wait.” She handed me a photo with a little card paper clipped to it. The photo was of a smiling blond man with light eyes. He was even prettier than she was – so gorgeous, in fact, that it almost hurt to look at the photo.

“That’s a picture of Gage. If you see him around here, tell him Vanessa Whitman is looking for him. He can reach me at that number after seven p.m. any day of the week.”

“All right.” I tucked them into my pocket and then dared another look at her, but she was gone.

#

I found the hole in the closet about two months after I'd been working at the church, and only then because I knocked down a bottle of wood polish getting some rags. When I bent down to pick it up, I saw a line of ants crawling past my foot. They were coming from a fist-sized hole in the old baseboard.

Yuck, where's the bug spray. We didn't have any, so I balled up one of my cleaning rags and went to stuff it in the hole.

Light was shining through the hole from the other side.

Why would there be a light fixture behind a solid wall? I watched, and the light flickered, the way a candle did. I dropped the rag and saw a glimmer on the edge of the hole, and reached in. The floor on the other side was wet and cold and crawling with ants.

"Ugh." I jerked my hand away. "Ow!" The edge of the hole cut into the back of my hand. I stood up, saw I was bleeding, and muttered as I pressed a clean rag against the scratches.

easy

I didn't know where the whisper had come from, or even if it was real. Maybe I had imagined it – but it sounded like it was on the other side of the wall.

"Niamh Murphy?"

I shrieked when I saw Bishop Tower standing in the doorway, then sagged. "Father Augustus – I mean, Your Eminence." Automatically I hid my hurt hand behind my back. "You startled me."

"Are you through here?"

“Yes, Your Eminence.” I gathered up my supplies and walked out of the closet. Father George and the two Italian priests were waiting outside, and the two Italians had small black leather bags that looked like what doctors in old movies used to carry for house calls. Father Rocca’s face was shiny and unhappy, but Father Carlo only stared back at me with his usual glower.

The bishop gestured toward the stairs. “Please escort Miss Murphy back up to the sanctuary, George.”

The Italians stayed down in the basement, so it surprised me when Father George asked me to lock the door by the altar. “Shouldn’t I leave it open, so they can come back out?”

“No, they go out. . . some other door.” He gave me a wry look. “I’m dying to know what they’re doing down there, too, but the bishop hasn’t confided in me. Sometimes he can be a very private person.” When I went to fill the bucket, he caught my arm. “What have you done to your hand, child?”

“Oh, I scratched it on the edge of the bucket.” I didn’t know why I lied, exactly. “We’ve got an ant problem down there, Father – they’re in the supply closet.”

“I’ll have to call an exterminator. There’s a first aid kit in the church kitchen; be sure to bandage that hand before you start working.” He paused.

“Nia, you haven’t noticed anything unusual lately, have you?”

I thought of the light coming through the mouse hole. “Like what, Father?”

“You know, any sounds or voices? Anyone calling to you in a strange language?”

I was going to tell him the truth, but something knotted inside me, and I heard myself lying again. "I've only heard pipes rattling whenever someone flushes upstairs." I glanced at the door. "Why?"

"No, but I hear the strangest things sometimes." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I need to have my ears checked, I think."

"Could there be some homeless people sneaking in down there to sleep? Through the other door?" That might explain the voice. Winos and bums would sleep anywhere dry.

Father George seemed to relax. "That could be it; the poor wretches are certainly resourceful. You be careful down there. Let me know if you see anyone sneaking in or out."

He left me to scrub the floors, and for awhile, I did. Then I heard a sound I hadn't heard before coming from the basement.

I got up and walked over. It was definitely coming from downstairs, and it sounded like chanting. I eased the door open wider and listened.

“. . . aurem tuam ad preces nostras, quibus misericordiam tuam supplices deprecamur, ut animam famuli tui Abbadon . . . “

Abbadon? I took a step onto the stairs, but the chanting stopped and there was a muffled cry.

Father Carlo appeared at the bottom of the stairs. He rushed up as I backed out. "Get out of here!" He slammed the door in my face.

#

I was mad, so I left my supplies outside the basement door and left. I felt more tired than usual when I got home, and went to bed as soon as I saw Mrs. Harris out. I couldn't sleep, though. I kept seeing the basement in my mind, hearing the strange chanting, then that single, stifled cry.

Light behind a wall. The sounds. The metal clanking. That voice. It didn't make sense to me. Could there be someone living down there? Why would the bishop go down there with those Italians?

My hand hurt. I'd doused it with peroxide and covered the scratches with some band-aids, but it still throbbed like a bad tooth. Finally near dawn I drifted off, but I didn't sleep well. I had a strange dream or a series of dreams that ran together, not like any I'd ever had before.

The first part was kind of silly – I dreamt I was locked in the supply closet. Bishop Tower was on the outside, banging on the door and shouting something. I was afraid to let him in . . . but he had the keys – he had locked me in, hadn't he? So why was he wanting me out of there?

Get out get out get out get out get out –

Then I wasn't in the closet anymore, but in some kind of museum. There were beautiful paintings in heavy frames on the wall, and gorgeous flowery carpet on the floor. The windows were ceiling to floor sized, with little square panes that had funny ripples in the glass. On the other side of one stood a man, his hands pressed to the glass. He wanted me to let him in, I could see that, so I went and tried to open the window. Instead, his hands came through the glass like a ghost's, and he pulled me through to the other side, like I was one, too.

You can feel me now.

I nodded – he wasn't speaking English but somehow I understood every word. I looked up into his beautiful face, but I couldn't see it too clearly – his eyes were covered by a shadow, like a blindfold. I got the sense that he needed me to do something. *What must I do?*

Find me. His hands framed my face. *And I will save us.* Blood trickled down his cheeks like tears.

Where are you?

I found myself back in the closet, alone, and terribly afraid. I looked down and saw the mouse hole I'd found growing larger. In a panic I bent and tried to stuff it with rags but something sucked them through. The hole stretched up and out until I could have walked through it.

I couldn't see what was on the other side, because of the light – light that now poured out over my face.

Like the sun . . . I never got outside much during the day, because of my face. *Feels so warm . . .*

The light was gold and red and lovely, and I could feel it, like the touch of a gentle hand. Like his hands on my face.

So nice. Nobody had ever touched me like that. I wanted to close my eyes and wallow in the sensation.

The light drew me, pulling me toward the hole, and even though I couldn't see there was nothing I wanted more than to step through it to the other side.

What does he want? He couldn't want me – I was ugly. And who was he? I could feel his presence growing stronger. *What do you want from me?*

True ben wall

It was his voice, low and soft, barely a whisper. His voice was sad and needy, like someone in terrible pain. I had to go to him, but . . .

Niamh a day wall

The light grew brighter and hotter, and it wasn't so nice anymore.

NIAMH May a pell dee sang ah voh tray sang.

It was going to suck me in and burn me up, like the fires of hell, and it was filling the room and my head until I was sure it would scorch the eyes out of my sockets –

NIAMH

I stumbled back, away from the light, and screamed.

“Nia?” Small hands were shaking me. “Nia, wake up!”

I opened my eyes and saw my little brother standing over me. I was sitting huddled in the corner of my bedroom, with my arms over my head. My nightgown was soaked with sweat and I was shaking so hard that my teeth chattered. “Teag?”

“Are you okay? You were yelling.” He crouched down and touched my face, which was wet. “You're crying, what happened?”

“It was just . . . a nightmare.” I felt like I was going to fall to pieces, right there, but I couldn't. I held out my arms and hugged my brother. “Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t.” He buried his face in my hair. “Was it Mama?”

“I don’t remember.” Yes, I did, and it scared the wits out of me. I’d never had a dream like that.

Teag insisted on making me breakfast, which included singed toast, runny eggs and tea so strong it was black. He hovered and looked so anxious that I ate every bit and emptied the tea pot.

“Do you want more? I can make more.”

God, I loved him so much. “I’ll be fine.”

“I almost forgot.” He ran out of the kitchen to his bedroom, and came back with the little pocket flashlight I’d given him. “You said whenever I woke up from bad dreams I could turn this on and look under the bed, remember?”

I nodded.

He gave it to me. “You can use it now, Nia.” Then he made a scared sound. “What happened to your hand?”

“Oh, I just scratched it.” I glanced down.

No wonder he was scared. All of my band-aids were soaked through with fresh blood, which was now dripping onto the floor.

#

I would have quit St. Luke’s after that nightmare, but Mr. Cipella came up the same day to tell me our rent was being raised.

“I held off while your Ma was sick,” he said, looking at the rug instead of me, “but I can’t no more. All the other tenants got the same increase, you understand.”

As it was we'd have just scraped by. Now if I quit St. Luke's, we'd have to find another, cheaper place to live. That meant moving into the projects; and as bad as the neighborhood around Bughouse Square was, the projects were worse.

"Thanks for letting me know." I hesitated. Our landlord was a devout Catholic, so maybe he would know. "Mr. Cipella, do you know what the name Abbadon means?"

He peered at me. "Where did you hear that?"

"An old lady cursed me and said it once." I lifted my shoulders. "I was just wondering . . . who is he?"

"He's mentioned in Revelations." He thought for a minute. "He lives in a bottomless pit that will be opened during the End Times."

And Bishop Tower was praying to him? "So Abbadon is Satan?"

"No, he's an angel, I think." He went over to the little bookcase next to Mama's armchair, took down our big family Bible, and began flipping through it. "Here it is." He handed me the book.

And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions. And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle. And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power was to hurt men five months. And they had a king over them,

which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon . . .

It sounded scary, all right. “What does it mean?”

“I don’t know, Nia. I never liked reading Revelations much myself.” Mr. Cipella patted my shoulder awkwardly. “Maybe you should ask one of the priests at St. Luke’s.”

“Yeah.” I closed the bible. “Maybe I should.”

Before I went to St. Luke’s on Saturday night, I went through a box of my father’s things in the back of Mama’s closet and found the jack knife he used to carry. It only had a four inch blade, but it was sharp and small enough to fit in my pocket, and I could open it with my thumb. If there was some homeless bum living behind the wall, or if Ian O’Brien tried to grab me again, I could scare them with it. At the last moment I put Teag’s little flashlight in my pocket, too.

Ian and his gang were waiting at the corner of the square, and I had to stop my bike because the light was red and traffic was unusually heavy. Avery came over this time, but halted a foot away and held up his hands like he was surrendering.

“What do you want?”

“What happened?” He nodded toward the gauze I had wrapped around the scratches, which were still raw.

“I hurt it.” I kept my good hand on Daddy’s knife.

“Somebody bothering you?” When I lifted my brows, he turned a little red.

“Besides us, I mean?”

“No.”

“You let me and Ian know, huh? If anyone bothers you. We’ll kick his ass.” He ducked his head and shuffled his feet. “Sorry about your Ma.”

I looked over his shoulder at Ian, who didn’t give me the usual leer but simply nodded. Evidently I was still a freak, but I was *their* freak. In a weird way, it made me feel nice.

“Thanks.” The light turned green, and I rode off.

I expected everything to be shadowy and scary but St. Luke’s was just the same. Nothing happened when I went downstairs – well, *ran* downstairs – to get my supplies. For once it was really quiet, too. I didn’t hear any bumps or clanks or anything. Father George didn’t even come out of the rectory until I was done dusting the old wooden pews.

“I thought I smelled the lovely scent of pine.” He inspected me. “You’re a little late tonight; is everything all right?”

“My bike had a flat tire.” Good thing I didn’t go to confession anymore, I’d have to say a ton of Our Fathers and Hail Marys for all the lies I’d told. “I’ll be finished soon.”

“Do you want me to drive you home, child? I can wait up for you.”

“No, I have my bike.” I could tell he was worried. “I’ll be fine, Father. Go to bed.”

“If you’re sure.” He gave me one last troubled look before he went over to blow out the blessings candles. “And if you would, remember to lock up before you leave.”

“Father?” I tried to think of how to ask. “Bishop Tower and the priests, the other night, were they praying down there?”

“I don’t know.” He frowned. “Perhaps they were. Why?”

“I thought I heard them say Abbadon – what does that mean?”

“It’s the name of a fallen angel. The destroyer from the pit, who comes to bring about the end of the world.”

“And they were praying to him?”

“Praying he’d skip Chicago, I imagine. These Italians priests.” He rolled his eyes. “Everything with them is such a drama. Do you know they insisted on blessing the church inside and out when they arrived? It was practically raining holy water around here for a solid week.” He smiled. “Ah, well. The ways we worship our Lord are many and mysterious. I’ll let you get back to work. Good night, Nia.”

I chuckled. “Good night, Father.”

I thought about it as I finished the floor, but nothing made sense. When I was through I emptied the bucket and carried everything downstairs. Now the absence of sounds bothered me; the silence seemed to crawl over my skin – like ants.

“I’m not afraid,” I muttered under my breath as I opened the closet and turned on the light. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

I checked the mouse hole, but it was the same size it had been the other day, and there was no light or bugs coming out of it. Surely I’d imagined the light, just like the voice. I had to stop spooking myself.

I took the mop and crouched down by the small dark hole. “Okay, you ants.” I stuck the end of the mop handle into the hole and banged it from side to side. “Go find somewhere else to – ”

Something grabbed the handle and yanked it. I shrieked and let go, and fell back on my butt. The hole sucked in the handle until the mop end slammed into the wall.

EASY.

I crawled backward, scraping my palms on the concrete floor. “Who’s in there? Who are you?”

The mop jerked, then went still.

“Go hifreann leat!” I yelled. Mama would have slapped me good for using the old curses, but I was scared. “Go dtachta an diabhal thú!”

Chan eil moran Gàidhlig agam.

I don't speak much Gaelic.

It wasn't a demon or an angel, it was a man. An ordinary man, talking on the other side of the wall. I sagged with relief.

Tá tú mall.

He was complaining because I was late tonight? I scrambled to my feet. “This is private property, mister. You come on out of there, right now.”

He didn't say anything.

Mama had said there were still places in Ireland where people refused to speak anything but Gaelic. Maybe he'd come over on a boat. “Do you speak any English?”

Tha, beagan. A little. You can . . . help me?

“Are you stuck in there?”

Ba mhaith liom. Yes.

“I have to go get help. You stay there, all right?” That was a stupid thing to say. “I mean, just wait, I’ll get Father George.”

NON!

The mop head slammed into the hole again, and this time it went through, taking a square foot of wall with it.

Help me.

He sounded awful, like he was terrified. That scared me more than seeing the mop disappear.

“I can’t get to you.” And still I went to the wall, and crouched down to peer in. There seemed to be a room on the other side, but it was dark. “I can’t even see you.” I moved a piece of wall, and something dripped onto my hurt hand. It was dark, and wet, and it burned a little.

I stared at my hand as one of my scratches disappeared.

Help me now.

The dry wall was old, and thin enough that I could pull pieces away with my hands – and I found myself doing that, wrenching at the edges of the hole, trying to make them bigger. A strange urgency hammered inside my head. I suddenly knew I had to get him out, quickly and quietly, before they found me doing this.

Somehow our lives depended on it.

The hole was finally large enough for me to squeeze through. “Okay.” I got down on my hands and knees and poked my head through. The smell on the other side of the wall was awful – like someone had emptied a dumpster in the hidden room – but I worked my way in. My hands slipped on the wet floor and I went down. Something hard in my pocket bruised my thigh.

Teag’s flashlight. I pulled it out and switched it on.

The room was bigger than the entire basement on the other side. It looked like it had been walled off a long time ago, with all the cobwebs hanging from the ceiling and old mouse droppings everywhere. I stood up and swept the flashlight slowly around me. There was a rickety-looking table and two scarred up old chairs in front of a fireplace, which was overflowing with dead ash. On the table was a glass filled with red wine. There was also, of all things, a brand new refrigerator sitting in one corner.

No sign of the man, though. “Where are you?”

Chains rattled behind me.

I turned around and pointed the flashlight toward the sound, and saw him. The flashlight nearly fell out of my fingers. “Oh dear God.”

Gage Seran wasn’t beautiful anymore.

They’d taken his clothes and stretched him out against one wall. At first I thought he was tied to the life-size cross – there were chains wrapped around his neck, waist and knees – until I saw the ends of the huge black nails piercing his wrists and one foot. He’d worked the other foot free, apparently, and had that right next to the hole. His thin body was spattered with dark paint.

No, not paint – old, dried blood.

Sometimes he can be a very private person.

The Italians and Bishop Tower had done this to him. There could be no other explanation, no one else came down here. But why? What possible reason could they have had to do this?

Help me.

When my light reached his face, he turned his head away, but not before I saw the heavy leather gag. How had he called to me through that thing? I lowered the light as I walked to him. “How do I . . .” I was afraid to touch him, afraid I was going to be sick. “How do I get you off this?”

His looked at me again, and his eyes were two black holes in the shadows covering his face. Take chains away.

He wasn't speaking with his mouth. He couldn't. I was hearing him inside my head. But that wasn't possible. How could that be possible? Numb with shock, I looked at the bolts they had driven through his body. “Your hands and feet – “

Chains. Please.

I didn't want to touch them — they were caked with blood, too — but I had to help him. In fact, getting those chains off him was all I could think about. I started looking and found the ends of one hanging on hooks driven into the wall behind him. I unhooked it and began unwinding it from his waist. The links were cold and sticky, and so heavy I had to let the weight of the chain fall to the floor.

This close I could smell him; and his body had an odor like dead flowers. How long had he been kept in this room? Weeks? Months?

“Why didn’t you yell out to me before?” Then I remembered the muffled cry – maybe he had. “Why did they do this to you?”

He didn’t answer me. He had his head turned toward the hole I’d crawled through. Quick chains please.

I left the chain around his neck for last. Why it hadn’t strangled him was beyond me, but at last I had it off him, and I flung it to the floor in disgust. “I’ll find something to pry the nails out.” I swung the flashlight around, hoping to see a hammer or tool. On the other side of the hole, a door slammed into a wall.

“Who’s in there?”

It was Father Carlo’s voice. Father Carlo, who must have known this man was down here and had kept it from Father George. Maybe he’d even nailed him to the cross. “We have to hide.”

There was a jerking, tearing sound. *Ce n'est pas nécessaire*. One of the chairs flew across the room and lodged itself under a door I hadn’t seen before.

When I turned back to the cross he was standing on the floor in front of it, and there were huge bloody holes in his wrists. The nails were still stuck in the cross.

I paid no attention to Father Carlo’s shouting or the way the blocked door was shaking. I was staring at Gage. No man on earth could have withstood that kind of pain. “Who are you? *What* are you?”

He lifted his bloody hands and untied the gag. The smell of dead flowers changed and become lush and enticing, like walking through a florist's.

Gardenias. He smells like gardenias.

“Open this door at once!”

I could have stood there for the rest of my life, just to breathe in that beautiful smell. “Are you . . .Abbadon?”

Don't fear me.

I was moving to him then, and I couldn't stop my feet or make myself turn away.

Wood splintered. “No!” Father Carlo's voice seemed so far away. “Don't give him the blood! Don't let him touch you!”

Blood? Touch me? Why would he want to? I was ugly and he was so beautiful. I couldn't breathe; the smell of flowers was so strong I felt smothered by them. And the light, the light was attracting bugs from somewhere, because they were whizzing around my head, their wings making a low droning sound.

The flashlight dropped from my fingers and hit the floor.

Gage moved, his steps slow and hesitant, until he reached the table. He took the glass of wine and drained it. Then he went to the refrigerator, took something out, and drank from that before coming back to me. Absently I noticed he was moving a little better, a little faster.

Vous m'avez sauvé. His teeth flashed as he pulled off my scarf and touched his cold fingertips to my left cheek. He had a wonderful smile, but his teeth were odd. Maintenant je vous sauverai.

The light became gold and red and warm, and so intense that I had to close my eyes. Tears streaked down my face, and I felt the swarm of insects grow thicker. A door slammed open, and a man screamed. “NO!”

I couldn't see or breathe anymore but it didn't matter. His hands were cold on either side of my head but that didn't matter.

Nothing mattered.

#

There were dreams after that. Strange, terrifying dreams, where locust filled the air and an angel spread his black wings to block out the light that was burning my eyes. Father Carlo was there, and he hit me with something, so hard it knocked me away from the angel. I saw my own blood pouring down the front of my shirt and fell. I knew I was going to die there, on that filthy floor, but the angel was free, and would suffer no more pain.

Then there was darkness, and voices.

Seran—

Take her.

Mon Dieu, what have they done?

I do not know.

Vanessa –

I know I know I know. Shit.

A woman's hands ripped open my shirt, and I tried to push them away.

Leave me alone . . . I'm dying . . .

My ass you are, babe.

And then there was only darkness.

#

My little brother's voice brought me out of the dark. Teag was talking to someone, and he sounded frightened.

“—going to be okay?”

“I think so, honey.”

I was floating; I felt warm and comfortable and safe. Hearing the lady's voice didn't bother me. She had a nice voice. She would be nice to Teag.

Another male voice, deeper and accented, spoke. “She is waking.”

“About time.” Something touched my cheek. “Open your eyes, Nia, I need to check them.”

I obeyed her, but the light shining in my face hurt, and I squeezed my eyelids shut again. “Sleep some more,” I mumbled.

“You've been doing that for three days, don't you want to take a break?”

Three days? I tried to sit up but the lady held me down. “My brother – ”

“I'm right here, Nia.” He was sitting at the side of my hospital bed, grinning at me.

I took a moment to get my bearings. I was in a hospital room, hooked up to a bunch of equipment, and Vanessa Whitman stood right next to Teag. At the end of the bed was a tall, handsome man with white-streaked black hair.

Automatically I turned the left side of my face into the pillow.

“Hey.” She put one of her pretty slim hands on my unmarked cheek.
“We’ve already seen everything. Well, I’ve seen everything -- I made Jack leave the room when I examined you.”

The thought of the man seeing me at all made me cringe. “It’s ugly.”

“What, your face?”

“My affliction.”

She nudged my chin up. “You don’t have an affliction, sweetheart. You have congenital, progressive ectasia of the superficial cutaneous vascular plexus.” She smiled. “Or in simpler terms, a great big port-wine stain birthmark.”

“Mrs. Reilly said it was the devil’s mark,” Teag said, trying to be helpful.

“Well, Mrs. Reilly was wrong, big guy.” Vanessa lightly skimmed her fingers over the purple and red half of my face. “I don’t see many of these, and I’ve never seen one as extensive as your sister’s, but they are treatable in some cases.”

“The laser treatments were too expensive.” I peeked over her shoulder at the man, but he didn’t seem disgusted. That was a first.

“Your birthmark isn’t disgusting, kiddo,” she said, reading my mind. “It’s kind of exotic, actually.”

She was beautiful, she had no idea. “Exotic. Sure.” I felt something around my neck and touched a big bandage. “What happened to me?”

Vanessa glanced at the man before she asked, “You don’t remember?”

“No, I – “I thought of Gage Seran. “I found your friend. They had him in the basement, and he was . . .”

“I know. He’s okay.” She leaned over and patted my hand. “You got to him in time.”

“In time for what? What were they doing to him?”

“Our friend was in trouble,” the man told me, sounding very matter-of-fact about it. “You saved his life.”

Again the doctor looked at him, and this time she seemed upset. “By the way, Nia, this is my boyfriend, Jack.”

“Hi, Jack.”

Vanessa chuckled. “He’s good at that, too.”

“Jacques-Sebastien Cyprien.” He gave me a small bow. “A pleasure to meet you, *mademoiselle*.”

I recalled the crucifix and his wounds. “Did you call the police? Father Carlo – Bishop Tower, did they do that to him?” It still didn’t seem possible.

Vanessa brought over a tray table with a jug of juice and a plate of toast and fruit. “You’re still very weak, and you need to eat and drink now. We’ll talk about this later.” Her gaze went to Teag, who was obviously hanging on every word.

“I can’t stay here.” I looked around. Mama hadn’t had a room as nice. “I don’t have any medical insurance and I can’t afford to pay for this.”

She smiled at me. “This is my private clinic. There won’t be any bills for you to pay. And while you’re recovering, Teagan will be staying at our home.”

“It’s really cool, Nia,” my brother said, his eyes bright with excitement. “Dr. Whitman has a pool and a big screen TV and she gave me my own room and

there are oranges and grapes growing in her hothouse and you can just go in there and pick them whenever you want!”

“That’s really great, Teag, but we don’t know Dr. Whitman.” Or what she expected as repayment. “We can’t impose like this.”

“Your brother is a great kid,” she told me, “and he’s completely safe with us. My clinic is built on to our house; his room is right down the hall from here. Any time you want to see him, you just let me or one of my staff know and we’ll bring him to you.”

I suddenly felt too tired to argue. “All right.” As I relaxed back against the pillows, I saw the bag of red fluid attached to the pole next to my bed. “Blood?”

“We’re giving you a refill; you lost quite a bit.” Before I could ask how, she rested a finger against my lips. “Later you can ask me all the questions you want. Rest now and eat something if you can.”

Teag went with the man, and Dr. Whitman checked my heart and blood pressure before excusing herself to make rounds. I couldn’t eat much but I drank like I’d been in the desert for forty days and nights. By the time I emptied the jug, a nice black woman in a nurse’s uniform came in.

“You want to try the bathroom, or a bed pan?” she asked me.

I wrinkled my nose. “Bathroom, please.”

“Can’t blame you, honey. I never could pee laying down myself.” She chuckled as she helped me out of bed and showed me how to push the IV pole as I walked. Then she waited outside the little private bathroom while I emptied my bladder and washed at the sink.

I didn't like looking in the mirror but I wanted to see what was wrong with my neck. A huge gauze dressing covered the left side, and when I lifted up one taped edge I didn't see what I expected to. "Oh my God."

"You okay in there?" the nurse called through the door.

"Yes." I pulled off the rest of the bandage, then I opened the door. "Who did this?"

The nurse tried to take my arm. "Dr. Whitman will talk to you about that."

"No, you talk to me." I yanked aside the collar to show her the dinner-plate sized spot of white, unmarked skin. "Where did it go? How did she remove it?"

"She did not," a man said from behind the door. "I did."

#

Gage Seran was in a wheelchair, and he was wearing wrap-around sunglasses, but he looked much better than the last time I'd seen him.

"Hey." I forgot about my neck and went to him. "Are you all right? Should you be up?"

The nurse murmured something about leaving us alone and slipped out of the room.

"I am well, thanks to you. And I am quite recovered."

He was in a wheelchair, which didn't make me feel better, but the rest of him look great. Better than great – perfect. "But you don't have any bandages, or –" I looked at his hands but there were no holes, no stitches, and no scars.

“Or anything.” I backed away until my legs hit the edge of the chair, then I sat down, fast. “I think I’m going to freak out a little now.”

“Please, do not. I heal quickly.” He wheeled over to me. “I need to talk to you. Cyprien has been teaching me more English, and from knowing you – I am speaking better?” I nodded. “Niamh, I was prisoner there for long time. I nearly died, but you, you saved me.”

“I don’t remember what happened.” I wasn’t sure I wanted to. “How did we get out of there? What happened to my neck?”

He reached out and touched my hand. It is easier if we speak this way, yes?

I can’t -- then I heard myself in my own head. I’m not psychic. I’ve never been psychic. How can this be happening? I tried to take my hand away. Is it you?

We have shared something; it connects us now. He urged me closer to him, until we were nearly bumping noses. Then he pressed his hand against my left breast, so that my hand was caught between my heart and his palm. Your mind is as beautiful as your soul.

I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Unlike my face.

Non, cherie, you are wondrous . . . He closed the small gap between our faces and brushed his mouth against mine. I’d never been kissed by anyone except Mama and Teag, so I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to know, though – I wanted to kiss him back in the worst way.

He drew back. I must go soon. Gently he drew his fingertips down the ugly side of my face. When Vanessa explains what they did, do not hate me.

Hate you? How could I?

His mouth touched mine again. Do not hate me for what I am. I would never have hurt her --

"I leave you alone for a few minutes and look, you've already lured my cutest patient into your room." Vanessa came in and smiled at me as I jerked back from Gage. "I'm seriously jealous."

For once I knew what to say. "But you already have Jack."

She grinned. "That I do, and he's a handful." She looked at Gage. "You, however, should not be pushing yourself around here just yet, pal."

"I will return to my room. Thank you again, Niamh." He smiled at me before he wheeled himself out.

"He kissed me."

"So he is feeling better." Vanessa seemed amused.

I stared at the door, still dumbfounded. "And he can talk inside my head."

"That's not all he can do, honey. You'd better get horizontal yourself now, you're looking very pale." She pulled back the covers for me, then sat down on the edge of the bed. "Why don't you take a nap?"

"Why don't you tell me what's going on here?"

"I don't think you're ready for that."

I tilted my head. "After finding your friend nailed to a cross? It'll be a walk in the park."

“Jack and Gage have been friends for a long time. Gage came over from Europe to visit us about four months ago, but there were some men following him. These men . . . hurt people who they think are evil. They grabbed Gage before he could get to us, took him to St. Luke’s and interrogated him.”

“They had him nailed to a cross, like Christ. I found him like that.”

“I know.”

I blinked. “But he should have bled to death – and now he doesn’t have any wounds. Or scars.”

“Gage has an extremely rare blood disease. He spontaneously heals. When they hammered those nails into him, his body immediately healed around them.”

A laugh burst out of me. “Oh, right.”

“It’s true.”

I wanted to slap her. “I’m not a doctor, but I’m not idiot, either. How did you do this? How did you heal him so fast?”

Vanessa sighed. “Look, Nia, you got caught in the middle of a horrendously bad situation. I can’t give you all the details, but we’re very grateful to you for helping our friend. We would like to do the same for you and your brother.”

That hit my pride. “Teag and I are fine.”

“The men who tortured Gage will be looking for you. We have to get you and the boy someplace safe, you can’t stay in Chicago. Jack and I have a house

on the beach in California; we thought you might like to stay there with us until you get back on your feet.”

“I can’t leave. Everyone we know, everything we have is here, and unless you live next to a circus, nobody will give me a job.” Which reminded me. “Gage said he took the mark from my neck – how is that possible?”

“You had a bad laceration there, and Gage got some of his blood on it carrying you out of the basement. The unique properties of his immune system removed part of your birthmark and helped the wound heal.”

I touched my neck and remembered the part in the dream when Father Carlo had hit me. “So do I have AIDs now or something?”

“No, honey, you’re fine. It didn’t affect you the same way it did . . . other people. And just for the record, he doesn’t have AIDs.”

“What kind of blood disease does he have?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, and you look like you’re ready to pass out.” She patted the bed. “Come on, hop in.”

I felt very tired all of a sudden, and climbed into bed like an old woman. I curled up on my side. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“I’m sorry, Nia, I wish I could tell you more.” Vanessa stroked my hair with a gentle hand. “But you’ve put yourself in great danger already, and we need to protect you and your brother. It’s one of those `what you don’t know won’t hurt you’ situations. Just trust me a little longer, okay? We’re the good guys.”

“Okay.” I closed my eyes.

#

Gage woke me up a few hours later – or at least, his thoughts did.

Cyprien and his woman are gone. Wait until the nurse finishes rounds, then slip down the stairs.

Darkness surrounded his thoughts like an angry fist, and each word seemed to slam into my head. He could have been standing next to me, yelling in my ear.

Gage?

I am well, Niamh. He sent something along with the thought, something wordless that was like being covered with a warm, soft blanket. He wanted me to sleep, or thought he could put me to sleep.

So I played along and closed my eyes. See you tomorrow?

Yes. Goodnight.

I kept my mind blank until I felt him leave, then I sat up. Gage was lying to me. He wasn't well, he wasn't going to see me tomorrow. He was going back to St. Luke's. He was ignoring Vanessa's orders; I flashed on his memory of her telling him he could not go after the Italians by himself.

He was going to get his silly French ass killed, was what he was doing.

I could feel Gage was outside the clinic now, but I couldn't see anything. He was doing weird stuff, smelling the air, kneeling on the ground, pressing his hands into the dirt.

Come to me.

He was calling something, something that would help him get in and get to them; something only he could control. The same way he had called me. I

couldn't see what it was; he was still blocking that. I couldn't see anything through his eyes. But then, I'd been blind for a long time to a lot of things.

That cut on your arm isn't healing, Mama.

The band aids on my hand, all soaked through with blood.

You're not thinking of trying again, are you?

The glass of red wine on the table in the basement. The new refrigerator.

Don't give him the blood!

Gage, not bleeding, even with nails through his hands and feet.

When Vanessa explains what they did, do not hate me.

Gage, drinking the wine, drinking from that plastic bag in the fridge. A bag filled with dark red blood. Gage smiling at me, his teeth white and strong . . . and wrong.

I would never have hurt her.

The wine that wasn't wine.

Gage has an extremely rare blood disease.

A disease that healed.

It didn't affect you the same way it did . . . other people.

Other people like my mother.

And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon . . .

I got up and jerked the IV needle out of my arm, and winced at the sting. The soft cotton pajamas they'd given me were the only clothes I had only had to

wear, and I'd have to go barefoot. Didn't matter, I thought as I edged past the nurse's station and into the stairwell.

The devil and all the demons in hell couldn't keep me away from St. Luke's tonight.

#

It took over an hour to walk from the private clinic to my old neighborhood, but it was after midnight, and there were hardly any people on the street. I didn't get lost, either; Gage's thoughts acted like a compass so I simply followed them. Nobody stopped or spoke to me until I reached Bughouse Square.

"Hey, you sleepwalking, Two-Tone?" Ian O'Brien called out from the corner.

I looked over at the gang of boys, thought about it, and then crossed the street. A couple of them whistled when they saw how I was dressed but Avery used his elbow and told them to shut the hell up.

Ian took off his leather jacket – something I'd never seen him do – and draped it around me as he gave me the once-over. "Where have you been?"

"In the hospital." I looked down the street. "One of the Italian priests over at St. Luke's put me there. They had a man nailed to a cross in the basement, and I think they killed my mother."

They should have laughed at me, but none of them did. They just gave each other these weird looks. Finally Ian said, "What are you gonna do about it, Nia?"

“I’m going to make them pay.” I scanned their faces. They were just boys, really, but they’d grown up on the streets. Nobody messed with them.

“Feel like helping?”

Avery smiled. “Oh, yeah.”

I told them about Gage, and what I wanted them to do. When I was finished, they scattered. Only Ian lingered, waiting until the last boy had gone before he touched my shoulder. “You should maybe wait here. We can get your friend out.”

I pushed my arms through the sleeves of his jacket and zipped the front of it. “He doesn’t know anyone but me. Got a blade I can borrow?” He pulled a jack knife from his pocket and handed it to me. I tucked it in the front pocket.

“Thanks, Ian.”

“No problem, Two-Tone. You can keep the knife” –he tugged at the zipper pull– “but I want the jacket back.”

Walking up to the front entrance of the sanctuary took every ounce of courage I had. I’d put on a brave front for the boys, but inside I was terrified – if the priests could nail a man to a cross, they could do a lot worse to me.

They already did, I reminded myself. They took my mother away from me.

I felt Gage, who was waiting somewhere close by but not inside the church yet. He was focused on the men inside, the men he’d somehow summoned there.

Tower. Rocca. Carlo.

I slipped into the sanctuary, and saw all three men standing in front of the altar. I knew every nook and cranny of the church, so it was easy to stay in the shadows, unnoticed as I moved forward.

“We need the Chief Investigator from Rome to come at once,” Bishop Tower was saying. “If you explain things to His Holiness—”

“*Abba Patre* is not involved,” Father Carlo said. “Nor can he be, Augustus.”

“You don’t understand, they are organized now!” The bishop blotted his face with his sleeve. “They have created places of asylum; they have many allies – that female doctor is helping them—” he faltered as someone came in from the rectory.

It was Father George. “Your Eminence, I went down to the basement this afternoon. I’d like an explanation.”

“That is none of your concern, George.”

“It looks and smelling like you’ve been slaughtering animals. Then I find fifteen pints of blood in the refrigerator, and a used, man-sized crucifix. I’d say that concerns the police.” He gestured toward the basement. “What in God’s name have you been doing down there, Augustus?”

The Bishop folded his arms. “I am ridding the world of demons.”

“*Nous ne sommes pas des démons.*” It was Gage, wearing Jack’s black trench coat. It was covered with locust. Their wings were fluttering, but they weren’t flying. They were . . . guiding him? “We have never been demons.”

Father Rocca's eyes rolled back in his head as he keeled over and hit the floor. Father Carlo grabbed his cross and held it out as he began babbling in Italian.

The bishop ran up behind the altar. "Leave this house of God!"

"I tried to leave before, but you said I had to stay. That I had to tell you our secrets." Gage sat down in the third pew and all of the locust jumped off him onto the floor. "I'm back. Don't you want to question me now?"

Something chirped by my foot, and I looked down to see thousands more locust covering the old tile floor. They went neatly around me as they hopped steadily toward the front of the church.

"We will kill you," Bishop Tower said, his voice shaking. "And the rest of them. We will purge this earth of your evil disease."

"My friend Dr. Whitman tells me my disease is not good or evil. It is simply a disease. She is a student of science." When one of the Italians made a move toward him, Gage lifted a hand, and the locust left the floor and began whizzing around in the air. "Regrettably, I am not."

Father Rocca came to, screamed, and jumped up, tearing at his black jacket as he tried to brush off the locust crawling on him. "Get them off! Get them off!" He pulled out a revolver and pointed it at Gage. "Call them back or I'll shoot – "

"You will not." Father George plucked the gun from his hand, opened the chamber, and shook out the bullets. They pinged as they hit the tile floor. "Not in my church. I'm calling the police."

“You fool.” Father Carlo tried to punch Father George in the face, but the old priest dodged his fist. Gage murmured something, and the locust started swarming all over Father Carlo again. He danced around in circles, trying to slap them away. None of the bugs touched Father George as he strode out of the church.

I saw the other Italian follow Father George, but Avery and another boy appeared at the door of the rectory. They let Father George pass, but blocked Father Carlo from leaving. The Italian cursed them and ran to the other side of the church, but Ian and another boy stepped out and blocked that exit. Behind me, four boys now stood guarding the front entrance.

None of the locust, I noted, went near Ian or any of the other boys, either.

Ian came to stand next to the pew where Gage sat and regarded the cowering bishop with visible disgust. “Did they really nail you to a cross?”

“*Oui.*”

“Man, that’s cold. Here.” He offered Gage his knife.

“*Non, merci, mon ami.*” Gage turned his head as Father Carlo ran into the pew from the other side. Before the Italian could touch him, he grabbed his arms, jerked him down, and snapped the priest’s neck with a quick jerk. “I have no need of weapons.” He pushed Father Carlo’s body aside.

“No, you don’t.” Ian grinned and sauntered back to guard the side door.

Instead of attacking, Father Rocca came back and got down on his knees in the aisle by Gage’s pew. “*Perdonilo, Abbadon.*” He was covered in bugs.

“*Non ho desiderato danneggiarlo. Perdonilo per favore!*”

“What did you say, when I begged you to stop?” Gage reached down and plucked a locust from the end of Father Rocca’s nose. *“Vaffanculo.”*

“Stop this.” Tower came down from the altar. He had his hands behind his back, but from my angle I could see he was holding the communion chalice. “I am the one you want. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? I’m a Roman Catholic bishop, you think you can kill me?”

“I know I can.” Gage didn’t seem concerned – in fact, he wasn’t even looking at Tower.

Suddenly I knew why he had been in the wheelchair.

“No.” I started running toward the altar.

The door to the rectory opened, and Father George came in with Vanessa and Jack.

“Stop it!” Vanessa shouted as she ran toward the bishop. “Leave him alone!”

That diverted Gage’s attention. “Vanessa?”

At the same time, Bishop Tower brought out the chalice and lifted it, as if preparing to smash Gage in the face with it.

I got there first, and threw myself in front of him – just in time to get a face full of something wet as the bishop threw the contents of the chalice at Gage.

I sputtered and choked, then realized what it was and regarded His Eminence. “Water? You were hoping to drown him?”

“More than that, *cherie*.” Jack gently removed the empty chalice out of the bishop’s hand and then threw it so hard it sailed clear across the sanctuary and smashed through one of the big stained glass windows.

“Niamh?” Gage reached out, and I caught his hand in mine. “What are you doing here? I put you to sleep.”

“Getting a bath, and no, you didn’t.” He flinched as the water running down my arm touched his skin, and I let go of him as soon as I saw the blister form. “Water burns you?”

“The copper in holy water does. Gage, these bugs are grossing me out.” Vanessa pushed the bishop back. “Have you had enough fun for one night?”

“No.” Gage made a funny gesture, and the locust stopped swarming and settled back down to the floor. “But I suppose it will have to do.”

The Bishop grabbed me and hauled me against him. “If you kill me, Rome will never stop hunting you.”

“Rome will never stop hunting us anyway.” Jack sighed. “We are finished here. Let go of the girl and we will all retreat to our neutral corners.”

Father Rocca began shouting incoherently and throwing prayer candles at Vanessa and Jack.

“Augustus!” Father George shouted. “Release that child at once!”

“I swore to her mother that she would be safe.” Tower pinned his arm against my neck, and when Jack stepped forward, tightened his choke hold.

“She’ll be completely safe if she’s dead.”

The candles Father Rocca threw were starting little fires all around the interior of the church. The Italian priest laughed like a maniac.

“You killed her mother by making her drink my blood,” Gage said, rising to his feet. “Why?”

“We made a bargain.” He dragged me back with him toward the altar. “She wanted laser treatments for her daughter. We had to discover how you spread your filth. The legends said—” he stiffened, then his arm went limp and he fell to the floor with me. I looked up to see Father George putting the big cross back on the altar.

“Fiona Murphy was worth ten of him.” He helped me up before he turned to Vanessa. “We have to get out of here.”

The little fires had grown into large ones, and the church was starting to fill with smoke.

“That would be for the best. We’ll take Nia with us.”

He looked at me. “Is that you want, child?” I nodded, and he kissed my brow. “I’ll keep you in my prayers, then. God bless you and keep you safe.”

He lifted Bishop Tower onto his shoulder and carried him out. Through the smoke I saw Ian and Avery grab Father Rocca and push him through the side door. The locust had mysteriously vanished.

So had Gage.

#

California was warm and sunny, and Vanessa and Jack had a huge house right by the ocean. The first week we were there all Teag and I did was play on

the beach. It was nice to pretend to be a carefree child again and not think about that night at St. Luke's, or Gage, or why any of it had happened.

I wasn't a child anymore, though.

I called Father George to let him know that we were safe, and he told me that St. Luke's had burned to the ground, and that the fire had destroyed all of the evidence of what the bishop and the Italians had been doing in the secret basement room. Father Carlo's death had been ruled as accidental.

"What will you do now, Father?"

"I've a church to rebuild, and a parish to watch over." He sounded tired. "I've also reported what I know to the Cardinal. He's had Bishop Tower and Father Rocca recalled to Rome."

"So they got away with it." It didn't seem fair, that the other two men wouldn't be punished for what they'd done to Gage.

"The Cardinal promised me there'd be an investigation, especially after I mentioned how inclined I'd be to tell the press about the incident if there wasn't." Father George sighed. "It's not much but it's the best I can do, Nia."

"Thanks, Father."

Vanessa came to my room with a pot of tea that night, as if she knew what I'd been thinking. She told me what I'd already suspected – that she and Jack were *vrykolakas*, victims of a disease that dated back to the Middle Ages. Like vampires, they lived off human blood, but they weren't evil and they didn't kill people anymore. Vanessa made the whole thing sound almost normal, like being a diabetic, until she got to the part about the special investigators who

hunted, tortured, and killed the *vrykolakas*. Then, finally, she told me about Gage.

“The mutation gives all *vrykolakas* certain abilities, like spontaneous healing, telepathy, and increased physical strength. But there are a few cases where there have been other mutations, like Gage. Gage is special.”

“He can summon and control locusts with his mind.”

“Locusts or any insect, really.”

“Why didn’t he call them to help him get out of there?”

“They’d starved him for months; I think he was too weak. We’re not even sure how or why he can do it, but I’m working on it.” Vanessa grimaced. “Was working on it, I should say. He took off. He probably went back to France, not that I blame him after what he’s been through. There’s something else I should tell you.”

“He can tell me.” I went to the window. “He’s not in France, he’s close by.”

“How do you know that?”

“I can feel him. Maybe it’s another weird mutation.” I faced her. “If I tried to take his blood, it would kill me, right?” She made a see-saw gesture with her hand. “Why didn’t it kill you?”

“I had to go overseas for some volunteer work with refugees and they gave me some unusual inoculations. When Jack infected me, I had antibodies present in my blood that most people don’t.”

“And if I got the same shots, and developed the same antibodies?”

“I’d have to run a whole slew of tests, but theoretically . . . yeah, it might work.” She gave me a slow grin. “You interested in studying medicine, kid?”

“Maybe, when I’m a little older.” I slipped on my shoes. “Okay if I take a walk on the beach? I won’t be long.”

“Sure.” She got up and gave me a hug. “See if you can talk him into staying.”

#

Gage was waiting for me on the seawall about a quarter mile from Vanessa and Jack’s house. Moonlight glinted off his dark glasses as he turned in my direction. “I came to say *au revoir*.”

“No, you didn’t.” I stopped in front of him. “You came to apologize for using me and killing my mother.”

“That, too.” One side of his mouth curled. “I see our connection remains strong.”

Ever since the night of the fire, I could feel what he felt, hear his thoughts from a mile away. He’d put himself through hell over me. “You didn’t kill my mother, Gage, and what you did to me wasn’t so bad. Parts of it I really liked. Like the kissing.” I glanced out at the Pacific ocean, which was beautiful but too damn cold to swim in at night. “I like being human, by the way.”

“So did I.”

“You should also know that I’m only seventeen.”

“I’m five hundred and two.”

Talk about falling for an older man. “Then there’s the whole issue of us both being permanently disfigured. I’m not getting involved with someone just out of pity, and neither should you.”

“I think you are . . .” he halted. “What did you say?”

“We’re both pretty hideous. I’ve got this face, and you’ve got” – I reached up and took off his sunglasses – “no eyes.” The sockets had healed cleanly, but it hurt to see those two dark holes where his eyes should have been. “Who did it to you? Tower?”

“Carlo.”

“Good thing he’s dead, then. How are you getting around if you’re blind?”

“I have friends.” He lifted a hand, and hundreds of monarch butterflies fluttered up from the ground. They landed on his shoulders and sleeves. “They guide me.”

Like the locust had brought him to the church. I reached out and one of the butterflies fluttered over and landed on my finger. “You didn’t have to hide the fact that you’re blind now.”

“I did not want your pity.”

“Likewise.” The butterfly flew away from my hand as I slid his glasses back on for him. “So I think we should take this very slow.”

“Slow.” The butterflies fluttered away from him and flew off into the night.

“As in the opposite of fast.” I put my arms around his waist. “Don’t go back to France. Stay here and let Vanessa run her tests. You can meet my little

brother, and take me out on a few dates, and kiss me some more. If you want to.”

“I want to.” He rested his hands on either side of my throat. “In the order you said?”

“No.” I lifted my chin. “Mix them up.” Just before he kissed me, I moved my head back. “And one more thing.”

“Mmmm?”

“No calling any cockroaches. Ever.”

“Very well.”

An Exclusive Excerpt from **Twilight Fall**
A novel of the Darkyn
By Lynn Viehl
To be released July 2008
Published by Onyx/New American Library

She still had a few minutes before the plane landed, and she was not going to spend them hiding from him. Her head throbbed painfully; a remnant of the taking, perhaps, although it had never had that affect on her before tonight. Liling dressed and went into the small bathroom adjoining the compartment to wash her face.

As the water ran over her hands, she stared at it. Her ears felt hollow with the absence of the bells. Each time she washed or dressed or ate, a part of her felt wrong because there were no bells signaling that it was time to do such things. The priests had trained her and all the other children to respond to them like dogs, so they wouldn't have to speak to them or be present to supervise their activities.

She hated the sound of bells, and still, she listened for them.

The pain throbbing in her temples made her looked in the cabinets for a bottle of ibuprofen. She instead found several lipsticks, hair brushes, and small bottles of perfume. All of them had been used.

The jealousy withering her heart surprised her. She wasn't the first woman he'd had on the plane, and she wouldn't be the last. Valentin was an extremely sensual man; he had a bedroom built into the back of his plane. Naturally he'd use it for something more than simply sleeping.

Idly she took out one of the bottles, a wildly expensive French perfume she could never have afforded, and uncapped it to take a sniff. The heavy floral scent had an unpleasant soapy undertone to it from the chemicals and agents used to boost the perfume's intensity. Why women felt the need to spray themselves with such odors to feel beautiful confused Liling. Certainly no garden ever smelled as vile as the perfumes created to mimic them.

She carefully replaced the bottle of perfume and closed the cabinet. If Jaus preferred women who wore French perfume and expensive makeup, then it was a good thing that she would only have this one night with him. She'd bore him to death in a week.

And she'd never again meet another man like him, she knew that. It had nothing to do with his wealth, his power or the tragedy that had stolen the use of his arm from him. He wasn't like other men; in some fundamental way that defied explanation, he was much more. In a sense most men were as simple to understand as a page from an open book. They wanted attention and pleasure and gratification; they needed ways to channel their basic aggressions.

Liling knew from the taking that was not the case with Valentin Jaus. The depths inside him had felt like some well-guarded, secret library she would never be permitted to enter. Even when the lust had overtaken them, and she had surrendered herself, he had been holding something back. Not to deceive her, but to protect her.

If only she didn't have to run. If only she could be like other women. But she could not let the priests capture her again.

Liling went out to the main cabin, ready to see him and talk with him, and perhaps even give him one last kiss before they parted. She could be as civilized about this as he was, and leave him without regret.

No regret he can see, she amended silently. She had a feeling that emotionally she was going to pay for this night for a long, long time.

The cabin was empty. Liling heard Valentin and another man's voices coming from the front of the plane, and slowly walked up to the open door leading to the cockpit.

"—can't fire that in here," Valentin was saying, his voice cold. "Hand it to me now and I will not harm you. I give you my word."

The pilot laughed. "The word of the *maledicti* means nothing."

Liling came up just behind Jaus before she saw the gun in the pilot's hand, and froze. The pilot was going to shoot Valentin.

The scent of camellias became smothering.

"Give it to me," Jaus repeated, holding out his hand.

The other man trembled all over, and then slammed his fist into his thigh. "The girl must die." He shouted something else in a strange language as he shoved a handle forward.

The plane tilted sharply forward and began to hurtle down in a steep dive.

"God does not want your death," Valentin told him.

"No," the pilot said, his face contorted with pain. "He wants hers, and yours." He fired.

Valentin didn't move, but a sharp pain made Liling stagger backward. She grabbed an overhead handle and then screamed as the pilot reversed the gun, put the end in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

An Exclusive Excerpt from **Stay the Night**
A Novel of the Darkyn
By Lynn Viehl
To be released January 2009
Published by Onyx/New American Library

Robin strode to the office, but found the door locked when he tried it. A simple twist of his hand using his Kyn strength broke the locking mechanism and allowed him to enter the room.

Chris Renshaw straightened as soon as he closed the door behind him, and twisted the knob again the jam it shut. "You can't come in here."

"Yet I just did." He regarded her steadily as he deliberately shed his scent, surrounding her with it. "I had expected you would come and greet me when I arrived. Unless you have gone blind since last night?"

Her eyes remained clear, her pupils normal as she offered him an insincere smile. "No, I can see fine. I just didn't notice you."

That proved beyond a doubt to him that she could resist *l'attrait*. "You are a better liar than that, Madam."

"I'm sorry that you feel that way. I have to get back to the show." She came to him, and glanced up when he didn't move out of her way. "Excuse me."

"No, I do not excuse you," he said, enjoying the way his tone startled her. "I know you saw me. Why did you not come to me?"

Chris backed away from him. "All right, I did see you and your companion when one of the press asked me about you. I didn't come over because I felt awkward about approaching you."

“Awkward.”

“I didn’t want to say anything that might embarrass you in front of your date.” She had to force her next words out. “I apologize if I seemed rude.”

“You were protecting me. I see.” Robin advanced on her. “Tell me, what did you think would embarrass me most? That you might slip up and mention that you used me for sex? Or perhaps that you never told me your full name? Or that you left my bed this morning without bothering to wake me or say farewell?”

“I wrote you a note—”

“Oh, God, yes, how could I forget? The effusive, affectionate, one-line note of thanks.” He had her pinned against the desk now, and leaned down until their faces were only a breath apart. “I’ve not earned such gratitude since the last time I held a door open for an elderly woman using a cane.”

“Rob.”

“Robin. *That* is my name. Say it. Say all of it.”

“Robin.” Her lashes came down, hiding her eyes from him. “Listen. I’ve never done anything like that, and I really didn’t know what to do except leave. I told you, I don’t pick up guys in bars. I don’t have one-night stands.”

“There now, that has a ring of truth to it.” He fingered the edge of her jacket. “But technically speaking, I wasn’t a one-night stand, was I? You didn’t stay the night.” He parted the front of her jacket and ran one long finger down the row of buttons on her blouse. “By my calculations, love, you owe me two more hours. I’d like to collect.”

“I can’t—” she stopped as he used his thumb to pop off the first button at the top of her blouse, and her throat worked as she swallowed. “Don’t do this, Robin.”

“Why not?” He circled the second button, watching the frantic throb of her pulse hammer in the hollow between her collarbones. “You liked it well enough the other night. You put my hands on you. You wanted me to do it.”

“That was then. This is my job.”

“Your job.” He moved his fingers down to the third button. “You didn’t tell me what that was, either.”

“Someone is going to come looking for me any minute,” she warned.

“Let them try.”

“Robin.” She put her hand over his, trapping his fingers between her cold palm and her warm body. “Please, stop.”

Her indifference had shocked him; her lies had enraged him, but the manner in which her voice quavered over the “please” struck him like a burning mace to the side of the head.

He looked into her eyes, as wounded by her fear as her deception. “Did it truly mean nothing to you?”

“Maybe it started out that way,” she said slowly, “but when I woke up, and saw you sleeping next to me, and remembered . . . I didn’t know I would feel like that.” Her shoulders rounded, and she stared at the floor. “I didn’t even think about you, not really. I got dressed as fast as I could, and I ran.”

“You can’t regret being with me,” he said, shaken. He ran a piece of her hair through his fingers and looked all over her face. “Not how we were together.” When she didn’t reply, he put his arm around her waist and pulled her against him. “*Chris.*”

“No. No, I don’t.” She spoke as if she were ashamed of that fact. Then her expression cleared, and she touched his cheek. “You were better than any fantasy I’ve ever had.”

Robin felt confused. “If that is true, why did you run away?”

“Haven’t you ever done something amazing and dangerous and exciting,” she asked, “that you later wished you’d never done at all? Because you know it could change everything you have, everything you are?”

“So you ran away because you wanted more.” Bitter memories made him laugh. “Yes, actually, I have done that myself.” Robin urged her closer, folding her against him, and rested his chin against the top of her head. “I believe this is where my severely bruised pride takes a tumble.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s me. My life. My choices.” Chris tilted her head back and kissed his cheek. “But I am glad you understand. I’ll never forget you or the night we spent together.”

Now she thought he was being understanding. Accepting. Happy to slink off into the night and leave her to her sting operations and undercover work. But at least he had the comfort of knowing that she would never forget having sex with him.

If he left this room without throttling her, Robin thought, it would be a miracle.

“Before you send me on my way,” he said carefully, “and go back to living your life as it was, there is something else I want you to remember.” He put his hands around her waist, lifted her off her feet, and brought her mouth to his.

Chris tried to push him off for all of five seconds before her hands shifted and wound around his neck, and her lips parted for his tongue.

Robin groaned. She might look like a posh barrister, his Chris, but she kissed like a Persian courtesan. As she had last night, she met his hunger by offering her own. Her soft, silky mouth tugged and caressed, her tongue stroked and tasted.

His anger had not vanished, and Chris’s generous response added resentment to the ire felt. He knew how to use finesse with a female, but she had brought out the brute in him, and he took it out on her mouth. She didn’t go passive, however. She met his fury with an affectionate indulgence, catching his lip between the edge of her teeth or stroking his face with her fingers, petting him, as if she meant to dare him to do more, take more.

After centuries of embracing softly yielding human females willing to meet his every need, the erotic challenge of kissing this one drove Robin wild. No one had ever made him feel this, and he would not let it end. To hell with the manuscript, the FBI, humanity, the Kyn and the rest of the bloody world. She would not dismiss him from her life. He would find a way to win her heart.

“Wait.” She gasped the word between ferocious kisses. “Fire.”

He found he had to literally wrench his mouth from hers in order to hear her over the miserable clanging sound in his brain. "What?"

"Alarm." She tore free of his hands and heaved in a breath, staggering a little as she went around him. "*Fire alarm.*"

About the Author



Since 2000, Lynn Viehl has published thirty-eight novels in five genres. On the internet, she hosts [Paperback Writer](#), a popular publishing industry weblog which she updates daily. Lynn's StarDoc science fiction series has been a genre bestseller for seven consecutive years. Lynn's first three novels of the Darkyn, *If Angels Burn*, *Private Demon* and *Dark Need* all made the USA Today bestseller list. As did her fourth and fifth Darkyn novels, *Night Lost* and *Evermore*, which both debuted at #21 on the New York Times extended bestseller list.

Readers are always welcome to send feedback on this free e-story by e-mail to LynnViehl@aol.com.

Note to Readers

If you've enjoyed this free e-book, please let other people know about it, as word of mouth is the best advertising a writer *can't* buy. Also, if you're interested in reading other books I've written, here's my public bibliography:

Science Fiction (*writing as S.L. Viehl*)

StarDoc SF series:

StarDoc January 2000 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451457730
Beyond Varallan July 2000 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451457935
Endurance January 2001 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458141
Shockball August 2001 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458559
Eternity Row September 2002 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458915
Rebel Ice January 2006 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451460626
Plague of Memory January 2007 Roc SF/F ISBN#9780451461230
Omega Games to be published August 2008 Roc SF/F
Crystal Healer to be published in mid-2009 Roc SF/F

Other SF novels:

Blade Dancer August 2003 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451459261
Ring of Fire (Anthology; short story: A Matter of Consultation)
January 2004 BAEN ISBN# 074347175X
Bio Rescue August 2004 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451459784
Afterburn August 5, 2005 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451460294

Romance (*writing as Gena Hale*)

Paradise Island April 2001 ONYX ISBN# 0451409825
Dream Mountain August 2001 ONYX ISBN# 0451410033
Sun Valley June 2002 ONYX ISBN# 0451410394

Romance (*writing as Jessica Hall*)

The Deepest Edge February 2003 ONYX ISBN# 0451207963
The Steel Caress May 2003 ONYX ISBN# 0451208528
The Kissing Blades August 2003 ONYX ISBN# 045120946X
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Dark Fantasy (*writing as Lynn Viehl*)

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Private Demon October 2005 Signet Eclipse ISBN# 0451217055
Dark Need June 2006 Signet Eclipse ISBN# 0451218663
Night Lost May 2007 Signet Eclipse ISBN#9780451221025
Evermore January 2008 Signet Eclipse ISBN#9780451222848
Twilight Fall to be published in July 2008 Onyx
Stay the Night to be published in January 2009 Onyx

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Christian Adult Fiction Series (*writing as Rebecca Kelly*)

Grace Chapel Inn Series/GUIDEPOSTS

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