

Endlessly

By C.V. Hunt

Copyright 2011 C.V. Hunt

Smashwords Edition

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental unless specified in acknowledgements.

Copyright 2011 C.V. Hunt

Smashwords Edition

All rights reserved.

<http://www.authorcvhunt.com>

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This work was edited by Peter Heyrman. He can be contacted by <mailto:bearpressedit@hotmail.com> or by calling (410)-433-0908

Author's photos for jacket and website were taken by Tony Ocha. He can be contacted at <http://www.tattoosbyoch.com>

ISBN: 1456356534

ISBN-13: 978-1-4563-5653-8

(ebook) ISBN: 978-1-4507-5995-3

DEDICATION

This book is for everyone that has accepted me for who I am.

Words. They are our greatest weapon in life. They have the power to heal and destroy.
Choose them carefully as you battle each day. A single word could be your last spoken or heard.
You will be remembered for them.

These pages are filled with some of my words.

C.V. Hunt

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A thank you to Peter Heyrman, my editor, for inspiration and guidance.

To Tony Och, my tattooist, photographer, and friend, thanks for the morbidly funny conversations and creepy photos.

A huge thank you to Chris Godfrey, Pedro Soto, and Patti Witte for allowing me use your names and likeness. I had way too much fun doing wicked things to you.

To Richard, thank you for putting up with me, Verloren, Ash, and Jason.

Chapter 0 PRELUDE

I had finally met the Quatre. I'd known of them for so long, but often I'd wondered if they were anything more than a scary bedtime story we told to keep each other in line.

Now I stood before them in a beach condo somewhere in the Caribbean. The four of them lounged on the furniture acting as if this was nothing more than a casual conversation about the weather. The sound of waves breaking on the beach came through the open balcony door. A warm breeze fluttered through nearby curtains. It would have been nice under other circumstances.

The tropical atmosphere masked the fact that this was intended to be the place of my death. Would my death be a relief? I didn't know. The only thing I was sure of was that no one should live as long as I had. My kind—what the world calls vampires—don't have souls. That makes us unique, but it also means that death is truly the end—no reincarnation or afterlife of any kind. What would it be like to sleep with no dreams? Sweet oblivion? I tried to imagine nothing. I had lost my belief in any god a long time ago. The incarnates confirmed this, telling me gods did not exist. After all, why would any god create a monster like me?

Kale's face was blank behind sunglasses. "You haven't answered us Verloren," he said, allowing a glimmer of smugness to spice his apathy. He wore a suit—certainly more fitting than my casual outfit.

I searched his eyes, trying to erase any cruelty that might creep into my expression. The room's bright sunlight was hell on my eyes. It was a struggle to keep them open, but if I didn't how would I see death coming? I didn't take my eyes off Kale. I felt my only chance for sympathy would be with him—a fellow vampire. Wind ruffled his long white hair.

"I choose not to conceal my appearance, for the same reasons you don't conceal yours," I told him. As we eyed each other it occurred to me our colorless skin and hair made the exercise something like looking into a mirror—except our features were as different as they could be.

Kale laughed. The werewolf sitting next to him looked smug. Hania, the shaman, avoided eye contact, staring at the floor instead. Then there was little Sara. She fidgeted as if she were really the child she appeared to be.

Kale leaned forward and grinned. "I do not tromp about in the human world like you. Do you really think the humans won't look at you and suspect something?" He shook his head, as if he were dealing with a stubborn child.

"Sure, they'll see something different," I sneered. "I won't deny it, Kale. But this is the millennium, 2000, modern times. No one is going to stone me. They'll just think I'm an albino. You're making a lot out of nothing. Don't be so afraid."

If Kale planned to kill me, I had to at least put up a fight. Maybe I was sick of this world but, with no hope past death, I was determined to try to stay alive. There was no reason to remind him death was a vampire's greatest fear. He knew it from personal experience.

Kale contemplated my argument. These four—this Quatre—worried about their own survival, not mine. I couldn't blame them. We all knew what might happen if we—vampires, incarnates, and all the rest—were exposed.

William, the werewolf, glanced about nervously. With his plain face, buzz-cut hair, khakis and plain white shirt, he looked like any middle-aged man. His gun holster was obvious, but I hated him more for those stupid khakis than for his wish to kill me.

Finally he asked: “Couldn’t we just kill him and get it over with?”

My body tensed. William drew his revolver from its holster. I might be able to dodge a shot, but then there were the goons outside. These folks had enough firepower to take out most of the island.

“Let’s not be hasty.” Kale raised his hand to William before turning to smirk at me. “Verloren has a special talent for seeing people for what they truly are. I’ve never heard of such a thing before. It really fascinates me. What is it you call them?”

I eyed him carefully. “Auras,” I said. “I see their aura...and know what they are.” This was the first interest Kale had shown in anything other than my imminent death. I could see Kale’s aura, a black film hugging his skin. His vampire’s aura was something like my own.

William’s bright aura was red.

Hania’s silvery shaman’s aura nearly blinded me. His long hair fell into his face, concealing dark brown eyes and weathered russet skin. I couldn’t look at him long.

Sara’s was the rainbow prism of all incarnates. The tiny girl sat upside down, her back on the seat, and her legs running up the chairback. She swung her feet, stared into space, and sung a child’s lullaby to herself.

Watching her made me wonder if I’d ever been a father. Surely I could have had a family before the change. I’d been old enough. What would it have been like to live as a normal human? Would a family be a blessing? Would I want people who cared about me? Would I want a soul?

Hania still stared at the floor, looking as if he didn’t care if I lived or died. His face showed the wear of age. He sat as still as a statue.

We said nothing. The room filled with the sound of the ocean and Sara’s fidgeting. The blonde child twisted her hair and stared vacantly at the wall. She was a fairy who was still having trouble with shifting. That’s why they chose her. A fairy is always eager for more—more of everything. More power, more money, more pleasure—they’ll do anything to get what they want. Even then I could see that when she got older the others would have to suffer her desire for power.

“We will let you go as long as you take someone with you. They will keep an eye on you,” Kale said. William stared at him, his jaw dropping in disbelief. Kale continued: “If you create a problem, he will be instructed to kill you. He will report back to us. If he sees no problems with your life and lifestyle, after a while, he can leave.”

Relief flooded me, but I hated the idea of a babysitter. I looked at the others. They waited to see where Kale would lead them. Why bother with a group? I wondered. It was obvious this was Kale’s game. He was judge, jury and, if necessary, executioner.

As they left William, was the only one to acknowledge me, glaring at me as he went out the door.

Sure, vampires were at the top of the pecking order, but born knowings and werewolves were only a step behind. I regarded Sara as nothing more than decoration, representing what was left of those who were not human. She was a beautiful child who would grow into a beautiful temptress luring the unsuspecting to their deaths.

As I closed the door I sighed. I now knew just how real the Quatre was. They ruled the non-human world, deciding what rules we must follow. In my case that meant I needed a baby sitter. Otherwise I might talk, and that was always forbidden.

Over a decade passes.

Chapter 1 SECOND SIGHT

The store was a front, a basic part of the disguise keeping the Quatre off my back. Not that I was hiding from them. They knew about our shop. I put on a human façade to keep them happy and counted myself lucky they hadn't called me in for another meeting.

I had helpers. Three of us—a vampire, a werewolf and a witch—were running the store. We posed as humans while an assortment of incarnates filtered in and out looking for information. They were usually glad to find us. Few of them suspected a place such as this could even exist.

Then there were our human patrons, high school and college kids looking for CDs, books, or clothes. God, how I hated them, with their normal lives and boring problems. They complained about the pettiest things: dating, clothes, school... If they could walk a mile in my shoes.

And here was Chris Godfrey, the only human I could tolerate, leaning on the counter, trying to hustle me over some CDs. He was at least a head taller than my 5'7", but as he leaned over to rifle through a pile of CDs, he gave up the height advantage. Chris wore a stocking cap and looked as if he'd skipped a couple of days shaving. It was nice to have someone around that appreciated music the way I did—even though he was human. Someone once told me it only takes one thing in common to make a friend. We had two.

"Come on man. I'll trade you a box of ammo for these," he offered. Chris owned the small gun store across the parking lot from my shop. It was convenient to have that kind of access to firepower. Chris never worried about my lack of ID. I was never even sure if ID was a requirement for gun ownership in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

"Sure," I whispered. "They better be hollow points." I kept my voice down so the few customers wouldn't hear, but I couldn't do anything about the damn demon in the back. He'd been strolling around the books all day, and from where he was he would almost certainly hear the conversation.

Suddenly the bell rang, signaling the door opening. Chris and I both looked over as the girl came in. There was something about her. Chris looked back to me and continued talking. I caught a glimpse of the girl's unusual aura, then I got a burst of pictures. The Quatre was the only one I recognized before it was all gone. I stood staring at the front of the store. The girl had disappeared from my direct line of sight. I stared straight ahead, trying to grasp what I had just seen.

"Hellooooo, Verloren?" Chris waved his hand in front of my face.

I turned and stared at him.

"Where did you go man?" he demanded. "You totally spaced out on me, and your eyes kinda rolled back in your head all crazy. I thought you were gonna pass out or have a seizure or something."

Chris was seeing something I wanted hidden. He knew nothing about me being a vampire nor did he recognize the weird collection of supernatural beings running in and out of my store for what they really were. He didn't need to. Chris's ignorance protected both of us. I quickly composed myself, and lied. "Man, I haven't been feeling too good lately."

"You need to eat something, ya scrawny fucker. I got some cold pizza in my store if you want it."

"No," I replied. "That's okay. I'm cool."

Human food. Ugh. Chris was right, but he couldn't have imagined what that meant. I did need to feed, but meals aren't that simple for vampires. There's always getting rid of the dead bodies. Though I could eat human food, that wouldn't do a vampire any good.

I started looking around for the girl while Chris went on about bands, music, and whatever else crossed his mind. I stood up tip-toed, peering over the aisles of books, CDs, and clothes. Chris's voice droned on. Music played on the store speakers. Finally I caught a faint aura by the books. Then I saw a flash of light.

I was pulled back to the normal world by Chris's voice. "Hey buddy what's up? You look a little puzzled."

"It's...it's just been a long day."

What the hell was happening to me? The auras, yeah...I could see them, but what was this? Some weird delusion brought on by my vampire hunger?

I turned to see Jessica Quinn's petite frame bouncing around in the back with the new age stuff. The witch's silver aura and mass of red hair were too bright to view without sunglasses. The New Age section disguised merchandise witches and shamans used in spells. What was she doing there?

Witches know everything. From the beginning of history they've carried their knowledge through many lives, never losing memories despite undergoing reincarnation. That is why we refer to them as the born knowings.

"Well man, I'm gonna get out of your hair," Chris said, "which you need to do something about...and those pants too. I'll come back tomorrow." He laughed as he grabbed his CDs and left. I felt a curl of cold air waft in from the dark night as the door shut behind him.

I wasn't going to change my shoulder-length, black-and-lime-green hair...or my baggy pants with their hanging chains. After all, if you looked at my misfit crowd you would realize I was just trying to fit in. Some were human and I had to try and act like I was human too. The vitiligo was hard to cover up and I hated spray tans. It was so much easier posing as a goth.

I didn't need to wear contacts because the vampire virus didn't affect my eyes. They were pale blue and reasonably human-like. Still the light forced me to wear sunglasses even on overcast days. I preferred the winter, when the sun set early and I could often forget wearing shades.

As Jessica approached I said: "I need to talk to you in private before you go home." I gave her a look, just to reinforce the "in private."

I saw the girl looking through the clothes on the rack. She had a book in her hand. Her back was to me, her raised black hoodie and beanie cap hiding any trace of her features. All I could see was tawny hair falling straight from beneath the hood. It was halfway to her waist.

She had a strange aura, rainbow-like, so I assumed she must be an incarnate. Most incarnates' auras show all the colors of the spectrum evenly, but hers was outlined in red with the rainbow spreading around it. Red auras were usually confined to werewolves.

I was recalling that when the werewolf walked in, as if my thought of him had been a summons. He was in his early twenties, just as I seemed to be, but in all other ways his appearance contrasted with mine. Jason was tall, tanned, and wore his brown hair in spikes. He'd entered through the back door leading to the apartment we shared. He saw her and flashed a smug smile at me.

I watched as he walked up to her and suddenly I realized the pervert was going to ask her for her number. For the thousandth time I recognized the only reason I put up with Jason was so he could eat the human bodies I left behind. It was the only way he, or any werewolf, could shape

shift into his form—by consuming human flesh. Having someone around who could eat the drained bodies, bones and all, was damn convenient. I had no choice but to kill them. If I didn't, the virus would spread through their bodies and they would become vampires too. The Quatre didn't give permission for that too often. I'd pushed it once with them and didn't want to see them again. Their one rule was that we keep ourselves beneath human radar. As long as we went unnoticed we could live among them.

Jason was rearranging items on shelves, planning to drop one, then do the "Oops! Sorry I bumped into you" thing, but he couldn't get close enough. Every time he came within range she moved. They looked like two opposed magnets bouncing off each other. Maybe she sensed his pervert vibe.

I chuckled as Jason chafed at the cat and mouse game. Jason's acute hearing matched mine, so it was no surprise that he heard my reaction to his moves on the girl.

He walked over, leaned on the counter, and said: "Well?" while raising his eyebrows.

"Well what?"

"You know what you fucking asshole," he breathed.

A chuckle came from somewhere in the back—the demon again. Where was that black smoky aura? I didn't see him but I knew he could hear us. "She doesn't know what she is yet," I whispered as I watched her flip through CDs. "She still smells human." All of this begged the real question: What was she?

"An incarnate?" Jason wondered.

Just then Jessica strolled up and set her seminar flyers on the counter. I glanced at them. Some of the nearby stores hosted seminars where incarnates might start learning about who and what they were. Would the girl want to go to one?

Jessica followed our gazes, saw the girl, and muttered: "Hmph! Men."

Jessica marched to the back of the store, Jason following. With girls, incarnate girls, human girls...any girls—he couldn't stop himself. He had a one-track mind. I loved the fact that, no matter how much he pestered Jessica, she always shot him down. It was comical to watch.

With Jason diverted, I returned to the mystery of the girl. What could she be? I had never seen an aura like hers, seemingly a mix of incarnate with werewolf. Was she from another planet or realm?

The girl turned toward the counter and, for a split second, her brilliant blue eyes stared into mine. A wave passed through me. She looked down. In that instant we'd been drawn to each other.

I glanced at Jessica, and realized she was in shock. Her perpetual smile faded, her mouth fell open, and her eyes bulged. This wasn't supposed to happen to a born knowing.

I stared at Jessica's face and felt a strange sense of panic. I didn't notice the girl approaching my counter.

Chapter 2

AWAKENING HEART

“Excuse me...um...sir,” she said.

I cleared my throat, trying to calm my nerves. “Uhhmm...sorry. Can I help you?” My attraction to her might be better described as panicked magnetism. A part of me wanted to embrace her. A part of me wanted to run. The conflict left me rooted where I was.

“Uh, uh...yeah,” she said, almost stammering. “I’m ready to check out.” Her eyes darted everywhere. I could hear her heart beat faster.

I suddenly realized the girl was embarrassed. Her cheeks reddened, and sweat coated her forehead. She fidgeted. Jason, Jessica, and the rest of the store became distant, quiet, and not quite there. I saw her book: a guide to reincarnation. So, she was trying to figure it out. Something was off. Had there been some change in her aura. Had she been feeling strange?

“You know, we’ll be getting a shipment with some new titles about this on Wednesday,” I said, ringing up her book while trying not to stare at her aura.

She squinted at the price on the little screen and counted out her money. When she blushed, the sight of blood blooming into her cheeks made me hungry. My stomach growled, but the music drowned it out. As she handed me cash I noticed the tattoo on her knuckles. I saw it for a split second, and could not make it out. As I bagged the book and gave it to her, I glimpsed her aura again. It was like no other. Our eyes met again. She was unaware of her sweating. She didn’t even know she was trying to hide it.

“Um...Wednesday you said?” she murmured.

Why was it so awkward? She was just another incarnate becoming aware, wasn’t she? She must be struggling with the weird feelings. So? Weren’t we all? She was starting to think she was crazy. That made her just like so many other misfits. What did she have that they didn’t have?

“Wednesday,” I said, with a nod. “Come back then. We should have the new books out by the time we open.”

Whenever I looked at her aura it changed, as if in response to my stare. Her eyes evaded mine, yet I felt sure she was as drawn to me as I was to her. Finally she looked straight at me and said: “Ok. Thanks.” She clutched her book to her chest and put her head down. She walked out.

There were born knowings who coaxed ones like her into the store. Born knowings enjoyed helping incarnates learn the true nature of their own souls. The process was a lonely one, but it got easier once you knew there was something bigger. We had books about that, and then there was our diverse clientele...

As I watched her walk to her car, I still felt the aching pull. When I glanced back at the counter there was Jason, Cheshire cat smile and all.

“What?” I snapped.

“I might ask you the same thing,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t hide it. It’s not like anybody hit you with a stun gun. The real question is: are you gonna fuck her or eat her?” In the back of the store Jessica snorted.

“Neither,” I replied. “She’s an incarnate.”

“What is she? A werewolf?”

“No. We should only be so lucky.”

“What?” Jason demanded. “What’s wrong with werewolves? You got a problem with me? Ya don’t like my kind? Maybe my kind is her kind too, and you wouldn’t want to go there?” Finally his sarcasm faded as he asked: “So if she’s not like me then what is she?”

I watched as the demon slipped out. Only one human male, with the limited hearing of his species, was left in the store.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” I said softly. “She’s not a born knowing or a werewolf.”

“Then you are going to fuck her.”

“You know I can’t do that,” I said, wishing he would shut up. I was way too hungry to even think about it. “I can’t risk doing that kind of damage. I’ve been there before.”

“You tried to do it without hurting a girl?”

I didn’t answer. I’d said too much.

“What is it with you vampires anyhow?” he hissed, his anger showing. “Why can’t you guys fuck somebody without biting them? Can’t you control yourselves?”

“It’s what I am,” I said. “That’s why the Quatre ruled that vampires must only mate with other vampires.”

“So,” Jason said, nearly satisfied, “the other girl— did you kill her or change her?”

“Who?” My mind was still on the girl who’d just left.

“The one that you fucked and couldn’t keep from sinking your teeth into.”

“I killed her,” I said. “I didn’t have permission to change her. I was too terrified that I would be killed if I let her transform.”

The memory of my meeting with the Quatre made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I hadn’t thought about that in a while. Still it brought the fear.

I’m not a guy who talks about my sexual habits, and the last person I would share that with would be Jason.

“Then you need to get some dead, cold, vampire pussy,” he countered, roaring with laughter as he slapped the counter. He clutched his arms around his waist.

I rolled my eyes and pointed at him. “You’re such a little shit.”

Jason straightened up. “Little? Look who’s talking.” He walked toward the back, saying: “Hope you can keep up with all this traffic in here. I’m gonna take a nap before we take off tonight.”

“Is that a crack about my height?” I craned my neck to see over the tops of the aisles.

He passed through the back door still chuckling.

Tonight—Jason was reminding me I needed to feed. Talking about all this with Jessica would have to wait until tomorrow.

“Jessica.”

“Yeah?” she called from the back.

“You can take off, but be in here first thing tomorrow.”

She came over and searched my eyes. “I felt a strong pulse,” she said. “Like a ripple in water...and your face...”

“We’ll discuss it tomorrow.”

She nodded and gathered her coat and bag. Her perpetual smile returned. She bounced around the store, checking a few things before she left. Jessica was way too happy.

Jason’s words echoed in my head. Dead...cold...two Hollywood vampire myths. My heart still beats and I still live. And live and live. If I eat and don’t get my head blown off I might live forever. Maybe it’s my focus on those facts keeping me from ending it. That’s what most vampires do.

The only other immortal creatures are demons and angels—but they were here before man. They started as soon as there was life on the planet, evolving with it. They are evolution. We refer to them as demons and angels because they have the power to influence events for good or for ill. Rather than changing through shape shift, they can only evolve. Demons have black smoke auras while angel auras are gold. Rather than clinging to their skin, these beings' auras radiate out from their mouths with each exhalation.

Many vampires' minds fall victim to a hopeless madness. Some discover their consciences and hate killing. Unable to kill, they starve themselves of humans, attempting to squeeze nutrition from animal blood. Soon enough they learn that it's useless. Only human blood can save us.

Some blow their brains out. Nothing else works very well. Our bodies heal too fast for other methods.

I haven't been able to accept the idea that not feeding a little when I was having sex would never be a real option. But it was true. Feeding was drawing all blood from a human body. Whenever I fed I needed the aura too. I'd never known why. I'd met many other vampires, but I had yet to hear of another who could take an aura. Few could even see an aura, much less pull it from a dying victim. I'd heard rumors of vampires that, on changing, found themselves with something extra, but these stories were as distant as myths.

In the end the only sexual relationships that made sense were with other vampires. They were safe. Our bites did no harm to each other. Tasting a little blood felt good, but there wasn't much nutrition here either. Combining these bites with sex gave the illusion of feeding. Real feeding was something else entirely.

I had never taken a mate for long. Two vampires living in the same place wasn't a good plan. It meant appetites requiring twice as much blood, hunts that don't end until we had twice as much prey, and finally twice as many bodies to clean up. As I'd grown older I'd grown jaded and grumpy. Most females could only stand me for so long before they moved on. I can't say I blame them. I get sick of myself sometimes.

As I daydreamed of old flings I recalled the girl I'd just met. A being discovering her true nature...I'd seen a million of them. Why was I so drawn to her?

We're not supposed to interfere with incarnates. Either they found out for themselves, or it didn't happen. Some simply couldn't shape shift into their form. I closed my eyes, unable to imagine what a disappointment that must be.

Incarnates are reincarnations of other non-human figures. They could be anything. Jason was a werewolf, which was obvious from his red aura. Like other werewolves, he was in a class by himself—special diet, special teeth, special features.

I don't know why they're called "werewolves." Though they have wolf-like heads and teeth, they seem more like gorillas. The tail and the sudden covering of hair are mere movie moments. In truth the arms lengthen, the legs grow stronger, and the werewolf gains the speed of the wild. They gain strength too, but no more than that of a vampire. Their skin is bright red-brown, like that of Native Americans. Typically their eyes are yellow. One last myth is the full moon. They don't need it. All it gives them is moonlight.

One thing the movies sometimes get partially right is mind control; vampires have it. We can use it on most prey within close proximity. Once we have bitten into them we can rummage through their thoughts and memories.

Over the centuries I met many incarnates: fairies, trolls, witches, shamans, aliens and all the rest. They come from other planets, other realms, and sometimes they appear to pop up directly

from human imagination. They are reborn into human bodies. Some are born remembering and can shape shift at will. Others forget. They always have the feeling they belong to something bigger. Some figure it out immediately. Others never do. The latter are reborn again.

As the clock ticked down to closing time I went through all of this over and over. That aura, that look, that feeling: I'd never known anything like her before.

Chapter 3 VAMPIRE NIGHTMARES

Jason and I arrived in Indianapolis later that night. I was familiar with the area and knew exactly where to go. We drove down a dark street known for its prostitutes. There they were: two girls leaning against a graffiti-covered wall. They wore the usual plain white aura of humans. They both came out on the sidewalk, chattering to each other as they watched us approach. They were gearing up to do their jobs. The blonde wore a smile as real as her bleached hair. The brunette was trying to care. Both were barely dressed.

I slowed, pulled closer to the curb, and stopped the car in front of them. They leaned down and peered in the passenger side. Jason hit the button and the window slid down. He leaned back and smiled. The blonde smiled back, resting her elbows on the base of the car window. She wore a low-cut shirt and exposed her breasts like the pro she was. The other girl stood a few steps back, her hands on her hips. The blonde might have been in her mid-twenties. The brunette didn't even look eighteen.

Jason liked to do most of the talking. It gave him a sense of stalking his prey. Though we both knew a few thoughts from me would have them both paralyzed, I let him play his game. It reminded me of a cat toying with a mouse, though in this case the mouse had the misplaced expectation of profit.

"Well, well ladies. Which one of you would be willing to come with us for a little ride?" Jason smiled, and glanced back and forth between the two. He was favoring the blonde.

When the blonde spoke her breath smelled strongly of cigarettes. "It depends on what you boys are looking for."

"One of you for the both of us," Jason said, as he looked down at the window button. He playfully traced it with his index finger. What a horrible flirt.

"I don't know about two at once. That might cost a little extra." She straightened up and took a step back. She wasn't sure about these terms.

"Money is no problem," Jason said, smiling. Why worry about the money, when we knew they would never get paid.

"We'll both do it for two hundred," she said, glancing back. Her girlfriend wasn't paying much attention. The brunette was busy, chewing her nails, while trying to get a look at me.

"Oh no, we only want one of you," Jason said softly.

The brunette spoke up, "I'll do it for one-fifty."

The blonde turned to her, and whispered: "Are you sure? That driver's albino or something."

The brunette came forward and climbed in the rear door on the passenger side. As she slid onto the seat, the blonde backed off and walked away. She glanced back once or twice, then vanished into the shadows. Jason got nervous because the blonde wasn't taking the bait, but it was fine with me. I just hoped our brunette wouldn't ask about the green army duffle bag stuffed up under the driver's seat.

I put the car in drive and we crept down the street.

"So where are we going?" she asked. "Not too far, right? I have to be back soon."

"Just a little way down the street." As I said it I felt an evil smile cross my lips. I moved my face into the shadows. It wasn't time yet. In a few minutes she would know the full fear of death, but for now it was just the slight feeling of trepidation one gets from the unknown. The rich scent of her blood filled my nostrils. As her heart beat faster the odor became more enticing.

Saliva pooled in my mouth and I had to keep swallowing. Otherwise I would've looked like a mad dog. I pulled halfway down the alley, then checked both ends—no traffic. I put the car in park, got out, and climbed in the back seat and shut the door. I was too hungry for formalities. The brunette had struck what she thought was a sexy pose, but the effect was that of a frightened, awkward girl. What came next was a typical vampire moment, private and slightly erotic. Jason stared out the front window. He never cared to watch me feed. I couldn't blame him.

I immediately grabbed the brunette behind the neck, pulling her face close to mine. I'd caught her off guard. Her arms flailed out, then her hands came down on my legs. She found herself on all fours on the back seat.

"Hey, now don't be too rough." She crawled across me, coming to rest straddling my lap, facing me. All the while I kept my palm on the back of her neck.

She kissed me, probably in hopes of finishing as quickly as possible. That only made me hungrier. I inhaled deeply. My breathing quickened. I was getting too excited. I had to consider Jason, who didn't appreciate me having sex with his meals. I gripped the back of her neck and pulled her away from me.

"Hey what did I s..."

I pressed down, cutting off her words. The anger in her eyes suddenly shifted to terror. I loved this part. "Listen to me," I hissed. "You are going to die." I laughed, mad with hunger. "I am hungry and you will taste so much better packed with adrenaline and fear." Her pulse elevated, and her chest expanded as she gulped air. As she opened her mouth to scream, I paralyzed her with a thought and threw her down on the seat. She lay there in a horrible stillness.

If I'd had fangs I'm sure this would've been when I'd show them. I climbed on top of her and lowered my head beside her ear. I could hear Jason giggling like a girl in the front seat. I don't know who was mentally sicker, him or me.

As my ears filled with the drumming of her heart, I whispered in her ear: "I am death and I am here to take you away from this world. No one will ever care that you are missing. When you die you will forget all of this and there will be nothing more for you." With that I turned and bit deeply into her neck. As I became fully aroused I drew deeply from her body.

My days without blood made it orgasmic. I pulled on the energy from her aura and her body went limp. I knew of no other vampire who could see auras well enough to capture them, but I could, and always did. A born knowing once told me I was stealing their souls, that there would be nothing more for them after this. Throwing up my mental firewall, I blocked out her chaotic thoughts, and drank. I drained her. The details of each human's last thoughts were different, but they rested on the same background: terror, regret, and knowledge of impending death.

Without warning pictures flashed in front of my eyes. My body jerked. I nearly fell off the girl. In my head I clearly saw the girl from the store. She was like an erotic dream catching me unaware. There she was again, but with pitch black skin and a contorted body. Suddenly my thoughts filled with images of the Quatre and Sara, the girl who'd been with them. She'd been no more than a child.

Then I returned to reality. The girl I'd fed on was dead.

But what had those flashing images meant? When I tried to get hold of them it was like grasping sand. The harder I tried to see them the more they slipped away. Tomorrow couldn't get here quick enough. I needed to talk to Jessica.

I put my hand under the dead girl's neck and pulled away. I'd let only a few drops of blood spill. I wiped my hand across the spot. In my fury to eat I'd inadvertently taken a full bite out of her neck. There was blood on my palm. I licked it. It was intoxication like no other.

I sat back feeling full, much like a normal human might after the gluttony of a Thanksgiving dinner. Jason turned to me, grinning. I didn't have time to reflect on flashes and pictures. We needed to get off the street.

I grabbed the duffle bag from under the driver's seat and started stuffing the girl into it.

"Do they really taste better to you if you scare the shit out of them?" Jason gave me a hand with the bag.

"Yes they do. It's like a fine wine. Also, fear loosens their hold on their auras, which makes it easier for me to take it."

I zipped up the bag, got out of the car, and checked both ends of the alley. Jason got out of the passenger side. When he stood beside me I felt so small. He was not only taller than me but he was better muscled. My lack of food had a lot to do with that. I should've been eating every day, but doing this daily would've risked my anonymity.

Jason hurried to the driver's side of the car. I always let him drive to the hotel afterwards while I basked in the accomplishment of survival.

Jason gave it gas and we headed for the hotel. He checked his mirrors a hundred times, making sure we weren't followed. I felt sympathy for him. He only ate humans so he could shift into werewolf form. It's a good thing he didn't need it to survive.

At the hotel, I checked us in, then we drove around to the back. We looked for humans. None were around, so we did our work. Jason retrieved the bagged body from the back seat. He flung the strap over his shoulder almost effortlessly. We followed our standard procedure, taking the steps, avoiding the elevators, and checking the long hallways. TVs blared behind almost every door. We approached our room and I used our key card to open the door.

He took the bag to the bathroom. It looked like any hotel room: two full size beds, ugly floral patterned comforters, a television and a bathroom.

I grabbed the TV remote and turned it on before flopping down on the queen bed closest to the window. I flipped through the channels, turning the volume up to drown out the noises coming from the bathroom.

I knew what was happening behind the door. I had watched Jason and other werewolves before. He would dump the girl's body in the tub and strip her naked. He would then take off his own clothes so they wouldn't tear when he shifted. He would shape shift into his werewolf form, lean over the tub and devour the girl's entire body: bones, skin, hair, everything.

Once he was done he would take a shower and rinse any evidence down the drain. Nothing but the girl's clothes would remain. We would throw these in the dumpster behind the hotel before we left. That trash would go to a dump and no one would ever know. And since she was a prostitute, more than likely, no one would ever care.

As my meal settled, my eyelids grew heavy. I thought I would close my eyes for just a second, but ended up falling asleep. I dreamt. Dreaming was something I did not do often. Now I saw the girl with the strange aura, her skin as pale as mine. Her hair was snow white. This wasn't a light yellow like my own hair; this was true white. She stood in a grassy field. Above her the sun and clouds sailed through the sky. Hunching her shoulders, she bent forward.

As I walked closer I saw something protrude from her back. She raised her hands to her forehead and stared at me, her black eyes in agony. She took a deep breath, then unleashed an animal-like scream.

I woke with a start. My whole body jerked, shaking the bed. I let out a yelp. I gasped for breath, and wondered where I was. As I heard Jason belch I knew he'd probably awakened me. He'd flung open the bathroom door and now he was creating sound effects with his digestion. He

stood in the doorway rubbing his enlarged stomach with one hand as he held the empty duffel in the other.

When he looked at me he must've seen the confusion in my eyes. "Jesus Christ! Are you ok?" He fished in his pocket for his cigarettes.

"Holy shit!" I muttered. "I just had a fucked up dream."

"That's no good," said Jason. "It's got to be bad when a vampire has a nightmare. Verloren, you're what nightmares are made of." He chuckled to himself as he threw the duffel bag on the floor. He shook his head and ran one hand through his wet hair. He held the cigarette pack in the other.

"That girl from earlier today," I said.

He leaped onto his bed, stretched out on his stomach, and turned his head to me. "I've been thinking about that too. If she comes back in Wednesday I'm going to try and get her number." He lit a cigarette. "If you can't fuck her I want to."

"No you're not!" I snapped.

"I knew it. You do want to fuck her." He jumped up and sat on the edge of the bed. "It's about time you got some. I can tell when you feed off of a chick you want to bust her shit up. You haven't gotten laid since I've known you and you are one grumpy son of a bitch. You need to bust a nut, dude." He took a deep drag off his smoke, then he flopped on his bed.

I inhaled, closed my eyes, and tried to ignore him. "Go to sleep. I'll wake you in a few hours and we'll head home." I stared in the direction of the television but didn't watch it. He finished his cigarette and snuffed it out. I heard the sounds of his snoring.

In truth, I did find the girl attractive. It was the way she carried herself. She reminded me of a flower, closed and waiting for the sun. With sun she could open her pedals and bathe in the light.

She was almost certainly an incarnate. The incarnates often sensed the strangeness in their lives, but they struggled with what that meant. They came in the store searching for books with answers. What they wanted to know most was: were they a part of something bigger?

Like so many incarnates, the girl was embarrassed and confused, but her confusion went deeper. There was something about her and I didn't know what it was. She wasn't a typical incarnate, so what was she? Something I'd never seen before. I went through a mental checklist of every type of creature I knew, but came up empty. Could she be from another world? I doubted it. Every extraterrestrial I'd ever known had a blue hue, but not her.

I snapped out of it, woke Jason, and we headed for home. He dozed as I drove. I barely noticed the road or the traffic. All my thoughts were of the girl.

Chapter 4 REMEMBERING PURGATORY

The next day I was anxious to see Jessica. I sat on the stool behind the store counter as my DVD player ran through *Dawn of the Dead*. The flashing images still haunted me. I couldn't get the girl with the strange aura out of my head. I had to know what was happening.

I paid little attention to Jason as he busied himself with inventory, only asking him to put on Marilyn Manson. I wanted to stop thinking about the girl, yet I wanted her to come back. I realized she was growing into an obsession.

The door opened and Chris came in carrying a plastic sack. He put it on the counter.

I opened the bag and checked the contents. "Hollow points, right?" I asked.

"It's all you ever ask for. So what are you doing this weekend?" Chris crossed his arms and leaned on the counter.

"Nothing that I can think of. Why? You want to do some target practice?"

"Always man," Chris said. "You know it would be better to practice with regular bullets though."

"Yeah, but I like the way the hollow points blow shit up."

He laughed. "Yeah, I know what you mean." He quieted down and said softly: "I had this guy come in yesterday. Said you sent him. He was looking to buy a gun but he didn't have ID. He's cool, right? I told him to come back today. I figured I'd talk to you first."

"Yeah he's cool," I blurted, before realizing I didn't know who he was talking about.

Then the door opened and a short figure moved quickly down the aisle. Jessica put her coat and bag away under the counter.

Chris stood up, as always unsure of what to make of her overly happy persona. "Jessica." He acknowledged her, then looked back to me. "Well, I gotta go open up the shop. I'll call you about the target practice."

"You know I hate talking on the phone. Just come over," I said.

He stopped at the door. "I'll call you," he said with a smug smile.

"Don't call me, you asshole! Just come over!"

He laughed as the door closed behind him. He headed across the parking lot toward his shop.

"He doesn't like me much does he?" Jessica asked.

"Chris is about as thrilled with your eternally happy joy attitude as I am," I said coldly.

She slipped her hands in her back pockets and shrugged at me. The cool thing about Jessica was she didn't care what anyone thought. She killed everyone with kindness. It was hard to truly dislike her.

"So?" she said. "What about yesterday? I felt this pulse go through me right before you looked at me."

"Yesterday...last night." I struggled for the right words. I didn't want to talk about feeding with Jessica. That was private. I steered my thoughts back to the girl. "That girl had the weirdest aura I've ever seen. I couldn't get her out of my mind. Then, last night, images started flashing through my mind. It was...like dreaming with my eyes open."

"What kind of images?"

"I don't know. I can't remember. When I try I lose all memory. Chris thinks I'm having seizures."

“Can you remember anything about them?”

“One was of the Quatre, Sara in particular. Then when that girl looked at me...when our eyes met...” My head shook.

Her eyes widened a little. “Hmm. The pulse.”

“What does all that mean?”

She bit her lower lip and looked at me. I felt like she was holding something back. “Strange stories are going around the born knowing community, stories about the Quatre and...Sara.” She shivered.

“What stories?”

“Nothing really clear. Just rumors. Apparently they’ve been....experimenting.” She squinted, as if she were trying to focus on a distant picture.

“Experimenting?” I asked.

“I’m not real sure, but it’s all centered around Sara and....possibly hybrids.”

Sara. Her name brought back the fear. What was she doing now? She would be in her late teens and if she’d developed the way she wanted to, would now be greed’s creature. All she would do is want. How would the rest of them do when this full grown child with her incredible powers, started throwing a tantrum. And hybrids? The Quatre didn’t allow vampires to change incarnates into vampires because of the fear of what a hybrid would become. Yet now the Quatre was running its own experiments.

The thought hit me like lightning. “You don’t think they’d be building some kind of army do you? They have Sara, a fairy. You know how greedy fairies can be. She might want to build some crazy empire for herself.”

“No,” Jessica said. “That would be hard to miss. Someone would catch on. But they’re doing something. It’s got everyone stressed. The board is supposed to put fear in us. It was created to keep things quiet and under control. It selects its members carefully. Hania is there because he is one of the oldest of the born knowings. Kale was chosen because he is a meticulous record keeper. He’s documented every day of his life, even when he was human. I don’t know how the werewolf and incarnate were selected, but there was a reason for each of them.

“Overall we want everyone represented so the board can reflect popular opinion. The born knowings structured it like that once the dragons went extinct. We had to control our activities among humans. That was especially true among vampires, with the danger being greatest if a vampire were to infect an incarnate. What if the incarnates shifted in front of humans? What if the vampires went mad and turned every human into a vampire? The world would be chaos. If the balance of the vampire population tipped too far it could drive humans into extinction. Then how would you survive?”

She reflected on her words then continued. “We can’t allow humans to see our lives. They would kill us all. They mustn’t even know we’re here. Still, if anything were to get out of hand with the Quatre I know Hania would handle it.”

Reluctantly I extended my hand to her. I had never allowed any born knowing to look into my mind before. Some things about my life I was afraid to know. Ignorance is bliss. But now it was time.

“Here,” I said. “It’s the only way you’ll be able to see what I saw.”

She looked at my hand, shocked. “What?”

“I want you to see the pictures I saw. But only look for them. Don’t go rummaging around in there. I don’t know how long I’ve been alive. I’ve done vile things to humans. Go in and see

for yourself.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. There are reasons we vampires can’t remember things.

I felt her tiny hands close on mine. She laid her palm on my palm, with the subsequent mental intrusion. I had to fight the reflex to keep her out. I tried to pry into her mind, but it was like getting a door slammed in my face. After a few awkward moments she pulled her hand away.

I opened my eyes. Looking at her, I knew she had seen more than she’d expected.

“Some things are left better unknown,” she whispered, “and some are better left until the right time. Just as there are things you don’t want me to know, there are things I don’t want you to know.”

Why was she hiding it from me? My thoughts felt slow and confusing. Was she using a spell on me? She must be hiding something big.

Then the odor hit me, like hot rotting garbage and feces. I threw my arm up and pushed my nose into the bend of my elbow. I recognized the ugly smell immediately: a troll.

I walked quickly through the aisles looking for it. I heard Jason searching too. He’d smelled it. Only humans were immune to that stench. Trolls come from another realm—the same one where fairies originate—and they are nothing but a nuisance on earth. I found her in the back, squatting as she filled her pockets with stones. I knew her: Patti. To a human she would have looked like a small middle-aged woman but even if I hadn’t known her I would’ve recognized the rainbow aura tinged in green. I squeezed her shirt and coat collar into a knot and yanked her to her feet. She dropped the stones. They clattered across the floor.

Her face was only inches from mine. I wanted to dry heave. I towered over her. “Patti, what the fuck did I tell you? Stay the fuck out of my store!”

Her face shifted into a childish expression, but her voice was old. “Mister I don’t know what you’re talking about...”

Suddenly I had a flash of Sara, the girl with the strange aura. My body jerked. Patti stared at me, confused. She was one of a lot of trolls in our area, but they had little power, just a glamour for making themselves look like anything they wanted. But that took all their strength and never lasted long.

As she started to say something I cut her off. “Shut up! Your glamour shit is not going to work with me and you know it!” A half gurgled growl was rumbling in my chest. Trolls were kleptomaniacs and liars. I looked around to see if anything was missing. “How many times do I have to tell you to stay out of my fucking store?” I started dragging her toward the door. Her little feet struggled to keep up.

“Get that thing out of here! It fucking stinks!” Jason yelled, gagging.

Her face shifted to that of an innocent child, but it did her no good. She couldn’t fight me. I could snap her neck as easily as I might break a twig. Once I knocked her out the door her features shifted back to her truest form: sunken cheeks, huge, deep-set eyes, and an ugly mouth.

“Why did you come here, Patti?” As daylight spilled in the doorway I pulled my sunglasses out and shielded my eyes.

She got up and brushed herself off, smirking. “Hey, I was just in the neighborhood and thought...”

“No,” I snapped, “not my store.” I leaned back, gulping fresh air. “Earth. Why did you choose here, this planet? Or should I say this realm?”

She glared at me. Should she walk away? Or talk to me? Finally she said: "In my own realm everyone knows I'm there, but here, humans don't even notice me. They think I'm one of them." She shrugged her shoulders and looked defeated.

This was her way of getting me to feel sorry for her. Instead I turned from her and walked back into the store. I watched through the window as she walked away.

Jason came out of the apartment armed with lemon air freshener. "Jesus Christ, it fucking stinks in here!"

"I threw her ass out again," I said. I went to the back to help Jessica gather up the stones.

Jason sprayed the store, holding his nose.

"Just breathe through your mouth," I said.

"I'm afraid I might taste it," Jason said.

Jessica and I started laughing like crazy.

Once the stones were cleared away I returned to my station behind the counter. After a few minutes I noticed Jason was still spraying.

"Knock it off!" I shouted. "Now it smells like lemons and ass in here!"

Jason roared with laughter. Jessica giggled from the back.

As Jason joined me behind the counter I asked him: "Do you remember what it was like before you took your human form? When you were in that purgatory you guys talk about?"

"No." Jason shook his head. "Some of the incarnates remember, some don't. I only know what others have told me. They say it's like nothingness. You know like...that you exist but you don't have a form." He furrowed his brow. "I heard one of the born knowings say you can see the whole universe at the same time. Almost as if you were everywhere at once and nowhere at all, both at the same time. Once you decide where you want to go, you're born." He quieted, then whispered: "Sounds like hippy bullshit to me, but whatever it is, I went through it and will do it again."

"Humans don't have a choice," I said, as if reciting a truism. "They are automatically reborn in another human body."

"Yeah," said Jessica as she emerged from an aisle. "They don't know what hit them. Just *bam!* They're dead and the next second they're born." She looked at the portable DVD player. "Your movie is over." She turned the power off.

Jason detected a scent and frowned. "Fucking trolls. This place is going to stink for a week."

He was right. Nobody liked trolls. In the pecking order of our world trolls were at the bottom.

Jessica shuffled through the CDs and picked one by The Used. The girl with the strange aura had worn a Used hoodie. What did her music collection look like? A stupid thought. My mind seemed to linger on her more and more. What made her choose Earth? Was it her decision? And what could she be?

Chapter 5 FAILING GRAVITY

The next day was Wednesday. I was anxious to see the girl again. I hoped she would come back but I didn't want Jason to know that. Jessica called and said she wouldn't be in. Jason was in and out, stalking back and forth like a tiger between the apartment and the store.

We'd just had a dusting of snow when I saw Chris coming across the parking lot carrying a flat rectangular box.

He opened the door, came straight to the counter, and laid the box down.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Jason, come over here," Chris called.

Jason came from the back where he'd been rearranging books.

Chris took the top off the box. "Your gun came in." He grinned at Jason.

"Oh! Fuck yeah!" Jason picked up the enormous weapon.

"Holy shit, Jason!" I said. "Are you trying to overcompensate for something?"

"Desert Eagle 500," Chris beamed.

Jason unzipped his hoodie, pulled out the .45 Glock he kept in his shoulder holster, and replaced it with his new toy. He walked back to the apartment smiling ear-to-ear.

"I picked something up for you too," Chris reached inside his coat, pulled out a shoulder holster, and handed it to me.

"Wow man. Thanks!" I said.

I stripped off my hoodie, put the holster on, then pulled my Colt .45 from under the counter. It fit perfectly. As I was pulling my hoodie down over the holstered gun Jason reappeared, bouncing down the aisles, crowing: "Oh hell yeah! This is fucking awesome!" Chris laughed at him. Jason came around the corner, drew the gun, and pointed it at my head.

"Jason! Put that shit away!" I shouted.

Jason just laughed. He held the gun up, examining it.

"Oh! I almost forgot." Chris pulled something black from his pocket and tossed it at me.

I caught it in midair, opened my hand, and saw a silencer. "Chris! Holy...How did you get this?"

He smirked. "I have my ways."

Working well below the edge of the counter where no one could see, I started fitting the silencer onto my gun.

"It'll fit," Chris assured me.

Once I saw he was right I took the silencer back off and slipped it in the pocket of my sweatshirt. I watched as Jason kept practicing his quick draw.

"Cut that shit out before a customer comes in." I turned to Chris. "For real dude, this is the coolest shit ever. Pick out as many CDs as you want. No charge."

Chris spent an hour in the CD racks. When he left I assured him we were still on for going to the firing range.

Having a gun close under my hoodie gave me a feeling of comfort and power—like I could take care of whatever came up. With all the weird stuff happening with the Quatre, I felt I needed that. Who knew what kind of crap they might pull. What if they learned that Jessica had caught on to something? Now I had protection beyond my normal vampire powers. I wanted to try out the silencer as soon as I possibly could.

Later an angel incarnate came in looking for Jessica. Angel incarnates could restore life to the dying, heal the sick, or impose a calming effect on anyone nearby. This one's golden aura flowed from his mouth as he spoke and I felt the soothing reach of his powers. I didn't like it, preferring my normal state of mind.

He was immortal like me. I envied his luck. Angels went through life absent any fear of death, and without all the crazy diet restrictions we vampires had to endure. True, to exercise their powers they had to give up a small bit of their lives, but when they did no one hated them for it.

Demons were the exact opposite. They could influence humans to do evil and they could steal someone's life, adding it to theirs. Angels and demons did not shift or grow old. Their bodies and facial features constantly evolved. They were as old as the earth and could tell you from firsthand experience Darwin's theory was almost entirely correct. Their strength was near that of vampires and werewolves, but it was not the same kind of strength. Though we vampires were considered to be leeches on society, we were also stronger, faster, and quicker to heal. We would always be near the top of the chain of command.

Chris's gift and the distraction of the angel made me forget what day it was. When it struck me, I wondered if the girl with the strange aura would show. Why be so nervous about it? I wondered. What does it matter?

My mind careened back and forth between hopeful expectation and my attempt to not even care. Then I noticed my hands were starting to tremble. It was about a half hour till closing time. As the winter sun set early I relished the darkness, but this only made me want to see her more.

My mind picked at my memory of her as if it were a scab. What was she? The question gnawed at my thoughts, along with a feeling I couldn't fathom—I wanted to see her because I wanted to touch her. I was physically attracted to her in a way that made little sense to me.

Jason's music had been droning on all day. Finally, I decided to change the CD. I chose a mix CD I had created. I was hoping a bunch of familiar favorites would take my mind off her. Though the first song from Muse got my head bobbing, it failed to erase the girl from my thoughts.

Every time a car pulled up outside my heart raced a little faster, but it was never her. Most of the drivers were heading for the coffee shop next door.

I watched as two guys from the tattoo parlor did skateboard tricks until they both grew tired and cold. With the sun gone, I removed my dark glasses. I looked across at Chris's window and saw him at his counter, eyeing a small screen TV.

Jason appeared, grinning. "You really do have it bad for her, don't you?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked, busying myself, straightening up the counter area.

"All day you've been watching and waiting for that girl. Maybe you like her a lot more than you let on." Jason didn't take his eyes off my face. I didn't look at him. If I'd been able to blush I would have. Nothing could have embarrassed me more than the weakness of personal affection, not after the things I'd done and seen.

"What's it to you?" I ran my fingers through my hair, brushing it out of my face. I tried to look stern.

"I just like to give you a hard time." He smiled.

"Yeah, you and Chris both."

He stood up straight and stared out the window. I dug through some CDs, searching for a Marilyn Manson album.

"Hey, look, your girlfriend is here," Jason said.

I looked up just in time to see the front door open. The bell rang. It was her.

I tried to act smooth and composed, but my heart was beating too fast. I controlled my breathing and felt Jason's stare. As I put a CD on the tray my hands started shaking. I pressed "play." Finally I had the courage to look up at her.

Her dress and demeanor were the same as they had been, but the red in her aura burned bright today. Maybe she was close to knowing. Her aura extended at least a foot all around her. She kept her head down and her eyes to the floor. She walked to the counter, stopped, and shoved her hands into her sweatshirt pockets.

"Um, hi. I...uh...was in here a couple of days ago...um" Her eyes flickered upward and she looked at me. She glanced toward Jason, then down again.

"Yes," I said, "I remember you. You came back for the books." I tried not to sound bitter, hopeful, or eager. All I wanted was to keep my voice even and to ignore Jason's perpetual smirk. I knew it was there without even looking.

The girl blushed deep red. Her aura looked solid enough to touch. What was wrong with me? I'd never felt this way toward anyone. I had to know what this girl was before it drove me insane. My chest felt tight and my stomach seemed to be sinking.

"They're back there," I said. "I can show you if you'd like."

She looked up at me, nodded, then nervously glanced about. I led her through the crowded aisles to the area in back where the born knowing met. We had the books on one side of us, and the herbs, incense, and witchcraft paraphernalia on the other. The smell of the herbs was overpowering. I took her to the shelf.

"Right here. This is where we stock new arrivals. We have two new ones about reincarnation and old souls. That is what you're interested in, right?" I looked at her as her eyes skimmed across the titles. From this angle I could admire her profile. She had an elegant look. Her thin nose was the perfect complement to her slender features. Her lips were full but not overdone. She wore no makeup.

"Thanks." As she reached for one of the books on the top shelf, I noticed the tattoos. It seemed odd that such a shy girl would have any tattoos. After all, they draw attention, and the rest of her look and manner seemed calculated to keep her anonymous. But there it was: letters tattooed on her knuckles. She was leafing through a book so I couldn't quite catch what the tattoos said.

She was shaky and a sheen of sweat covered her forehead. Was I making her nervous? Should I walk away? I couldn't bring myself to leave her. I just kept staring. She must've been wondering exactly what kind of freak I was. My chest tightened. I had to say something.

"Uh, you know, a group meets here on the weekends to discuss the things you're reading about. I'm sure they would be glad to have you. Actually...uh...I go to all the meetings. I live in back of the store." I pointed to the door leading to our apartment. Why was I telling her that? I felt so awkward.

"Ok." She blushed again and looked at the floor. Her book was still open.

"I'm sorry." I extended my right hand. "My name is Verloren Fagan. My friends and I own the store."

She extended her trembling right hand. When our hands touched, I felt the pulse, and saw a flash of images. All of this sensory stimulation happened too quickly for me to keep up, but the last image stayed with me: the child fairy, Sara, with something on her hands. Then I lost it.

It occurred to me Jessica hadn't mentioned these flashes. Was she hiding that from me? I looked at the girl. She stared at our hands, her breath short, and her eyes widening. Slowly she

looked up at me. The pull was as strong as gravity. I felt as if I might fall into her. I had to lean back.

“Sorry,” I said.

Her eyelids fluttered and she looked at our hands. Finally she introduced herself. “Uh...Ash Nicely.”

“Ash Nicely,” I said, recovering enough composure to speak. “How unusual. Is that your given name?” I felt the pull deep in my chest.

“It’s Ashley, but I go by Ash,” she said. “I’m a big fan of scary movies. *Evil Dead* is one of my faves.” She smiled shyly. We kept looking at each other’s hands.

Her aura was thickening, spreading. Finally I saw the letters tattooed on her fingers. I turned her right hand up to read the letters on the knuckles. My white skin looked hideous next to hers.

“Vamp...” I said with a dumbfounded look on my face.

“...ires,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Vampires,” she said.

If there’d been any color in my face, it would’ve drained out then. I was still holding her hand. My trembling returned.

She put the book under her arm, held both of her hands out, showing the full word across all eight knuckles: V-A-M-P-I-R-E-S.

“Big scary movie fan.” She lowered her hands, then grasped the book.

In the background Marilyn Manson sang “If I was your vampire...” I laughed out loud.

“How ironic,” I said. When I saw her puzzled look, I added: “I...I...mean that song and your tattoo.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s a great CD.”

I heard Jason. “Ah man, not again!”

Then the smell hit me. Troll! Not now! Surely Ash would smell it! The odor wouldn’t be as strong to her because she didn’t know what she was yet. Self-awareness adds an edge to our perceptions.

And here came Patti, walking up the aisle toward us. Patti knew the girl was still human and counted on that fact to protect her from any manhandling I had in mind. She stopped in front of me, put her hand on her hip, and said: “Hey, Verloren, I need a little help finding a book.”

My breathing grew rapid and shallow. Patti was enjoying this. I glared at her. It took everything in me not to kill her right there. I held my breath and clenched my jaw. “Why don’t you have Jason help you, Patti?”

“He looked a little busy so I thought I would ask you.”

“I’m kinda busy right now too.”

“I see. Too busy for me,” she said.

I turned to Ash. “Sorry. I’ll be right back.”

Ash nodded. She glanced at Patti, scrunched her eyebrows together, and held her breath.

I grabbed Patti’s wrist and pulled her down the aisle with as little commotion as possible. When we were far enough away I swung Patti around roughly in front of me and hissed: “What the fuck do you think you’re doing? I told you to stay out. Now get the fuck out of my store and if I ever catch you in here again I will send you to the next world. Do you understand?”

She stared stupidly at me.

“Let me be as clear as crystal. If I see you in here again, I will kill you.” I pointed to the door. “Now get out.”

She smiled at me. Then turned and walked to the front of the store. She waved at Jason, calling, “Bye Jason. See ya later.” Then she left.

I heard Jason grumble. “Fucking bitch. Where’s the air freshener?”

I walked back to Ash. She looked at me then back to the book. She’d smelled the troll. “I don’t want to be rude,” she said, “but your friend...”

“She stinks,” I blurted.

She laughed, covering her mouth. “Sorry.”

“No it’s all right. She’s not a friend. More of a nuisance.”

I wanted her to know. I wanted her to find out what she was. I wanted her to be in my life. If the Quatre wouldn’t let me be with her, I wanted at least to be around her. I couldn’t understand this attraction, but I knew what I wanted. I would help her learn about herself, then she might learn who I was without being shocked by it. That was my hope.

I looked up at the shelves and recalled what we’d been saying before the Troll arrived. “Uh, like I was saying, if you’re interested in those workshops, they hold them here every weekend. You’re more than welcome to attend.”

“Sure, I’d like that.” Her eyes met mine—magnet to metal.

“How bout I take your book and ring it up,” I said. “We have some brochures up there with all the information. They have the dates and times.” She walked in front. I followed, inhaling her scent. She was still human. It made my mouth water.

That’s when I had noticed the music had stopped. I looked over at the stereo. Jason was messing with it. He looked at me with a devious smile. I shook my head at him. I was about to say something when the music started up again. A dramatic love song. Jason cranked up the volume. He turned, tilted his head back, put a hand on his chest, extending the other toward Ash, then he sang as badly and loudly as he could. I growled. Jason got out of my way. He laughed as I shut it off, then disappeared down an aisle.

I turned to Ash, and found her blushing and giggling. She watched me as she covered her mouth. Her laughter stopped. We stared at each other.

Finally I broke the tension. “Sorry about that. Jason can be a goofball.” We could still hear his faint voice singing the love song.

When we finally reached the counter, I gave her the brochures. I looked at the clock. “I hope you don’t mind, but it’s closing time,” I said. “I should lock up when you leave. I’ll follow you to the door.” The pull of her scent and her aura were almost too much for me. I wanted to grab her and pull her close. I wanted to preserve her scent. I blinked and shook my head trying to snap out of this bizarre trance.

When we reached the door I raced ahead and held it open for her.

“See you Saturday,” she said, waving the flyer. She gave me a bashful smile and headed for her car.

“I’ll be here.”

She looked over her shoulder and smiled at me again, this time in mid-blush. As the door closed I turned off the “open” sign. I watched as she fished in her pockets for her keys. I locked the front door. With her back still toward me I lifted my right hand to my face and inhaled. Her scent was still there where we’d touched. It was too much.

I turned to see Jason leering. “You’re going to follow her, aren’t you?”

I walked past him toward the door to the apartment. He followed. I hurried to my bedroom and grabbed my leather jacket. As I came out clutching my sunglasses, he spoke in an entirely different tone: “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I just have to know what she is. It’s driving me nuts.” I jogged down the hall.

“You want to know what she is? Or is it more that you want her? Curiosity killed the cat, you know!” Jason called after me.

Out back I jumped on my black crotch rocket and it roared to life. As I came around to the front lot I saw her car pulling out. I followed.

Chapter 6 WINTER KISS

It wasn't that cold for early December. I lay down on the tank of the bike trying to block the wind. My sunglasses protected my eyes from the cold air's sting and my obsession kept the rest of me from freezing. I just hoped it wouldn't snow.

I followed her out of the city and across the Ohio state line. Soon after she pulled off the highway and onto a country road. Hanging back, I shut off my headlight. She turned onto a winding road that followed a river. The area was wooded and the houses were few and far between. The darkness helped me remain invisible, but it did the same with her. I lost sight of her car. I followed the twists and turns and came upon a straight stretch. That's when I spotted the mobile home. It stood close to the edge of the road and had a small detached garage. Her car sat in the driveway. There she was, nearing the front door of the mobile home. She looked toward me, confused, and clutched her shopping bag. What she saw was a dark figure on a lightless motorcycle riding past her on a December night.

Even in the dark I could see her aura. My heart felt like it was going to pound out of my chest. I slowed the bike and continued down the road for about a mile. Finally I turned around, drove back about half the distance to her place, then killed the engine. From there I coasted quietly until I was only a few hundred feet from her trailer. I stopped and pushed the bike into the woods. I pushed my sunglasses up on top of my head, shoving my hair back too.

The leafless trees stretched their branches high, their leaves disintegrating beneath my feet. I followed a steep slope down through the woods to a cleared, level area. In the midst of the clearing lay the remains of a bonfire and a few lonely beer cans. Just beyond the clearing was a river.

To my right the land went back up toward the trailer. A steep slope with steps led up to the garage. The lights in the trailer were on and a lone light bulb shone above the back door. It was low wattage and most of the light came from the moon filtering through the tree branches.

Suddenly the back door opened. I heard her voice. It was higher pitched than it had been in the store and she spoke quite softly. It was the tone one might use with a child. Somewhere nearby a dog growled. I turned to run toward the river before realizing: it was the dog she was talking to. The dog had heard me and now it ran toward me.

Ash yelled out: "Pogo, stop!"

I ran up a tree trunk so fast her human eyes couldn't catch it, but the dog did. There he was at the base of the tree, barking. He was going to bust me.

"Pogo, get back here!" She started for the stairs. "Would you leave those stupid raccoons alone!"

I looked down at the dog that had doomed me—a fifteen-pound Boston Terrier strutting as if he were many times his size. The dog only did what came naturally: he defended his owner. I looked at another tree maybe ten feet from me and leapt to it. The dog followed, barking.

Ash trotted toward the dog. "Come on. Don't make me carry you back into the house. Do your business and get moving, mister. It's cold."

She came so close I could smell her. I wondered if it was her scent that drew me. I held my breath as she reached down to grab the dog. At that point I started to move, though I had no idea why. My heart beat so hard I thought she might hear it. I started silently down the tree. It was impulse. My body wanted to be near her. Her aura lit the night air around her. It looked like a

solid, individual entity. I wanted to touch it. Mindlessly I stretched my arm toward her. A deep ache filled my chest. I exhaled silently, stifling a moan. I couldn't fight her magnetism. It was physically pulling me. As she scolded the dog I crouched on a branch about five feet above her. I grasped a branch to steady me, and stretched my other arm toward her. Was her aura solid? That's what I wanted to know.

The dog let out a yelp. Ash glanced up in my direction. Terror crossed her face and she let out a blood-curdling scream. She turned to run, tripped over a tree root, and fell into leaves and mud. I jumped from the tree and reached out to help her.

The dog jumped on me. I thought he would bite, but instead he hopped up on his hind legs and pawed at me—all bark, no bite.

"Ash, please," I cried. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you or spy on you. I'm not really a creep..." The dog lost interest in me and my ramble. He ran about in the leaves.

She looked up at me. "Verloren!?"

I felt the pulse—saw the flash of pictures—then back to reality.

Ash looked at me from a confusion of leaves and twigs.

"Please don't freak out," I said. "I'm not a perv or peeping tom...I uh"

"Oh my God, you scared the shit out of me! I thought you..." She stopped herself.

The dog ran up to her and began licking her face. She pushed him back down. Then he began jumping up to greet me again.

I knew what she thought. It's bad enough to find a stalker in your tree, even worse if he looks like me. I felt sure she would call the police, or, at the very least, tell me to leave. I would go and never know what it was about her.

My hand was still hanging, extended toward her. She grabbed it. Contact. Pulse. The ground trembled. She froze. Our eyes met. My whole body jerked as my mind flooded with pictures. Though the images didn't seem related, they created a sense of motion. They ended with her, yet this vision was different from the girl in front of me.

My mind cleared and I suddenly realized her hand was like ice. I helped her to her feet and plucked a leaf from her hair. I had to fight off the urge to sniff it. I held it by the stem.

"I'm sorry," I blurted. "I know this must be the last thing that you wanted: a guy who looks like me hanging out in your tree in the dark." I couldn't meet her eyes. "I'll go now. Don't worry. I won't bother you again."

Turning away took all of my will. It was like trying to deny the pull of gravity. I had to escape her orbit and all that went with it: the flashes, images, and strange episodes. It would be better for Jessica to help her. My presence was doing her no good at all. Or so I thought.

"Wait!" she called to me.

I stopped walking. I did not turn back and I knew I was invisible in the darkness. I lifted the leaf and inhaled, catching her scent again. My chest felt close to bursting.

"I'm not saying you have to leave," she called through the shadows. "I thought you were my ex. He's kinda crazy. I've been hiding ever since I left him. If he ever finds out I live out here, he'll hurt me or... worse."

I dropped the leaf, then turned to look at her.

She had her hands inside her sleeves with her fists under her chin as if she were the one apologizing. Then her face grew perplexed. "What are you doing out here? Was that you on the bike that drove by?" There was no fear in her questions.

Just tell her the truth, my brain screamed.

“Um, well...I’m not real good at this stuff...I’m...” I paused, trying to find the right words. “I’m really fascinated by you. I mean...”

She looked down. Only because I could see the light from her aura could I detect the fact that she was blushing. What the hell was I doing? Confessing? Declaring my feelings? Or had I been lured into something? In my ignorance I tried to blunder on, but I couldn’t get anywhere. “Uh...there is some stuff you might find out...”

Her arms closed tightly around her chest. Her aura flickered with her shivering.

I had already revealed more than I meant to about myself. Now I found myself breathing: “Your aura...”

Her head shot up. When she looked at me I couldn’t breathe. Her eyelids fluttered. “What do you know about all of that stuff? All those books I’ve been reading...you know more don’t you?”

I turned away from her stare, and saw her dog sniffing here and there. I let that distract me as I collected my thoughts. Finally I admitted it. “Yes,” I said. “I know too much.”

“Could you come inside and tell me about some of that stuff? Because right now I’m freezing my butt off.” She laughed through chattering teeth.

“I wouldn’t mind, if you don’t mind.”

I felt as if I was starting a long journey with no turning back. I hadn’t wanted to get too close to her. Yet I’d come here. And now I would cross the threshold into her home. If I got too close to her could I stop myself? Stop myself from doing what? I didn’t know.

As she opened the door to the mobile home she asked: “You’re not a murderer or a rapist, are you?” Her dog dodged past her, almost knocking her over.

“That would be a good excuse for turning me away,” I said. “After all, it’s not like you know me that well.”

“I’ve been through enough shit in my life that nothing scares me anymore,” she said. “You won’t do anything worse than the stuff my ex threatens to do to me.” She laughed and shook her head.

“I promise no harm will come to you.” As she turned to see me in the light I pulled my sunglasses down over my eyes.

I was still on the steps and there in the doorway she was higher than me. It made me feel small and it dawned on me I must be chasing her because she was something important. I felt as if she were my superior.

She looked at me confused. “Do you always wear your sunglasses at night?” Something occurred to her, making her laugh. “You know the song?”

“Ah yes, I’ve heard it. Jason sings it all the time.” I smiled, then looked to my feet. “My eyes are very sensitive to light.”

“Is it because of...um...your...condition?” she asked. “I mean, you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want. I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable. You talk like you think...that I might think...you’re a monster. I don’t think that at all. I think you look...um...handsome.” She looked down at her feet and bit her lip.

I was shocked. She hardly seemed like the type to lay out her feelings for just anyone. That made it harder on me now. Now I knew the attraction was mutual. I was the one who should have put a stop to it. I should have walked away. But I couldn’t. It was her aura that drew me there.

“No it doesn’t make me uncomfortable. I just can’t tell you everything about it yet.” I wanted so much to tell her every detail.

She looked at me. “Ok, let’s go inside where it’s warmer. I want to hear more about this reincarnation stuff.” She led me in.

I tried to stay close so I could catch her scent again. I needed to snap out of it. I was going to get one of us killed. I needed control. My chest ached from want and that scared the shit out of me. How could I satisfy it? Did I want to hold her? Kiss her? Fuck her? Bite her? I shuddered at the last thought.

It was a typical mobile home, not fancy, and lacking some of the niceties that made a place a home. Through the back door we entered a small kitchen. It looked lonely with its little table and four chairs. An old microwave had the counters all to itself. Her living room had a tiny television, a stereo on the floor, stacks of CDs, and a lone couch. A couple of pillows lay on the floor by the couch. There were no pictures or any decorations at all.

The dog bounced over to one of the pillows and flopped down.

Past the living room was a hallway. There were two doors along the side, then an open doorway at the end, revealing an old desk, a computer, and a secretary’s chair.

The hallway walls were as bare as those in the living room. I saw no trinkets and the few shelves were empty—as if a bachelor lived there.

“Sorry it’s kind of empty. When I left my ex I kinda just grabbed what I needed—what little was mine. I got a couple of pieces of furniture from friends. This couch folds out. It’s where I sleep. I’ve been working overtime to get some money for furniture.” Her tone was sad and apologetic.

“Its home,” I said. “That’s all that matters.”

“Would you like some hot chocolate?” She nodded toward the kitchen table.

“Uh, sure.”

In the kitchen she got two mugs from a cupboard and stood on tiptoes to reach a box of hot chocolate mix. When she noticed me still standing in the living room, she said, “Make yourself at home.”

I sorted through the piles of CDs. She had many of the same ones I had, even Marilyn Manson. I found a Death Cab for Cutie CD, slipped it in, and pressed “play.” I kept the volume low.

The dog looked up at me, his little head cocked to one side. Ash came in holding two mugs. She handed one to me. I took it with both hands. She cupped her hands around her mug and sipped. I did the same. Human food didn’t bother me. I could eat and drink like any human, but it didn’t nurture me. For that I needed human blood. Without it I would starve. I usually stayed away from human food and drink, if only to avoid having to use the toilet so often. It was a waste of time. But this was a case where I accepted what was offered because it was Ash who was doing the offering.

“So, about old souls and reincarnation...” Ash said, alighting on the couch, as she motioned for me to sit with her.

We sat on opposite ends of her couch, facing each other.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Uh, usually I would have you attend one of the workshops. One of the girls would go through all this stuff with you. But I can do it.” *Stupid*, I thought. *What am I even doing here? I should finish the hot chocolate and go. Let Jessica work with her.* Instead I started to talk. It was as if I couldn’t help myself. “There’s a theory that souls are kind of...recycled. That, like human bodies, souls are born and souls die. According to the theory there are young souls, middle-aged souls, and old souls. A soul won’t necessarily be at the same stage as a body,

but eventually both will die. You can tell how old a person's soul is by their personality traits. Haven't you read about this?" I cocked one questioning eyebrow.

"Yes. This has to do with reincarnation, doesn't it?" Her eyes met mine.

"It's deeper than that," I said, licking my lips. My mouth felt dry, as if my words were evaporating. "This is what you would learn at the workshops. It's not just reincarnation of human souls. Some souls are from other planets, other realms, places almost like...parallel universes. The belief is, if a person seeks out this information, that person is probably an incarnate and is likely to be an old soul. It's as though they carry a subconscious wisdom, maybe from their former lives, that tells them their end is coming." As I lifted my eyes to hers, my chest tightened. It was hard to breathe.

"Really?" She looked down into her mug. "I read a book about that. When I read the chapter about old souls I thought I was going crazy. It was as if every description was written about me. But I thought if I told anyone they would think I was crazy. So...I'm an old soul that is about to die off?" She looked confused. "And my soul might not be human?"

I wasn't supposed to tell her but who would know? It wasn't as if she were shifting right now. "No," I said, "your soul isn't human. Most likely your soul is that of a creature of some totally different species. You could be anything. From anywhere."

She stared at me. "A creature? How do you know all of this? Are you an old soul too?"

"Let's just say that I am here to help you find out what you are. I can't tell you much about myself. It wouldn't help and you probably wouldn't believe me anyway." Too bad I couldn't produce real fangs; they might make her believe. All I had was normal-looking teeth that could easily cut through human flesh. Fangs were just another myth. The only things I could show her were my strength and speed—far greater than those of any human.

"So what am I then?" Her voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

"I don't know. But I think I can help you find out. I've seen them do it in the workshops. I could come out here Saturday and help you with it."

"What's 'it'?" she asked.

"It's kind of like a process of guided meditation. It works best in a comfortable environment where you feel safe."

I watched as she ran her finger across the edge of her mug. Jessica was going to be pissed at me for going this far. I noticed Ash's aura had shrunk into a concentrated rainbow with red outlining her body.

As if reading my mind, she said: "Earlier you mentioned my aura. Are you a psychic? I've read about that stuff..."

I cut her off. "I'll make a deal with you. I'll come out Saturday and help you find out what your soul is. If we do figure it out, I will tell you everything about me—what I am, what I know..." I smiled at her, while thinking: *Why not just put a bullet in your head before the Quatre does, Verloren.* For an instant I saw Sara's child-like face. I shivered.

She gave me a blushing smile. "Ok. I'll take the weekend off, and we'll see if we can figure it out on Saturday. I feel like I need to know you better. I don't know why, but it feels like you're...important to me."

Her words were both thrilling and scary. I tried to look stern and said: "You can't confide this information to anyone. There are other things you need to know."

She nodded.

I sat looking at the floor, hoping she didn't think I was a nut case. "Some people believe once you find out what your soul is you can shape shift to that entity at will."

She laughed, then stopped when she saw I was not laughing with her. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

“I’m not.”

“And it’s true that I could be one of these...uh...beings?”

“We can start trying to find out on Saturday.”

“Saturday,” she breathed. She looked up at me. “Right. Well, we’ll do that. I’ll make sure I have off. Speaking of which, I have to go to work soon. I work graveyard shift at a crappy factory.” She laughed again, this time to relieve the tension. She stood up, took my mug, and walked into the kitchen. I got up to leave. I inhaled deeply. The whole place was filled with her scent. She sat the mugs on the kitchen table. I walked to the door, keeping my gaze fixed straight ahead. I was afraid of what would happen if we made eye contact again.

She followed, then reached in front of me and touched the doorknob. She swung around and faced me. I kept my eyes averted and assumed she was opening the door for me. I almost ran into her and had to grab her shoulders to keep from knocking her down.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to run over you.” I looked into her eyes. *What am I doing?* I thought. Her magnetic pull was tearing my insides apart. Her scent seemed to pulsate in time with my heart and I heard the pounding in my ears. I should’ve let go, but I couldn’t.

She raised her hands and took off my sunglasses. I squinted, mostly from habit. The lights weren’t bright by the door. I kept a hold on her shoulders. Why didn’t I let go? I looked into her eyes—that pulse again. My breaths came fast and loud.

She put one icy hand on the side of my neck, leaned into me, and pressed her cold lips to mine. The flash of images startled me and I lurched into the kiss. The last image was of Kale hunched over Ash. Then I saw nothing. She squeezed me.

Jason was right. This is what I wanted. Her. All of her. Everything about her.

Her whole body felt cold, lips, hands, face, even her breath. Her kiss was like mint on my tongue. I brought my trembling hands to her face and gently pushed her back. I rested my forehead against hers.

My breathing was out of control and my heart was beating so fast I thought it might explode. The pull in my chest went beyond ache. It was searing pain.

She looked straight at me, but I could not bring myself to look back at her. The kiss had proved too much for me. *I can’t do this*, I thought. *She’s not a vampire. I’ll end up having to kill her*. As I tried to push away she kept her arms around me.

“We can’t do this,” I said, stepping back. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to upset you.” It was all I could do to keep from running out the door.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t normally do that. You probably have a girlfriend.” She blushed, dropping her hands, but they stopped at my waist, her fingers resting on my hips.

“No,” I said quickly. “That’s not it at all. It’s just that...there are some rules...made by people you’ll learn about. We can’t be together. We’re different. You’ll learn how and why soon enough.”

Her hand slid up to my gun in its holster. “What’s that?” she asked in confusion.

I looked down at her hand, then into her eyes. “It’s a gun. I carry it for protection. What we’re talking about is dangerous stuff. What I’ve told you should never be repeated. I probably shouldn’t have told you at all. We can’t change that, but if certain folks were to find out, they might want to harm me...even kill me.”

She let go of my side, and bit her lip. “Is this the same people that would tell us we can’t be together? Am I in trouble too?”

“Yes,” I said, “but as long as you don’t tell anyone about this you’ll be safe.” I took both of her hands and brought them back up to my face. When I saw the tattoos on her knuckles again I almost wanted to laugh. Her skin was so cold...she had to be cold-blooded. I laid a kiss onto her hands and looked into her eyes for approval. She blushed. Staring into her face, I needed every ounce of will power to keep from kissing her again. My mind and my body were at war, one saying, “Go!” while the other said: “Stay!”

“I really have to go,” I said.

“Yeah,” she mumbled. “Me too. I think I don’t like these people you’ve been talking about—the ones with the rules.”

“If you knew what I was, Ash, you would not like me either.” I separated myself from her, and it felt like skin tearing. I winced, then covered it by saying: “Saturday at noon then?”

“Noon’s fine,” she said, “and you can park in the driveway.” She gave me a shy smile as she handed me my sunglasses. “Verloren, I don’t think there is anything you could be that I wouldn’t like.”

I pushed the sunglasses back into her hands. “Keep them. I have another pair.” I paused and looked at her. “You might be sorely surprised once you find out what I really am.” With that I rushed out the door.

I ran to my bike, gulping night air in an attempt to get her scent out of my head. I climbed on, started it, then sped toward Dayton. I would make it there and back home before dawn. Not that I needed to hide from the sun. I just didn’t want to hear Jason complain about me feeding alone. He’d done it himself on occasion, and right then I needed to feed. Ash had left me ravenous, and not just for food. I would give the Dayton police something to keep them busy. It would be a night filled with Goths, metal heads, and punks. I knew the club, the people, and when I should strike.

This was going to be messy.

Chapter 7

THE WAR

It was early morning before I made it home. I hoped that would be for the best. I assumed Jason would be asleep. I pulled my bike into its usual spot next to Jason's. Fully fed, I felt better...almost giddy.

I had left the bodies in two different alleys far from where I'd picked them up. They were two brunettes. I'd had fun with both of them and considered staying long enough to take a nap, but figured I should dump the bodies quickly and get out of town. I wanted to get back before Jason woke up. I'd fed in a rundown house, leaving a bloody mess. I'd taken only enough time to shower and rinse off the bodies.

As I walked toward the back door of the apartment, my vampire ears caught the sound of the television. I entered as quietly as I could. Jason's snores came from the living room. I crept down the hallway and went straight toward my bedroom. I didn't bother looking in on Jason. I knew the picture: sprawled on the couch, remote in hand, as some reality crap played out on the screen. Why was I sneaking around? I don't know. It's not like I answered to him.

As my hand caught the doorknob I heard Jason stir.

"Hey," he croaked.

I stood still.

"Where the fuck you been?" He sat up. "Why didn't you answer your cell?"

I stood by the door, facing away from him. "You know I hate talking on the phone."

I heard him inhale. He smelled the kill. "So did you kill her or make her?" he demanded.

"Neither." I spun around to face him.

"Hey, asshole don't get pissy with me. I'm not the one who went out and ate alone. Selfish dick!" He reached for his cigarettes and lighter. He lit up, took a deep drag, and blew the smoke upward in a straight line. Then he looked at me. "So what happened?"

"What? You need to know everything? What are you, my fucking shrink? Are you going to ask if I want to talk about it?" I folded my arms across my chest and glared at him.

"Hey man, don't take it personal. You've got to admit, you've been acting pretty fucking weird since she showed up. I just want to make sure I don't get killed by the Quatre because of your ass."

When he mentioned the Quatre I saw the flipbook of images again, ending with Sara as a little girl. There was something important in that picture but my mind couldn't grasp it. Then the picture blurred and I wasn't sure if I'd seen anything. The flashing images were starting to piss me off. I growled and clenched my jaw.

Jason heard my growl, rolled his eyes, and flicked the ash from his cigarette. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

Finally I said: "Nothing happened. I went to her house. I talked with her about the same stuff she would've learned if she'd come to the workshop." I stopped, hoping that would cover it. I understood Jason's intentions, but I wasn't going to tell him everything. Ash had affected him too and I wasn't sure how. I just knew his aura had taken on a strange tone. It was as if he were radiating corruption.

My answer only sparked more interest. "Really?" he said. "You talked to her? And she knows? Then what is she?"

He was jealous. It had taken me a moment to see that, but the churning colors in his aura could have no other explanation. I didn't know why. "She understands that she is an incarnate, but she doesn't know much about what kind of incarnate she is. She's decided to have a private meditation session on Saturday. I'm doing it at her place. After that I'm hoping she'll understand." I closed my eyes, lowered my head, and tried to envision what she could be.

Suddenly I understood Jason's jealousy. Just as vampires were encouraged to only mate with other vampires, the same was true for incarnates. It made life simpler, eliminating the need for secrecy. There were only a few female incarnates in our part of the world and the ones that weren't already taken had rejected Jason. He fucked up with every woman he found, but that didn't change the fact he was looking for a mate.

"Do you think I could tag along?" Jason asked, taking another drag off his cigarette.

My heart sank. I had strong feelings for Ash and I felt like ripping his head off for even thinking of her like that. It was like a blow to the stomach. Yet I knew he was right. Jason wanted a partner. By law she was right for him, not me. I was supposed to continue fucking and killing humans as needed. After all, how could someone actually care about a monster like me?

"Sure. Why not?"

I kept telling myself it would be better this way, but I knew that wasn't true. It wasn't just the girl. I felt as if my life hung in the balance. Letting Jason have her would be like letting him take my life away.

I sat on the edge of the couch, my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. I looked at my battered boots. The laces were barely holding them together.

"So, you dickhead," he said, "you have to tell me what you did. You smell like food and pussy. Is that why I couldn't come along? You know I don't want your sloppy seconds." He nudged me, laughed, then took another drag off his cigarette.

I continued to stare at the floor. I couldn't tell him the truth. What I'd done with Ash was inappropriate. I couldn't take it back though, and I didn't want to. Ash was the girl I'd been looking for, someone who could share in my miserable life, someone who could relate to who and what I was. Yet I knew it was impossible. *Maybe I should give up on finding anyone like me,* I thought. *Start looking for a human and ask the Quatre for permission to make her a partner. I just wish it could be Ash.*

"Well?" Jason nudged me again. He craved the juicy sex story. He was such a vulgar jerk, yet he had a chance with her and I didn't. I felt like punching him in his smug little face.

If they wound up together I would move away from here. I would have to. It would be like salt on a wound. I knew I should give up any thought of Ash. But right at that moment Jason wanted the story, so I told him:

"I went to Dayton and picked up two girls at a goth club. They were staying in a rundown house. I had a three-way with them and drank them dry. I dumped their bodies in two different alleys. That'll give the police something to do." I smiled to myself. That would keep Jason's mind busy.

He giggled like a schoolgirl. "You are a twisted bastard. You talk about it the same way humans would talk about going to the store to buy groceries."

"That's what it is," I said. "Going to the grocery store."

Jason always loved the gory details. I didn't feel one way or another about them. I wasn't sure what was worse, me not caring about the people I killed, or him enjoying the recap.

"I'm going to take a nap before we open the store," I said, getting up from the couch.

“Yeah, I would be tired too if I’d tapped two chicks in one night. Lucky bastard. Wish I had control over peoples’ minds. I would be getting all kinds of ass up in here.” He leaned back into the couch, propping his feet up on the coffee table.

I walked to my room, my head lowered to hide my anger. Once I’d shut my bedroom door I leaned back against it, looked at the four-poster bed, then saw my reflection. I was a crazed monster.

That’s when I realized I could never let Jason have her. He only wanted to get laid. He didn’t care for her and never would. Jason was incapable of ever having the rooted feelings I had for her. All he saw was a pretty face on an incarnate. He would never want anything deeper than that. I didn’t care about the law. I wanted her and I would not let her fall into Jason’s hands.

I stared at myself, hands trembling, fingers curled into white knuckled fists.

I would do whatever it took. You know the saying: All is fair...

Chapter 8 EVADING HOPE

On Saturday I woke up early. Jessica had briefed me about what I might need so I gathered those items I had, putting them in my worn black backpack.

Chris came in early. “Hey, I seen you were up early. Ready to go blow up some shit?”

I’d forgotten about target practice. “Shit!” I said. “I completely blanked it out, dude. I had something come up last minute. If you’re not busy tomorrow I can go. Jason can come with us. He’s itching to use that horrendous gun.”

“Why, what’s up today?”

“Just some stuff.”

“What kind of stuff? Come on man, just blow it off. You can do it later.”

Through the open door to the apartment, Jason overheard our conversation. He poked his head out and cried: “It’s a giiirrrllll wooooo!”

“Shut up, jackass!” I snapped. “No one asked you!” I picked up a pen and threw it at his head. He ducked back into the apartment.

Chris laughed. I was lucky he wasn’t paying much attention. With my vampire strength I’d pierced the door with the pen. My sensitive ears caught Jason’s mutterings about how I’d almost killed him. Chris didn’t notice any of it.

“Augh man, a girl?” Chris jeered. “Come on, blow her off. She’ll forgive you. If she doesn’t, dump her. You’ll find another.”

“No, man. Sorry. I really got to do this,” I said.

“You got it for her pretty bad, huh? Well, I hope she can cook. Someone needs to feed your ass. Jason don’t cook for shit, does he?” He was talking in a stage whisper so Jason would hear. Of course, Jason would’ve heard Chris’s slightest breath.

“Hey! I can cook!” Jason shouted.

“No, you can’t, dipshit!” Chris laughed. “All right, all right. Since you got a hot date, I’ll swing by tomorrow. Just remember, Verloren, when Jason says no, he means no.”

“Ha ha very funny.” I flipped him off as he walked out laughing.

Jason spent the rest of the morning getting ready. I double-checked my books and herbs, then got ready to open. I felt bad leaving Jessica in the store by herself all day. She had the seminars going on in the back. But I knew she could handle it.

Though Jessica knew more than I did about many things, I still didn’t completely trust her. She wasn’t giving me answers about the flashes. Whenever I brought it up she changed the subject, diverting me until I forgot what I’d asked. I think she was using some kind of spell. Every conversation we had ended with my thoughts getting hazy.

Jessica had agreed to work all day so she would be there if any problems came up. I knew that meant she would stay there until we returned. I trusted her to do this, but if anything bad happened I knew she could resend her soul. That would be a last resort. There’s seldom any reason to give up the body and wipe the memory clean, but it happens. Sometimes an incarnate will simply decide this present life isn’t worth it. This occasionally happens to a werewolf, troll or fairy. When it does, a witch can resend the soul and make the person forget whatever horror made it necessary. It’s a lot like permanent amnesia.

I waited on Jason to finish grooming himself. This took a while. He was sure he was going to be with Ash, so he pondered over clothes, hair, and every other part of his appearance.

Finally I'd had enough. "You're acting like a girl," I said. "Knock it off and hurry up." Just then I heard the shop door open. Jessica had arrived. "I've got to talk to Jessica. When I get back you better be ready."

He rolled his eyes. "Or what?"

I sighed and walked away before we came to blows.

In the store I saw Jessica's fiery red hair bobbing down an aisle. Her movements were light and buoyant. She was getting back to her usual self. As she pulled a wheeled suitcase toward me she smiled broadly. "Good morning, Verloren."

"What's with the extra supplies?" I asked her. I stuffed my hands in my pockets, not wanting her to touch them. Even a brush of our fingers would let her glimpse my thoughts.

"If you boys run into problems I'll be fully equipped," she said, still smiling. She reached for my hand.

I shoved my hands even deeper into my pockets. "I'd rather not, if you don't mind. Once was enough."

She jumped at me trying to get at my hands, but we both knew it was pointless. I gave her a devilish grin. She wanted to know everything while I wanted her to know only which was absolutely necessary. Though I could confide in Jessica about things I wouldn't discuss with anyone else, I had to consider the law. Besides, the one time she'd read my thoughts, she'd acted so strange.

Jason appeared in the apartment doorway. "What the hell are you guys doing?"

Jessica bounced over to him. "Let me see your hand."

Jason knew the routine. He towered above her as he held out his hand. She gazed at his palm, then laid her own tiny palm against it. Jessica stared into his chest as if she were looking right through him. Jason glanced at me, grinning like a crazy man.

She mumbled something, then gasped and let go. As she recovered herself she smacked him hard on the arm. She was blushing. "Jason, you pervert!"

"Ow!" he cried, rubbing his arm. He kept grinning.

"What did he show you this time?" I asked.

"He was picturing doing stuff to that girl." As she got her suitcase and wheeled it to the back of the store, Jason and I exchanged glances. His was a smirk, while mine was an angry glare. As Jessica looked back at us, I realized she knew. You can't keep anything from a witch.

"Are you done fucking around?" I asked Jason. I wanted to hit him...hard.

"Yeah." He turned to go to the car.

"I'll be right there," I called after him. I walked back to get my black trench coat. Picking it up, I looked at Jessica. She was beaming.

"So you know, huh?" I said.

She looked to the doorway. Jason was gone. "Oh, Verloren," she whispered, "I'm so happy you found her." She hopped around in a dance.

"Found her? What do you mean?"

"You know...found someone to be with."

Was she hiding something from me? I was sure she was, but I didn't have time to interrogate her. "I haven't found anyone," I said. "You know I can't be with her."

"You can try anything for love," she said, grabbing my arm.

"Trying will get us both killed. She'll do better to find someone like herself." I pulled away from her, and put on my coat. "But it can't be Jason," I said.

"She deserves you. You are one of the greatest men I know, Verloren." She looked upset.

I flipped my collar into position. “She deserves the best. That’s not me,” I said, thinking of the Quatre. “Life with me leads only to death. Even if she were lucky, all she’d get would be a monstrous existence like mine—killing to survive.”

Jessica bowed her head. I hated upsetting her. I grabbed her chin and turned her face to mine. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve been around a long time, and I’m still ticking. I can do it alone. I’ve proven that.”

She gave me a half smile.

As I left, I said: “Don’t wait up, Mom. And you still have some explaining to do when I get back. You’re going to tell me about these flashing pictures. No more evasions. I want to know everything.”

I walked through the apartment and out to the car. Jason sat in the passenger seat, his cigarette dangling from between his lips.

Chapter 9 ALTERNATE REALITY

The car stereo blared. I drove while Jason kept his eyes on the scenery. When the landscape bored him he flipped through the book of CDs and wailed along with the songs. Sometimes the rhythms moved him to play drums on the dashboard.

It was noon before we reached Ash's place. I parked the Grand Prix in her driveway next to her older Camaro. Jason got out and looked around. I sat in the car debating if this was the right thing to do. My mind and body were having another argument. I could feel the pull in my chest. I pushed my sunglasses up the bridge of my nose, covering my eyes more completely. Even the dim winter sun hurt my eyes. Finally I got out.

"Could bring a meal out here and no one would know." Jason said, hands on his hips. He surveyed the wooded area, nodding.

We heard Ash call from the clearing: "Verloren! I'm down here!" I walked past the garage toward the stairs, Jason at my heels. The fallen leaves crunched under his feet.

When I reached the top of the stairs I saw her. She'd loaded the ring with wood and started a fire. Now she stood there, her eyes shaded by my sunglasses, and her aura beaming. She jogged toward me. I felt the magnetic pull and almost fell down the stairs.

For a moment I saw Ash in a different setting. Flashing images blinded me and I stumbled. My body twitched in a spasm.

"Hey! Watch what you're doing, asshole," Jason snapped as he nearly ran into me.

"Fuck off," I mumbled.

Ash saw Jason and stopped. "Oh! You brought someone."

She jabbed her hands in her pockets, shrinking like a wilting flower. She faked a smile and bit her lip.

I went down the stairs toward her. The pull in my chest made it impossible to do otherwise. Jason followed.

"You remember Jason Zurk from the store, right?" I said.

"Yeah, I do." She stood, fidgeting.

As we walked toward her I abandoned my habitual vampire's stealth and let my feet crunch dead leaves. I didn't want her to notice anything out of the ordinary. I would drop my human facade soon enough, but first I wanted her to trust me. Instead she looked as if she was having a panic attack.

"Are you okay with him being here?" I asked.

"Um...yeah. I'm just nervous around new people. You've seen that for yourself." She smiled, shifting her hands in her sweatshirt pockets.

"Don't be afraid of Jason. The worst he'll do is ask you out on a date," I said. I glanced at him. He glared back at me.

Ash giggled, her eyes darting between Jason and me. She blushed and looked down at her shoes.

I watched Jason. Finally he was accepting the fact that I was not going to let him be with her. He squinted at me and clenched his jaw. I'm sure he wanted to go back to town, but I had him there for a reason. He huffed and closed his eyes.

I smiled at Ash. "I brought him here to show you something," I said.

"You did?" Jason stared at me.

I nodded and smiled, hoping he would go along. "Yes," I said. "I did." I approached Ash, then turned so we were both facing Jason. I spoke to her while keeping my eyes on him. "Ash, remember how I told you that once you find out what your soul is, you can shift into that entity?"

"Yes?"

I saw Jason stiffen and knew he didn't approve. Nevertheless, he'd come this far, and it would be difficult for him to stop now. I was counting on that.

"Jason, please," I said. "You do the honors."

"This isn't exactly how this is suppose to go, Verloren," he said.

I knew he was reluctant to shift in front of someone who didn't yet know. It could be terrifying and it violated the most basic laws of the Quatre.

I flashed on Sara. In these visions she was still a child though I realized she must be a grown woman by now. I took a deep breath, recovering from the thought. "It...it will be fine," I said. "Trust me." I looked at Ash. "You said you love horror movies, right? You're about to see what a real werewolf looks like."

"Really?" She glanced at both of us. "Oh, I get it. You guys are just messing with me."

I saw that Jason was pissed at me. That wasn't a problem. Anger helped a werewolf change faster.

"No," I said. "No joke. Watch."

Jason and I locked eyes. I nodded. He pursed his lips, gave me a look, then unzipped his coat and let it fall. He slowly peeled off his shirt. He glanced at me, hoping I would change my mind. I didn't.

"All right then." He rolled his eyes, kicked off his shoes, and unzipped his pants. He held them below his hips so they would not fall.

Ash averted her eyes. Her cheeks burned red.

"Don't look away," I said. I touched her chin. Her skin was ice cold. I coaxed her head up. "You're not going to want to miss this."

She looked straight at him. As his eyes glowed yellow, he threw himself into the shift. It happened in an instant. One moment he was a man, then he was something else. His skin turned a dark rust color. He raised his wolf-like face to hers. She stumbled backward.

His pants were too tight, and if he moved much they would rip. He lowered his arms to the ground. His hands and feet still looked human except for his razor sharp claws. Her eyes widened. Down on all fours he was shorter than her. He cocked his head. His chest had expanded in size. Always muscular, Jason now seemed massive.

Ash touched his shoulder. He bared his teeth and growled softly. Though she was terrified, she withdrew her fingers with reluctance.

Then it was done. Jason shifted back to his human form and stood upright.

"Don't pet me!" he snapped at her. "I'm not a dog!" He pulled up his pants and buckled them, then finished dressing. "I left my smokes in the car," he said, and headed for the stairs.

Despite the sunglasses, I could see she was on the verge of tears. "I just wanted to make sure he was real," she breathed, fighting tears. She looked at me. "This is real, right?"

I nodded, realizing for the first time that Ash was emotionally fragile. Was this the right thing for her? Maybe she wasn't cut out for it. I wondered if I should have Jessica resend her soul. The world we lived in wasn't designed for delicate beings like her.

I put my hand on her shoulder. "Come here," I whispered, drawing her close. As I inhaled her scent I knew I could not let her go. I'd lived on my Spartan diet of occasional meals for too long. I needed her; I couldn't let anyone or anything take her away. If I could have her near I

would never need anything. My connection with her was unbreakable. I would protect her with my life.

“It’s okay,” I whispered. “Jason is just a jerk.” I looked around. “Where is your dog?” I asked.

Before she could answer Jason reappeared at the top of the stairs. He stared at us embracing, his cigarette nearly falling from his lips. He knew I was furious at him for speaking to her the way he had. As he neared us he watched me closely.

Ash wiped tears from under her sunglasses and concentrated on my question about her dog. “A friend of mine loves Pogo to death. I told him I was really busy this weekend and he volunteered to dog-sit.”

Jason puffed on his cigarette. “Now that we got that out of the way, lets get this party started,” he said. He blew smoke in my face.

“So where will you be most comfortable?” I asked. “This might take a while.”

“I thought I might sit by the fire,” she said, shrugging.

Jason threw a few handfuls of dead leaves on the fire to keep it going before gathering sticks and adding them on. He pretended not to hear us. That didn’t matter. He knew how this went.

Ash sat, legs crossed and eyes shut, facing the fire, as I read from Jessica’s book. She listened to every word, right to the end.

Jason finally sat down on a fallen tree trunk closer to the river. He said nothing. He knew Ash would need to concentrate if she were to have any chance at all. She was over two decades old, and that meant the process might not work. As I read to her I thought: What if I had never found out? What if I’d had to live with this insanity without ever knowing? I kept looking up from the book, knowing I would never meet another like her. No one else could have that aura. Yet I knew we might fail. If that happened I was supposed to call Jessica. Ash knew too much. Telling her these things made her a huge risk. Yet I had made up my mind, I would not call Jessica. There was nothing Jason could do to stop me.

Jason cooperated, remaining silent. This guided meditation was a type of hypnosis taking Ash back before birth. She needed to envision a safe area. If I could get her there, then we could explore the possibilities and learn what kind of an incarnate she was.

When we reached the safe area I said: “Okay, Ash, you’re in your safe place. Envision it filling with fog. There is nothing threatening about this fog. Imagine it getting denser.” From the corner of my eye I saw Jason sit up straight. He knew it was coming.

“The fog is getting thicker and thicker,” I went on. “You put your hand out in front of you, but the fog is so thick you cannot see your hand.” I waited for her to visualize it. “Now it’s so thick you can see nothing but the fog.” I waited a few moments. My heart pounded. I stifled my terror.

“While you are enveloped in this fog you hear something in the distance. You are not afraid. This is the sound of your incarnate approaching. How does it sound?” I paused. Her face tightened. She concentrated on something distant. The flames in the pit grew taller. I felt the tug of her.

“It is drawing closer. You hear it more clearly. It’s coming closer and closer and you are completely safe. It’s so close you can reach through the fog and touch it.” She raised her hands and stretched close to the fire. Jason was literally on the edge of his seat.

“You run your hand across it. It makes a noise. Do you feel fur, feathers, scales? What do you feel?”

With her eyes still closed she moved her hands. The flames throbbed like glowing pulse beats. Ash reached high as if she were touching something large.

I consulted Jessica's book and said: "This is you. This is what you are. Now the fog will clear, revealing what you have been feeling and hearing." My heart roared in my ears. It was as if her transformation was for me and me only. My chest tightened. I sensed something from Jason—a threat? "The fog is falling away faster and faster now. What do you see?"

Her face was upturned and her eyes were still shut. Her mouth fell open.

I turned and saw Jason standing, staring at her. He saw me, but his attention was on her. He was as riveted as I was. I felt paralyzed. I tried to relax. After what seemed like an eternity I stepped toward her silently. She was still frozen. It hadn't worked.

Disappointment flooded the void within me. What would I do? Call Jessica? The idea made me choke. I touched her shoulder and whispered: "Ash?"

Suddenly I saw sky. My ears rang and I heard Jason screaming. I sat up and felt a sudden sharp pain in my head. As I touched the spot I felt a horrible pressure building in my skull.

Then I saw it: a massive foot with large talons protruding from where her fingers had been. Its scaly blackness reminded me of a snake. I blinked my eyes. It was bright and I had lost my sunglasses. It had four feet. I wasn't completely sure if I was seeing double or not. Between pressure and sunlight I could barely open my eyes. I followed the feet up to muscular legs and a huge, cat-like body covered in black scales. They had an unusual sheen.

I got to my feet and saw that its back was as high as my head and humped. My pain ebbed. I was recovering. Something big was swinging—a tail. The neck was five feet long and the reptilian head had fin-like spines running over it. Two horns spiraled from its forehead. Its eyes were solid red.

As soon as I made eye contact with it I fell backward. Flashing images threw me into convulsions. I heard a scream and saw Ash morphing into the child, Sara. Finally everything stopped. I lay on the ground panting, my back arching. I sobbed, but there were no tears. Vampires can't cry.

A sound like a cat's purring brought me back to my senses. I rolled onto my side, trying to catch my breath. Jason was screaming, but I couldn't hear the words. I squinted, shielding my eyes from the sun. That's when I heard what Jason was shouting: "A fucking dinosaur! She's a dinosaur! Run! Run before she fucking eats you!" He aimed his gun at her.

Then it happened. Two lumps on the creature's back opened, giving way to two bat-like wings. Thin black membranes stretched between the spines.

Now I knew the truth.

Jason's hands shook so hard he could barely keep hold of his gun.

"Put the fucking gun away, Jason!" I shouted. "She's no dinosaur. She's a dragon."

"Holy Shit!" Jason breathed. He lowered his gun, and stared wide-eyed. "Is she gonna eat us?"

No! I'm not going to eat you! Verloren are you okay?

Jason and I both froze. His eyes looked like they might pop from his head.

"You heard that, right?" I asked. He nodded.

We'd heard Ash's voice, but the creature's mouth hadn't moved.

"Ash?" I asked.

Yes.

"There's some kind of reverse mind reading going on," I said. "We can hear what you're thinking."

Yes. I can read your minds too. So...how the hell do I change back?

Chapter 10
WEREWOLF PROPOSITION

“Like you’re sucking in your stomach muscles, but do it with your whole body.” Jason stood half naked in the clearing. He shifted to his werewolf persona. Tensing his body, he pulled his arms in and his chest rose. He quickly fell back into human form, grabbing his jeans before they fell.

Okay, I see. I can see it in your head.

Jason and I both heard her thoughts perfectly.

Through the afternoon Jason worked with Ash showing her how to shift back and forth between her human and dragon forms. It was the main reason I’d brought him, though neither of us had dreamed what shape she’d be taking. This was one area where I wasn’t much help. A vampire doesn’t change. With a little practice Ash learned how. She became a dragon, then morphed back to her human form. That ended with her standing naked by the fire.

Embarrassed and vulnerable, she spun away from me, but not before I noticed how voluptuous she was. Her light brown hair spilled over her shoulders and almost covered her breasts. Under all that clothing she wore she was curvy: full breasts, small waist, and full hips. I noticed also a glint of silver from piercings that adorned her nipples.

When she turned away it was like a slap in the face. The black mark I’d seen on her wrist was part of a larger tattoo: the tip of a tail that snaked up her arm, then centered on her back. One hand was outstretched to one side of her buttocks and the head was centered in the small of her back. Its wings opened onto her sides, and its tail started up on her shoulder, then wrapped around her arm ending at her wrist. A dragon.

Jason ogled her, pissing me off. I took off my black trench coat, walked up behind her, and draped it over her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she said, her cheeks burning scarlet red. As she buttoned the coat she said clearly: “Just so you know, Jason, that mind reading thing isn’t turned off.” She turned and stared at him. “I know exactly what is going on in your head.”

Losing his smug smile, he turned his back on us. He got out a cigarette and lit it.

She looked at me. *He is thinking about doing...er...stuff to me.*

Jason cleared his throat before he spoke. “Well I guess that goes both ways. I heard that, loud and clear.” He glared at me. “I don’t want some chick rummaging through my thoughts. If I wanted that I would have Jessica read me.”

“It’s true,” Ash said. “It’s like you guys’ heads are an open field. I can pick out any of your thoughts, and plant thoughts of my own. I can’t explain it.”

This wasn’t that much of a problem for me. When I felt an intrusion into my brain, I could put up a wall. Any vampire could. Whenever I fed I could read and control my victim’s thoughts. They had no control over mine, but once I bit into them they could read my mind. My bite created the link. Normally it went both ways, but I had learned how to put up a wall to keep my thoughts private. I could allow others to see only those thoughts I wanted them to see. I did that now with Ash.

Her head jerked back as she felt the barrier. She looked at Jason. With the wall in place I couldn’t hear what she was saying to him.

He threw his hands in the air, almost tossing his cigarette. “God! Would you leave me alone! I can feel you in there picking through shit!”

"I'm sorry!" she sobbed. "I don't know how to control it!" Tears welled in her eyes. She crossed her arms and hugged herself trying to get warm.

"Jason, I can help her with this. If you want to head home you can. I'll teach her how to control it. I'm sure she won't mind driving me back when we're done. Is that okay, Ash?" I asked, glancing at her.

She smiled at me, then shot a glare at Jason. "Sure," she said. "I can drive you home later. And Jason, you are disgusting. I guess it's true. That really is all men think about." Her cheeks flushed scarlet.

"Yeah," Jason muttered. "I'm getting outta here. This is just too creepy for me. I don't like her thoughts either." He walked around us toward the car, but stopped beside Ash. For the first time since I'd known him he looked sad.

"You know, he doesn't shift, so you can't be with him," he said. "He's not one of us." He stared at her, and after a moment I realized they were having an unspoken conversation. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

Jason gave me a contemptuous look. "Now you get to tell her what you are." He walked off, not waiting for a reply.

Ash and I silently watched as he drove off. She wiped at her eyes with the sleeve of my coat. "Well, that's that."

"Are you okay?" I asked. "I know Jason can be a huge jerk. I'm sorry he upset you."

"He wasn't being a jerk," she said. "He was just showing me how my life would be with him. He seemed... sincere...like he would have done anything for me."

Fuck. Maybe I had been wrong about Jason. Could he give her everything she deserved? Everything I couldn't? Could he give her a real life? Love? Marriage? Children? Happiness? I might give her love and marriage, but not children. Even then, we would be on the run, with the Quatre trying to hunt us down and kill us. I wanted nothing more than to give her happiness, yet I knew there was little chance of it. Most likely any life with me would end with capture, pain, and death.

An awkward silence hung in the air. Finally she whispered: "I told him he would make some girl happy one day, but not me...that my feelings lie elsewhere." She eyed me.

I felt my chest tighten. This was the moment when I should've said: No! I should've told her we could never be together. Now was the time to make her run for the car, chase down Jason, and take him up on his offer of happiness. This was when I could choose to let her live. I didn't have to allow her to join me against the Quatre. My wish to be with her was nothing but my own selfishness.

I stifled a sob, then said: "Let's go inside where it's warmer."

She struggled to walk without shoes. She glanced at me, her pain showing through her eyes. That's when I decided once and for all that we were doomed. It was that or I would die right there and then. I smiled faintly, bent, and swept her up in my arms. Though her body felt stiff as set concrete, she was light, and once I held her she softened. She snuggled against me as she sunk into my coat. My chest ached for her. For the first time in my memory I felt complete. And for the second time in my life I was scared shitless.

The sun started to set. This was going to be a long night.

Chapter 11 FATED INVITATION

I carried her to the couch and set her down. It was much warmer inside, maybe because she was trying to compensate for her cool skin. I took off my sweatshirt revealing my holster with the fully loaded gun.

She eyed the weapon and I sensed it would be better to take off the holster. I hid it under my sweatshirt on the floor.

She smiled and said: "You don't have to carry me." As she looked down at the floor her cheeks turned pink. She sat up, stretching her legs across the length of the couch. She shivered, then wrapped her arms around her midsection trying to warm herself.

"You don't have to be so embarrassed," I said, sitting on the opposite end of the couch. I watched her hugging herself. "You're cold blooded. It's going to be hard for you to stay warm."

"So," she said, "what are you?" She squinted. I could feel her mind pounding against the wall in my brain. "And how are you doing that? I can't read anything from you now. I could earlier."

"That's part of what I'm going to teach you," I said. "Just like you envisioned the safe area, you can make an impenetrable wall in your mind. It'll take practice, but I think you'll be able to get a handle on it within a day." I sighed and rubbed my eyes. My head felt recovered from the blow I'd taken during her shifting, but I could still feel pressure inside my skull. I should've never gotten that close. Now I was tired.

"And?" She pried at the edges of my mind.

As I watched her I prepared myself for a reaction of disgust or worse. My biggest fear was that she would be afraid. I had to let her find out for herself. It would be one of many things that would help introduce her to this unusual world where both of us lived. For the first time she was seeing how different this was from the world she'd known up to just a few hours ago. If she decided against resending her soul, her life would never be "normal" again.

I looked down at her feet protruding from under my trench coat. I slowly cupped my hand under her ankle feeling her cool skin. I ran my thumb along the ankle. Again I felt the pulling in my chest. This was the moment I had wanted. I yearned for her to know. But if this is what I wanted so badly, why was I so terrified? Suddenly I realized I'd stopped breathing. I exhaled, relaxed my shoulders, and discovered I had also relaxed my hold on the wall in my mind. Now the whole of what was in me was open to her. I could do nothing to stop her so I let her see everything. I closed my eyes. I cringed at the thought of what she might do.

In the next few seconds I felt her rummaging through my thoughts and memories. She pulled her leg from my hand and faced me. It seemed like hours had passed. Her cold hand fell upon mine. I opened my eyes, but didn't look at her face. Instead I looked at the end of the tattoo on her hand. I recalled when she'd first showed it to me and tried to show her the memory. I closed my eyes.

She moved closer to me. Finally I looked into her eyes. The ache in my chest crushed out another sob.

Ash didn't speak out loud, but I could hear her clearly. *Oh Verloren. How could you ever think that I would run from you?* She placed her icy hand on the side of my face, leaning her forehead into mine.

With her it was hard to figure out any rules. Could we be together? I didn't know. Her scent reminded me of something ancient, no longer human. Before I knew what I was doing I started kissing her passionately. She lay back on the sofa, pulling me with her. Our thoughts were a tangled mess of right and wrong. I tried to show her what might happen, but she couldn't control her lust. She didn't care about the future. She just wanted me.

Our kissing was so heated I could barely think. It was only when she started fumbling with my coat buttons that I finally caught her shaky hands. I pulled back from her and stared into her eyes. I let go of her hands, cradled her face and gently kissed her.

With her hands free she grabbed the back of my shirt and pulled it up over my head. I pulled it the rest of the way off, then sat up and edged away from her. When she reached for my pants I caught her wrists, pushed her back down and pinned her hands above her head.

I leaned in close to her ear and ran my nose down to her collarbone inhaling deeply. She turned her head to expose her neck to me. I drew back to look at her face. Her eyes were closed. She wanted to satisfy me in any way she could. I bent down until my mouth was millimeters away from her artery, then slammed my teeth shut. She heard the sharp snap of my teeth, and flinched. When she realized I hadn't bit her she glanced up at me, her eyes sad and wanting.

I kept her hands pinned and laid my face in the hollow of her throat. I listened to her accelerated heartbeat. I inhaled her, filling my senses with her life. I'd always restrained my natural instincts, but now she wanted me to let go, and escape all self-control. She didn't understand what that might mean. I sighed as her heart slowed. I let go of her hands and laid my ear on her chest to listen to her heart. She brushed the hair from my face and began to run her finger through it.

I fell into unconsciousness and had no idea what brought me back to my senses.

I raised my head, kissed her, and tried to explain: "I can't do this," I said. "I won't be able to control myself. I don't know what you would become."

I don't care. If it means that I can be with you. I am willing to do anything.

I sat up and stared at the floor. "You might become a murderer. That's what I am. You don't know what you're asking." I put up my wall.

"I've seen it. I do know," she said, pouting.

"Let's not talk about this right now," I said. "We have some important stuff to get cleared up. We should work on ways to keep others from hearing your thoughts. It will be useful for you to be able to read others but I don't think you want it the other way around unless you've shifted." I smiled, trying to look playful.

She nodded.

That gave us a task for the night and we pursued it until she could do it at will. She liked to read my mind. I showed her how I projected my thoughts to control my prey. That helped.

Later as we lay beside each other she buried her face into my chest and inhaled deeply. She told me she loved my smell. I showed her how she used to smell to me and how that had changed. Her new scent didn't trigger the same hunger in me. I wasn't as tempted to feed on her now that she'd found her shift.

You know who you look like? she asked me wordlessly.

Who? I asked.

Kurt Cobain.

I chuckled. *Well, I can't sing like him.*

She stared into my eyes and I saw my world there. She kissed me. Her hands started to wander, making it clear she wanted more than a kiss. I slowly pushed her hands away.

It will never be enough for you, will it? This is all that we can have together, I told her. I know. But I'll never stop trying.

I awoke in early afternoon, but left Ash sleeping. I slipped out the door and away from the trailer. As I neared the woods I pulled out my cell phone and called the store. Jessica answered. “Jessica? What are you still doing there?” I asked.

“You know how I am. I was waiting for you guys to come back,” she said.

“Why didn’t you leave after Jason got back?” I asked.

After an odd moment of silence, she replied: “Jason didn’t come back last night.”

I thought of how Jason had left and figured he must have gone on his own hunting trip, but instead of saying that, I made up a different story. “Hmm. He must have stopped off at a friend’s. He took the car. I stayed here to work with Ash on her shifting. There were some minor issues that needed attention.”

I could hear Jessica draw a breath. “She shifted?”

Again I felt reluctant to tell her anything. I still had this urge to protect Ash. I should have listened to it.

“In the end it was essential that she do it outside,” I said. “She would have destroyed the shop.”

“Destroyed it?”

“She’s a dragon.”

Silence. “I can’t believe it,” she whispered. “I feared it, but I didn’t really think it would happen. Verloren...you need to get to the store ASAP. Don’t tell another person what we just talked about.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“We can’t talk about it on the phone just...have her pack some things and get over here. We’ll talk about it when you get here. Hurry.” I heard the click. She’d hung up.

The only thing that would scare Jessica that badly was the Quatre. The thought of them made me shiver, then I saw flashes of light. I saw the world fading as I fell. The next thing I knew I was waking up on the ground. The sun had moved. I looked at the clock on my cell phone. I’d been out for a half hour.

I made sure my thoughts were well-hidden when I went to wake Ash. I didn’t want to upset her. Though I couldn’t be sure why Jessica was so worried, her voice had badly shaken me.

I entered the trailer. Ash lay on the couch with her eyes open. She smiled at me.

“I thought you might have left me,” she said as she got up from the couch and wrapped her arms around me. My heartbeat echoed in my head.

As she pressed her body against me I set my hands on her hips and searched her eyes. “You really do want to get yourself killed, don’t you? You’re making it very hard for me, as a man.”

“Then change me,” she said.

“But what will happen to you?” I wanted to do what she said. Fuck the Quatre and their fucking rules. If I knew my bite would change her into a normal vampire I would do it in a heartbeat. We could hide, and make a life for ourselves. But I was afraid of all the things I didn’t know.

“Pack some things,” I said. “I have someone who can help with your shift. She has all the information you need, but it might take a day or two.”

“Who?”

“Her name is Jessica. She’s a witch. A witch in our world is like a doctor. We go to them to get answers to our questions. They know a lot and if they don’t know the things you need, they’ll find out for you.” I closed my eyes. Looking at her was distracting.

Her cool lips found mine as she pressed her body hard against mine. I let out a feral growl. It startled me. I opened my eyes. It had startled her too and she stepped back from me.

My breath was short and my words were labored. “You are making this very hard for me not to...to...for lack of better words...I want to...”

Her smile was coy. “Oh, I know what you want to do. I’ve seen it.” She blushed.

“And I want to do it repeatedly,” I said. Her cheeks burned scarlet. “Come on. Get showered and dressed. Pack some clothes. We are heading to my place.”

“Okay,” she said, “on one condition.”

I hesitated. “What?”

“I didn’t get to see everything last night. I want to know about you. I don’t want to intrude, but I’ve always been curious about vampires.”

“Sure,” I finally said.

She smiled at me and turned to get ready. I’d never seen anyone so happy to get an invitation into a vampire’s home.

Chapter 12 ANOTHER LIFE

On Sunday afternoon the car ride back to my place became a grueling interrogation about my lifestyle. I decided it would be better to take a different car, one that wouldn't be recognized. Ash had me drive.

I watched the road, not looking at her as I replied to her nonstop questions. "No. No stake to the heart. No holy water or religious artifacts...and as you can see the sunlight doesn't hurt me except for my eyes." I adjusted the sunglasses she'd given me. "We can eat human food but we don't gain anything from it. It just means going to the bathroom. I can go into anybody's house without an invitation. I don't have fangs, just sharp teeth. I can cross running water. I have some mind control, I can move faster than the human eye can detect, and my strength is far greater than a human's. I see peoples' auras. I also have the ability to heal quickly as long as it's not a head wound. Once our brain is damaged we are done. I have the same temperature as a human and my heart still beats."

I let her ponder all that for a moment before continuing: "It takes a certain kind of personality to make it as a monster. You have to be willing to take a human life without regret. Basically, you have to have the personality traits of a sociopath or psychopath..."

"What's the difference?" she asked.

"A sociopath acts on impulse; a psychopath plans."

She searched my face. "You have a slight accent. Also, while I saw a lot when I looked into your mind, your memories seem to fade at a certain point. How old are you? And where are you from?"

"I don't know. I don't even know what my human name was. I have a theory about it. I think a human brain can only contain so much memory and new ones push out old ones. Do you remember your first steps as a child?" I asked her.

She looked at her feet. "No."

She paused before asking her next question. "You can see auras...as a vampire?"

"No. Not all vampires can. I'm the only vampire I know who's able to see them. I don't know if it's an aura or what, but I see colors around a person or on their skin or coming out of their bodies and I know what they are."

"Why just you?"

It was a question that had bothered me for as long as I could remember.

"I don't know," I said. "As for how old I am, I can remember some bits of things in the past but not everything. It's almost like looking back on a dream. It seems so vivid while it's happening, but once you wake up you try to grasp it, and it slips through your memory. I should have documented my life. It would have been interesting." I thought of Kale and his record keeping. What was he recording at this very moment?

"It's entirely possible that I was made by mistake," I went on. "I remember people being sick. I've asked other vampires about it. Talking about that kind of stuff makes them nervous. I was told there was a lot of feeding going on during the Black Plague. Since people were dropping dead everywhere vampires gorged on the dying. A vampire's sense of smell is better than that of any other creature. We can smell disease. During the Plague vampires thought of it as a civic duty to put the suffering out of their misery. My theory is that a vampire fed off of me, but didn't finish me off, and I changed."

I glanced at her. She thought about what I'd said, then fired another question. "So there's a virus transmitted by a bite. Then you change. What happens during the transformation? How long does it take?"

"I've never done one myself and I don't remember my own. Generally you have to have the permission from the Quatre."

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's a committee of four people that makes decisions for us supernaturals. I've seen one transformation. It looked like a horrible case of the flu: high fever, sweats, skin losing all color, hair turning white. It took about a week." I braked as we entered the city limits.

"A week." She thought it over. "And the Quatre has to give you permission."

"Not necessarily, but if they decide they don't like your decisions they will do whatever they like to you, stopping at nothing. They're supposed to do what is best for us. The main thing is to keep our secret from humans. The Quatre makes the rules and, if we follow them, humans should never know we're here." I took a deep breath. The Quatre made the rules and doled out the punishments. I reflected on that as I slowed to a crawl in the narrow streets leading to the store.

"What are the rules?" she asked.

"We don't allow humans to know us for what we really are. Vampires and incarnates can only mate with our own kind."

"Vampires can't mate with incarnates?" she asked.

"Not according to the rules," I replied. "The idea is that incarnates must be protected against the primal instincts of vampires. It's assumed that we can't control our appetites." I grinned at her. She lowered her head and blushed. I went on: "For the incarnates it's easier to mate with their own kind. That way they don't have to hide what they are. Another rule is that vampires must get permission to change someone, and we aren't allowed to change incarnates. It's the Quatre's way of keeping the vampire population under control. If folks started dropping like flies from blood loss, people would soon catch on."

"And what happens if you break the rules?" she asked, rubbing the tattooed letters on her fingers.

"It depends on their mood," I said. "They might kill you and everyone they suspect of any involvement...or they might let you go."

"You said it's four people. Who are they?"

"There's a vampire, a shaman, and two incarnates."

She looked relieved. "That doesn't sound too bad. What do the two incarnates...what are their...shifts? That's what you call them, right? The thing they change into?"

"One is a werewolf like Jason. The other is a fairy."

I pulled into the store's parking lot.

"A fairy. That doesn't sound so bad."

I parked, killed the engine, and handed her the keys. I could tell from her face that she was thinking of storybook fairies.

"You don't understand about fairies," I said. "They are not the cute pixies you read about in children's books. They are ruthless, deceitful, and power hungry. They will stop at nothing to get something. They would destroy the whole world if that is what it took for them to get what they want."

I surveyed the area before getting out of the car. I knew I wouldn't see any evidence of the Quatre, but it was best to be cautious. Finally I got out and hurried toward the store entrance, Ash jogging to keep up. She looked nervous. Was my paranoia contagious?

As we entered the store Jessica waved at us to come back to the apartment. She looked frightened, which scared me all the more. She gripped a thin book and gestured for us to take seats at the kitchen counter. Her mind was sealed. Though she acted cool, I could tell she was terrified.

She slid the book across the counter. I picked it up and examined it. It was old and its pages were brittle. “What is this?” I asked as I read the gold lettering on the cover. “Drache,” it read. Somehow I understood the German word.

Jessica stared at the book, then at me. “It’s all you need to know about dragons, Verloren. After today you won’t see me again.”

“Why?” Ash demanded. “What’s going on?”

“Ash, please don’t try to pry in my mind. I’ll tell you what I know. Anyone who knows you’re a dragon will either be killed or betray you.” She turned to me. “Give me your cell phone, Verloren.”

I dug it out and handed it to her. She broke it in half on the counter top then threw it into the trash can.

“They track everyone,” she reminded me. “Most likely they’re already on their way here. They’ve heard everything you’ve said. You must understand: Kale and the Quatre hoped dragons had become extinct thousands of years ago. Apparently that is not the case. There is a prophecy that dragons will return and rule the world.” She was only addressing Ash now. “You are a dawning of a new age. The Quatre doesn’t know what that means, and, like most people, they fear what they don’t know. The Quatre will do anything to keep control, even if that means killing you and every other dragon they find. They’ve been doing that for several years. You’re not the first dragon who’s appeared and you might not be the last, but they will do everything they can to destroy you.” She looked at the book I was holding.

“Sara...” I muttered.

“Yes,” said Jessica, “Sara. She will do anything to get to you, Ashley. You are a rarity. If the Quatre does not want you killed, she’ll want the essence of you. She’s sort of like... a collector.”

“We have to leave,” Ash whispered, “don’t we?”

”Yes,” Jessica answered. “All I can tell you to do is run. There won’t be any reasoning with them. We must face the probability that Jason never got back here because he...they...” Jessica choked back a sob, then clamped her mouth shut, as she tried to get back her self-control.

Ash sat, stunned.

I took her hands in mine and kissed them. “I swear with all my life, I will do everything in my power to protect you,” I said. “I won’t let them harm you.” I stood and looked at Jessica. “Help her,” I said. “Get some clothes for both of us. Take whatever we have from the store—hair dye, disguises...anything that will help us stay undercover. Load it into her car. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

I could tell Ash wanted to question me, but I didn’t give her the opportunity. I went back to the store, grabbed the cash from the register, then slowed to human speed as I hurried across the lot to Chris’s store. I opened the door to the smell of fresh blood, and knew it had already started. I heard a weak voice.

“Help! Help! Back here!” Chris lay in a pool of blood, his torso shredded. What was left of his intestines covered him, spilling onto the floor.

“Fuck! What happened?” I knelt down beside him. I didn’t want to touch him.

He handed me a folded piece of paper. He was in shock, but he managed a whisper: “They said you would come in for supplies. They left this...” He coughed and gripped what was left of his chest.

I took the blood-spattered paper. “Who?”

His eyes were huge, and his aura was fading. “Two guys came in...and attacked me.”

“I’m so sorry.” Suddenly I understood why humans got upset when their pets die. I’d grown fond of Chris and often wished I could be as carefree and ignorant as him. I’d never asked to know the things I knew. I rose to my feet and put the letter in my pocket. “Chris, you know you’re dying, right?”

“Yeah,” he rasped, smiling weakly. “And it really sucks. So just do it and get it over with.” That’s what I liked about him. He just knew.

I took my gun from my holster and the silencer from my pocket. “Here I’m using the gift you gave me to kill you.” I pointed it directly between his eyes. “Good-bye Chris. I hope we meet again in your next life.” I pulled the trigger. I heard the muffled sound, then silence. Somewhere in the world an infant was taking its first breath. The thought brought a brief smile, then the anger hit.

I couldn’t let myself dwell on it. I left him where he was and looked for ammo that would fit my gun. I grabbed all I could and stuffed it in a backpack. I forced the register open, took all the cash, and packed it in with the ammo. I took one last look at my friend’s body and walked out.

On the other side of the lot Ash and Jessica were loading the car. I passed them and went into the apartment where I had a safe. I’d never trusted banks after the Depression. There in the safe I had ten thousand dollars. I’d stashed money in other locations, but there wouldn’t be time for that. I added the ten grand to the cash in the backpack and went back out to the store. Jessica and Ash were waiting. Ash looked scared, while Jessica acted indifferent.

As I approached them I pulled out the bloody letter Chris had given me.

“It’s already begun,” I said. I opened the letter and read it aloud to them.

Dear Lost One,

Your presence and that of the Dragon is requested by the Quatre. Two weeks from today please go to the Glenbrook Mall at 11 am. Proceed to the overlook above the food court. You will receive further instructions there. If you do not follow this directive you know what the consequences will be. Just ask Chris and Jason.

“It’s not signed,” I said. I looked at the girls. I could hear Ash’s thoughts. They were a scream of chaos and panic. Jessica knew what it meant and was accepting her fate.

“Jessica, we have to leave now. We’re going to the Country Inn over on Cross Creek. If you need to get a hold of us—”

“I won’t need to, Verloren,” she said, cutting me off. “I can’t sit here waiting for whatever they’ve got planned for me. You have to take me out before you leave.” She gave Ash and me a twisted smile. “Besides, you’ll need the feeding.”

“Jessica, I can’t...”

“Don’t argue,” she snapped. “Just do it and get out of here.” She closed her eyes and turned her head away from me, showing her neck.

Ash stared, drawn by morbid curiosity, before stepping back. She wrapped her arms around herself and bowed her head. She instinctively understood our need for privacy.

I bent to hug Jessica, then whispered: “You were right. I do love her.”

“I know you do. I know exactly how much you love her.” Her aura beamed bright, blinding me. “Verloren, you need to know some things before I go. I confess: I knew what she was. I thought she was too old and would have to remain human. I hoped you two could be together if that happened.”

I stepped back. Jessica smiled.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“There’s so much you need to know and only one way to tell you. When you take my blood I’ll let you in.”

“I won’t take your soul,” I promised. Numbness invaded my body.

I took a deep breath and focused. “Goodbye, old friend,” I whispered. “Good luck in the next life. I hope I get to see you again.”

I kept my head down, but Ash was still in my line of vision. She stared, fascinated by the sad horror of it. I bit into Jessica’s neck as gently as I could. I closed my eyes. A tidal wave of thoughts hit my mind. She gave me all she knew about the dragons. It would have filled several books, yet the whole process took only minutes.

Jessica carried me back to a time when vampires and incarnates lived in giant underground communities away from the human population. It had been an age of religious intolerance and persecution when humans had tortured and killed anyone who was different. Our separate communities were the only reason we survived. The dragons had ruled our peaceful communities, but eventually they began dying faster than other dragons were born. They were old souls, and soon they would pass from this world, going extinct.

But recently the born knowing had learned that dragons had not died; they’d gone into hibernation. Each dragon possesses one element, either earth, wind, fire, or water. A dragon could manipulate that element at will. Moving the element brought a burst of energy, and when that energy was spent, the dragon would replace it with sexual energy with a monogamous lover.

Though she was dying, Jessica felt my body twitch, and let go a soft chuckle. I showed her how Ash had come on to me so strongly and Jessica’s thoughts explained this behavior would be the norm from now on. Ash would crave it just like I craved blood, though she wouldn’t need it to survive or change. She would only require it in order to build up the elemental energy.

Jessica showed me what she had been keeping from me: hidden thoughts in my own mind that even Ash hadn’t discovered. These were things I’d forgotten, but Jessica saw every thought and memory I’d ever had. As she showed me these thoughts, she also revealed them to Ash.

Jessica’s body grew limp. She left me as myself, yet I was different. The memory she left me with was so clear I felt as if I were living it. It was a future memory, if such a thing is possible. In it I turned and found Ash sleeping on her stomach. She looked different but I knew that it was her. Her skin was darker. As I stroked her long hair I noticed my hand was no longer pale white. It had color. I was becoming a human. As Ash awoke she smiled at me. I was suddenly aware that her eyes were brown. She rose to kiss me.

I got another image of Ash wrapped in a sheet holding her swollen belly. She was with child. Then I saw Kale hunched over Ash as he fed from her. Fury burned through me as I attacked him, but my strength was no match for his. He threw me against a wall, and as I lay dazed on the floor, he drank from me.

In another scene I woke up in a mountain cave. I walked to the cavern entrance and had to shield my eyes from the sun. My arm was white. My hands started to shake as I remembered what I had become.

Jessica stopped the images and spoke with her thoughts: *You were one of the born knowing and Ash was the last dragon. You were soul mates. She was the only dragon to ever become pregnant in her human form. When Kale discovered she was with child he killed her. The pictures that you see are either premonitions or memories. They might be from the future, but the future is not set in stone.*

I gripped Jessica harder, careful not to crush her frail human bones. Shock flooded my body and my stomach sank. If I hadn't been holding onto her I would've fallen. I'd never guessed. It was the reason that only I could see auras, that only I knew what people were. It wasn't a freak accident or a random gift. I was the forbidden one, yet they allowed me to be.

Kale was one of the oldest vampires, Jessica told me with her thoughts. He'd worked closely with the born knowing. They'd decided that when the last dragon died they would create a new kind of government. Kale would be one of its leaders, maybe the top man. He worried Ash would give birth to another dragon. Impatient for his turn in power, he killed her and hid her body. Kale let you live out of morbid curiosity. That is why the Quatre let you go that last time. Kale couldn't bring himself to kill his creation. He's been experimenting with hybrids ever since. Use caution if you meet him again. There are legends that immortality comes from drinking the dragon's blood, and if you consume their hearts you will gain their elemental power. I think he might want one of each—earth, wind, fire and water—so he will be master of all the elements.

Jessica's mind was starting to fade, yet her thoughts sped up. She wanted to get me the last of the information. *Your name was Varin Holstein. As you mourned for Ash you contemplated suicide, but as a vampire you thought your soul would die too. You thought you might not see her ever again. You've stayed alive all this time, waiting endlessly, in the hope she would come back. Over time your conscious mind forgot about her. Kale turned you in 1348. He's kept an eye on you ever since.*

I strained to get her last thoughts. *Her name was Abriana. She was, and is, your soul mate. You've found her.*

Jessica's heart stopped. I opened my eyes. Ash grasped a shelf to steady herself. She stared at me, panting.

I gently laid Jessica on the floor. So much information so fast. My body was shaking.

"Soul mates," Ash breathed. "Another life."

I reached out to her, my hand trembling. We embraced. She sobbed as I held her. The fierce pulling ripped through my body. "It won't happen again," I promised.

So if the picture I'd seen was of Kale in the past, but I'd thought it was the future, what did that say about every other premonition I'd had?

"We have to go now," I said.

Ash nodded through her tears. We gathered what we needed and left.

Chapter 13 NATURAL INSTINCTS

We left the store and headed to The Country Inn. Chris, Jason, Jessica...all three were gone. We rode silently, trying to absorb their deaths, and Jessica's revelations.

At the Inn I stopped in the unloading zone, grabbed a pen and paper from my backpack, and scrolled a short message. I handed that to Ash along with a large stack of bills.

When she saw the bills her eyes grew huge. "Holy cow! That is a lot of money."

"Take the money and that note up to the front desk. They've dealt with me before; they'll know what to do."

"Okay..."

I watched her as she disappeared into the lobby. I felt as if I might never see her again. In those uncertain moments anger flooded my veins. I knew that if I ever got close to Kale again I would kill him. I would take out Sara too. It was the only way to keep Ash safe, but the idea seemed impossible. They would have the manpower. Ash and I were doomed.

The vision was too dark. My thoughts turned to Ash's new persona and her need to feed off sexual energy. Though she didn't need it to shift or to exercise her power, she would crave sex constantly. When I thought of that in light of our impending doom, my first instinct was to break all laws.

Ash came out holding the key for our room. As she got in I saw she was blushing. She handed me the key.

"Um...apparently we get some kind of...honeymoon suite?"

"I figured you could use being pampered," I told her. "If the idea of us together like that bothers you I can get a separate room."

"No way."

I drove to the parking lot where we unloaded the essentials. I kept watching for people tailing us, but it was pointless. The ones who might be after us would be too well hidden. Suddenly I realized they'd been watching us from the start. Someone had come into Chris's store acting like a customer, then killed him. That person didn't just flee. We were being watched from somewhere nearby.

Still, there was the chance that they'd lost us, so it didn't hurt to change my looks. I grabbed a few items from the car that would help in that effort. When we got to the door to our room we stopped.

"Set your stuff down and close your eyes," I said.

She did as I asked. I took the key from my pocket, opened the door, and set our stuff inside. "Okay, open your eyes," I told her.

She peeked into the room and saw a hallway bedroom, bath, and multi-mirrored Jacuzzi. The living room even had a fireplace. I swept her off her feet and carried her across the threshold. She giggled. As the door closed behind us, I carried her to the bedroom.

"It's beautiful," she sighed.

Numerous pillows and a red rose spread covered the canopied bed. It lay behind sheer white curtains. The curtains were tied to each post with ribbons festooned with red roses. More roses spilled across the headboard of the bed. I laid her down gently. The bed seemed to swallow her. She wrapped her arms around my neck and drew me to her.

She kissed me passionately and I felt my heart pounding. My breaths came hard and fast and suddenly I heard my own loud gasps. I felt embarrassed and pulled back from her. She stared into my eyes. *Verloren, we have a death sentence. This is what I want.*

“It’s what I want too,” I confessed. “I just...I don’t want to hurt you.”

I don’t think you will.

“That’s the problem, you don’t think I will, but I know I will,” I said.

Her eyes dropped from mine. I changed the subject: “Besides, I really need to shower and I’ve got to dye my hair.”

“I wish you wouldn’t,” she said, giving me a sad puppy dog look. “I like the way it is now.”

I gave her a quick kiss.

As Ash parked herself in front of the TV, I dug through our bags until I found the hair dye. I was glad to see that it was the 10-minute kind, and black, which seemed appropriate. In the bathroom I shut the door, then saw the two bathrobes. Every honeymoon suite has them: his and hers.

I stripped off my shirt and applied the dye like a pro. I didn’t need directions. I’d done this too many times. I knew the drill: put on the gloves, mix chemicals, apply. I even remembered the eyebrows. When 10 minutes had passed I stripped and got in the shower. I rinsed out the excess color, then let the water wash over me.

As I turned off the water I heard a humming. It was audible even with the noise of the bathroom fan. I thought nothing of it as I used the dryer on my new jet black hair. In the mirror I looked like an all-out goth. They use make-up to look pale, but I was a natural. I turned off the hair dryer.

As I slipped on a robe and went out to the hall, I could still hear the humming. The bedroom door was open, and I realized it was the Jacuzzi. There I found Ash up to her neck in bubbles. In one of the mirrors I caught myself peeking at her like a pervert. She’d leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She was at peace. Suddenly she sensed me and opened her eyes. The pull in my chest returned.

“Caught me,” I said, embarrassed.

She smiled. “It’s about time you come join me.”

I walked over and sat on the edge of the tub, staring at my feet. “No, that’s okay,” I muttered, running my hand through my hair. “I’m glad you like the tub.”

She stood up and I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Bubbles slid down her body revealing her beauty. The tattoo was darker when it was wet. She stepped close, bent down, and whispered: “I would like it more if you joined me.”

Her scent overwhelmed me. Her lips found my mouth and she kissed me feverishly, untying my robe. I grabbed the belt and retied it. She tried pushing the robe off my shoulders but I opened my arms to keep it up. I placed my hands on the sides of her head to steady her, and slow her.

Why won’t you be with me? She jerked away, and sat back down in the water.

I don’t think I can be with you, without turning you, I told her. *The bite, the urge...I’ll lose control.*

“I don’t care,” she said aloud. “We’re going to die either way.”

As a primal growl escaped me I turned away from her. The growl scared me and I didn’t want it to alarm her.

She got up from the water and grabbed a towel. I closed my eyes, wishing this wasn’t an issue. I heard her footsteps and kept my eyes closed. I was afraid of how I might react to her

naked body. As she slid in next to me and we embraced, I realized she'd wrapped herself in a large towel. Finally I opened my eyes. As I lay my head on her shoulder I could smell her hair. She put her cold hand on my neck. Her mind was as blank as her expressionless face. I kept up my mental wall.

She ran her cool thumb along my jaw line again and again, as if she were petting me. She traced a line across my chin and up to my lips.

When her thumb dug into my mouth I stopped her. "What are you doing?"

Her hand didn't move. As I tried to push her away, I realized she was stronger than I was. As her other hand gripped me behind my neck, I struggled. It was no use. She forced her thumb down hard on my lower teeth. Strange thick blood flooded my mouth. It was over. She stepped back and looked at her thumb. Blood trickled down her hand. She closed her fingers into a fist.

"There," she said. "No more arguments. It's done."

"No more arguments? Are you insane! Do you have any idea what you've done?" I roared. I stood, dumbstruck, and then I felt anger beyond words.

She gazed at me as her thoughts spilled into my head. *Don't bother. I know how mad you are. Now you don't have to worry about hurting me.*

I took a deep breath, held it, then suddenly burst out laughing. Vampires had been known to lose their minds, but I was going to be all right. As I shook my head and looked at her I felt anger, worry, despair and even happiness.

I watched blood trickle down her arm and let out a sigh of defeat. "At least let me take a look at it and bandage it." I held out my hand to her.

When I wiped the blood away there were no teeth marks, just skin as white as mine. The whiteness was spreading. As I stared at it I said: "I don't know what you will become."

It didn't affect you much. You weren't human, so it actually helped. You have something more than a normal vampire. You have an extraordinary vision, she thought.

"That's different," I said. "I was a born knowing, not an incarnate. Vampires were the strongest of our kind. You've already proved that's no longer true. You were already much stronger than I am. You didn't need this. You don't understand the life you've chosen."

"I do understand," she countered. "I've seen it in your mind. I wasn't looking for a new lifestyle, I was looking for you." She looked down at her bloodied hand. I held it lightly.

"Vampires lose their souls, Ash. Why would you do it?"

"Human vampires lose their souls. You and I weren't human. I saw in Jessica's mind the hope she had for us to move on to another life after death."

"That's not a guarantee," I said. "It was just Jessica's theory."

If this is the only way that we can be together, than so be it. Either we live together, forever and immortal, or we meet our fate together, equally. I don't want to come back in another life without you. Tears welled up in her eyes.

I kissed her. She laid her hand on my chest and ran it down to my stomach. I grabbed her hand.

I smiled at her and shook my head. "You're so eager."

She giggled.

"Let's get it cleaned up." I gently pulled her to the tub.

She sniffed her hand, then licked it. I laughed at her. "That's not a requirement."

"I know, but it's symbolic. Anyway, I have to get used to it."

As she kissed me I tasted her blood on her tongue. Unlike human blood it was thick and sweet. In that moment, I almost lost control. I kissed her again and again down her neck, and my

hands wandered under her towel. I caught myself and stepped back. "I...I...I'm sorry," I stammered.

She bit her lip and looked at me. "You don't have to apologize."

It scared me how quickly my natural instincts had kicked in, spinning things out of control. What if I went too far and wound up killing her.

We washed her hand in the tub, then I let her dress in private. She emerged from the bedroom in pajamas. She looked tired. The virus was already spreading.

"I can barely keep my eyes open," she said.

"Maybe you should lie down," I told her. "It looks like the virus is working pretty quick. You're going to want to sleep a lot."

I helped her into bed. She was weak already, and fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. I let her be.

I watched TV for a while, then felt tired. I lay down, trying not to disturb her, but just as I got settled, she cuddled up to me.

She kissed me and pulled at my clothes. I caught her hand. It was like grabbing a stone. She could have easily continued but yielded.

It doesn't matter anymore. Remember?

She was right. I couldn't deny her anymore. I would always let her have what she wanted.

Chapter 14
PITCH BLACK

I woke in darkness and looked at the clock: four in the morning. I'd slept for a long time. At first I thought I was burning up, but it wasn't me, it was Ash. Her aura was changing with black outlines forming around the red. Her skin was hot to the touch. Just lying next to her was enough to make me sweat. Moonlight filtered through the window.

I lay on my side watching her. Her sleeping face looked peaceful. One of her hands was tucked under her pillow and the other was entwined in my hair.

I felt her forehead with the back of my hand. She was burning up. I gently pulled her hair from her face and noticed a small lump on her forehead a couple of inches above her temple. I touched it. Her eyes fluttered and she moaned.

"Sleep, my love," I whispered.

She pulled her hand out of my hair and rubbed her forehead. She touched the lump and winced.

"What is that?" she murmured. "It feels tender, like I hit my head." She ran her hand to the other side of her forehead where she found an identical lump. It too caused her to wince. As I watched her I realized her irises had gone from brilliant blue to dark purple.

"I can only give you my best guess," I said. "I believe you're going through the change. You've got a fever. I should run you a lukewarm bath. It might cool you down." I turned on the bedside lamp. When I pulled back the covers I noticed a hand-sized patch of skin on her stomach had already turned white. I pointed to it. "Apparently you will be as white as me." I kept myself from looking directly at her. I felt ashamed of biting her so many times in so many places. These white spots were like a map of my assaults. They were spreading over her entire body.

She looked at the spot on her stomach, then at one on her wrist. "Look," she said. "It's making my tattoo disappear." A large spot across the inside of her wrist had turned completely white, erasing what had been there before.

"Wow!" she cried as she rolled onto her back. She reached back, but couldn't get to the painful spot.

I walked around the bed to see what had disturbed her. Two large bumps the size of eggs protruded symmetrically from between her shoulder blades and her spine. Another lump was forming at the end of her spine.

I'd also bitten her on the shoulder and now the white stretched there. I touched one of the bumps.

She pulled away. "It's really tender. I guess I'm trying to shift."

I sat on the bed, pulled her chin to me, and kissed her. "Remember," I breathed, "this has never been done before. We don't know what will happen. I just always want you to know that I love you."

Her eyes teared with black liquid. "I love you too," she said, closing her eyes. I wiped a black tear from her cheek and showed it to her.

"What is that? My tear?"

"I'll draw a bath for you," I said. As I got up I kissed her, and whispered: "When you look in the mirror you'll be surprised."

In the bathroom I ran the water in the Jacuzzi, checking the temperature every minute or so. She would need cool water to get her fever down.

She appeared, hanging onto the doorframe. I stood up and lifted her. She protested, but then saw herself in the mirrors. “Is that me?”

“Let me help you,” I said, holding her as we entered the tub together. As her skin burned against mine I knew the lukewarm water must feel like ice to her.

She closed her eyes, curled up, and wrapped her arms around her legs. I bathed both of us. As I leaned over her to rinse the soap from her hair she opened her eyes. Her teeth chattered. She pulled me close and kissed me passionately. She was not shy about it.

I want you now.

“You’re too weak for that. I’ve already taken too much blood.” My rapid breathing and heartbeat betrayed my words.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pushed against me. Her strength had grown. I felt as if I were trapped in a vise. Her body trembled with fever.

I caught my breath and said: “In a few more days you won’t have these limitations, but until then you need to save your strength. This is only the first day. You’ve got four more to go.”

“But what if I mutate into something you can’t bring yourself to physically love?” she asked. “I want to be with you.”

I pulled away from her and she reluctantly let me go. “Ash, I’m begging you. We shouldn’t do this. You can’t take any more blood loss.”

Finally she smiled at me and for the first time I saw her fangs. I laughed. They were like a dog’s canines, top and bottom. They weren’t very noticeable, being no bigger than human canine teeth, but they came to sharp points.

“Look at you,” I said, “turning into a stereotypical vampire.”

She glanced at a mirror while reading my mind. “I’ll have to be more careful when I kiss you now, huh?”

I nodded. “Now you’re stronger than I am, so you’ll have to be careful not to break me.”

She looked down at her knees. “I’m sorry. I just really wanted to be with you.”

“I want to be with you too, Ash, but we have to wait until this change is done. You need to save your energy. This is the beginning. You’re still weak and this will take everything you’ve got. Anything physically taxing is going to drain you.”

She bowed her head. “Not any more. Remember I feed off of it. You know the physical... stuff.” She looked up from under her lashes. “Besides I can’t help myself.”

I chuckled. “Right now you must think I’m some kind of irresistible stud, but that’s just the change happening. Your body craves it. You would be able to seduce any man that you want with a look.”

“But I only want you,” she said. *Remember...soul mates.*

Yes. *Soul mates*, I thought.

She crept closer to me. My chest ached. The pull I’d been feeling was now replaced with fire. She smiled as she read my mind. She kissed me and ran her hand down my chest. I surrendered to her pleading. I couldn’t have stopped her if I’d tried.

That afternoon she turned the fireplace on, took a book from one of her bags, and lay on the couch reading. Finally she dozed off. Once she was asleep I found it impossible to wake her.

I turned on the television. Housekeeping stopped by. I told the maid we were there for an extended stay and my fiancé was ill. Could we leave the old sheets and towels out in the hall? I

asked. If they replaced those with fresh bedding I could do the rest. That, combined with a good tip, convinced her. Ash slept through all of it.

I went out to the car and got the rest of our things. I returned to find her still sleeping. I called room service and ordered an assortment of dishes. I wondered when she would go from food to blood.

After falling asleep on the sofa Ash didn't wake up for a long time. That evening I carried her to bed, then stayed up watching television. I nodded off, had a strange nightmare, and awoke early Tuesday morning. The sun had not yet appeared. I tried to remember the dream, but couldn't. All I knew was that it seemed as if time were running out.

When I checked on her I noticed patches of white hair forming. She still had a fever. As I felt her forehead I noticed the two lumps had grown. They were forming points. The areas around them looked bruised. Paper-thin skin stretched over the dark areas. She was growing horns.

She didn't stir even when I removed her robe. The lumps between her shoulder blades were arching up—wings. At the base of her spine I saw the beginnings of a tail. Though I was glad she was sleeping through it, I wondered how she would react when she saw her new additions in the mirror.

I parted her lips. Her canines were a little longer and the teeth on each side of them were now pointed too. I ran my finger across them. When I nicked my finger, a drop of blood fell into her mouth. I barely pulled my hand back before she slammed her jaw shut. The snap was audible. I took that as a sign she would most likely eat what I ate.

The paleness spread across her skin until a quarter of her body was the purest white I had ever seen. Her tattoos disappeared.

I got up, realizing I couldn't live with the silence. I watched the TV news and learned they'd found Chris and Jessica's bodies. They were searching for people of interest. That would be us. Once Ash transformed we would have to move.

I pulled out the little boom box with the CD player and found the CDs. Jessica had done well by us. I put in a CD of slow cello music by Adam Hurst and turned the volume down low. In my mind this would become the theme music for Ash's change.

The days came and went. Ash slept. She shifted slowly, going from her side to lying on her stomach with her face turned away from the door. The covers were around her waist. She reminded me of Sleeping Beauty, but that worried me. How had Sleeping Beauty stayed alive? Ash hadn't eaten for days and her body was thinning.

Each day I bathed her and moved her to the sofa to change the sheets. The fever still had her sweating profusely. I made constant trips to the ice machine to keep her temperature down.

Finally her fever broke, but she still slept.

I stood in the doorway looking at her. I hoped her change was ending. Her flesh and hair had turned white and she'd grown two black-spiraled horns about three inches long. Her bat-shaped white wings were almost as long as she was tall. They'd unfolded around her. Her tail went past

her feet. It amused me to see it twitch as she slept, much like that of a dreaming dog. Her vampire skin had the softness of velvet.

She didn't have a dragon's scales and the rest of her looked human. In the end her teeth hadn't changed much, but her aura had altered completely. The thin red line around her faded into black. When I looked directly at it the red wasn't even visible. I could only see it with peripheral vision.

To a human she would look like a demon or the devil itself. To me she looked like an angel.

As the sad music played on I returned to the window by the fireplace and watched the world pass through the night. Headlights moved down the street as snow dusted the ground. For a moment I imagined being human. From my viewpoint their existence seemed easy and carefree.

As I grew hungrier I thought of feeding, but I couldn't leave her alone. If she was anything like a vampire, she would be ravenous when she woke up. I listened to the mournful cello, leaned my forehead against the cool winter glass and closed my eyes.

What could we do? I wondered. Once Kale found us he would kill us both. The only plus side was that she would be happy until that happened. This is what she wanted. But our last days would be few if we weren't careful.

Memories of my flashing premonitions filled my head. It was like looking back on a distant past. The pictures were fuzzy and my fears of the Quatre clouded my vision. Were these pictures of the past or future? I couldn't remember.

A cold silent hand touched my shoulder. In that instant, images raced by. I saw Sara. Then she was gone. My stomach lurched. I tried to not act startled.

I turned and saw pitch black irises. I was awake, looking at Ash. She looked so sad.

"The music is so beautiful. It's such a tragedy that it plays in the presence of such an ugly monster." The black liquid filled her eyes and threatened to spill down her cheek.

She stood with a sheet wrapped around her body beneath her wings. Every mark on her body had vanished into whiteness. I couldn't help but touch her. As my fingers met her shoulder I felt a vibration. As I drew her close she ran her hands across my chest.

"You are not a monster," I said. "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." I turned her face to mine and kissed her.

The music put us into a hypnotic state. She wrapped her wings around me, then let go. She stepped back from me and said: "I'm hungry."

"Me too."

I took her hand and led her to get dressed.

Chapter 15 COLD-BLOODED

Ash and I would have had a lot to explain in a roadside search so I tried not to speed on the snow-slicked two-lane highway. My stomach ached from hunger.

I glanced at Ash. She looked determined. We'd decided on a skirt to accommodate her new tail. Until we could get some sewing supplies and alter her normal clothes she'd be stuck in skirts and halter tops. At that moment she was wrapped in my favorite trench coat to cover her wings and tail. We'd tried to conceal her horns with a hat but it hadn't worked. She'd dyed her hair, but that only helped cover them in dim lighting.

Though I'd told her my reasons for preferring to feed in large cities, she'd persuaded me to head for a small town in Ohio. I knew she must have a consuming appetite and I was willing to go along. Ash had just become one of the most powerful creatures on Earth and now I suspected she wanted to use her new abilities to settle a score. As we sped toward our destination I smiled. This was going to be fun.

"I don't even have to project my thoughts to you for you to read my mind," she said, seeing my smile.

"I would have never thought this of you," I said.

"Just this once," she said. "After this I won't care who or where."

I slowed as we entered the small town and read the sign: Payne, Ohio. She stared straight ahead. "Pain is all it ever brought me," she muttered.

She showed me where to turn. Most of the stores and businesses in town were within a two-block radius. Half the buildings were deserted. Ash told me to park on a side street, past an alley. The town seemed dead.

"Okay, now what?" I asked.

She surveyed the area. There were no cars. "Follow me," she said, opening her door. She jumped out and jogged past the front of a lit-up pizza joint, then down the alley beside it. I followed. At the rear of the pizza shop she turned right and disappeared into a narrow gap between buildings. I ducked in behind her.

From our hiding place we kept watch on the alley. The only light came from a dim bulb at the back of the pizza joint and the opening to the street on the far end. Ash turned and we faced each other. I heard her thoughts.

There's a bar up ahead where the light is. All the drunks around here hang out there. They park their cars on the side streets and cut through this alley to get to and from the bar. I'm waiting for one particular drunk. He might be with someone else, but I want you to leave that person alone. The rest is yours.

Care to share the story while we wait? I asked. I hugged her to keep her warm.

Not much of a story. One is a good friend. I'd like to see him get it together. The other is a monster of the worst kind... Just understand: I don't want anyone to have to go through what I did ever again.

I kissed her. A door slammed hard. She pulled back from me, listening intently. *This one you can have.* As she stepped back into the shadows, I heard the shuffling rhythm of a drunk's walk. As he passed in front of us I sent the thoughts to stop him. He froze. I pulled him into the gap. His aura was normal human white. He reeked of tobacco and alcohol. The alcohol would be an added treat.

His mind was full of the jumbled thoughts of a drunk. Fear pumped through him. He wanted to fight me but his body wouldn't follow his thoughts. I grabbed his shoulders, pulled him close and sank my teeth into his throat. Thin alcoholic blood sprayed my face. I took in his aura and blood in a hungry rush. His body went limp in my grasp. Even after his heart stopped I got almost all of it.

Past where Ash stood, the passage opened into a small overgrown clearing. I carried him there and dumped him.

Some pot smokers will find him within a couple of days, she told me.

When I got back to Ash I wrapped my arms around her. She smiled at me coyly.

"What?" I asked.

She pushed in close and licked my mouth and face. When I started wiping away blood with my hand she licked my fingers clean. She kissed me.

I grabbed both of her thighs, brought them up, and she wrapped her legs around my waist. She wrapped her tail around my thigh. Lost in our vampire embrace, we bit into each other's necks. She was hungry. What I had would give her some fulfillment. As we drank we explored each other's minds.

Finally we separated. As we caught our breaths she whispered: "Wow, that was different."

I stumbled from the alcohol. "Now you understand," I said. "Things can get out of control for a vampire. I didn't want to hurt you, but you needed to see. It's a different kind of intimacy. You end up sharing mind, body, and blood."

"Completely," she breathed. Hearing her made me want more than a kiss. I reached for her. At that moment the bar door slammed again.

Ash pulled back from me, took off her coat, and threw it into the clearing. She motioned for me to follow the coat. Her eyes sparkled like a child's on Christmas morning. "This one is mine," she growled, revealing a menacing smile. She reminded me of a cat.

I went back into the clearing and picked up her coat. I would not watch. This was for her. She was righting a wrong she'd endured as a human.

I listened to the two drunken male voices. They said their goodbyes, then one went down the street and the other came into the alley. Even back in the clearing I could feel her hatred. She kept her thoughts walled off, maybe to protect herself from sadness, or possibly to shelter me from the knowledge of what she'd endured.

I heard her move, and call, "Hey!"

After a pause the drunk answered: "Hey... what the hell are you doing here? I told... I told you." He laughed. "I knew you'd be back. You just can't seem to get it through your stupid fucking head that I'm the best you're gonna get."

"Shut up and get your drunken ass over here," she hissed.

I heard him stumble. I hung my head and closed my eyes.

"Don't you tell me to shut up, you stupid whore!"

If she didn't kill him, I would. I heard a choking sound and knew she had him by the throat. There was the flap of her wings opening. When I heard his feet scraping the ground I knew she was pulling him down, into the darkness.

"I'm not a whore," she breathed. "I'm not stupid. I don't deserve anything you did to me. And I am not! not! not! going to let you do it again... to anyone... ever."

I heard the snap and crunch of bone and cartilage. She'd bitten deep, tightening her grip. She pulled his blood quickly. His struggling slowed, then stopped. She let go of his body. It slid down the wall to the ground. More bones broke, then silence.

Suddenly her hand was on my shoulder. She'd become so stealthy since her change. We embraced, then she pulled back.

"I'm ready to go now."

I looked down at the broken man. She'd crushed his neck and face, but only after he was dead. She'd done him a favor. I would've killed him slowly, giving him far more pain. I stepped over him and followed her.

As we reached the car I glanced around. The streets were empty. I went around to the driver's side. She stood by the passenger door, licking the blood from her hands. She stumbled then giggled.

"You'll notice that if the person is drunk or high you get a dose of whatever they're on." As I got behind the wheel I noticed I was feeling good myself. "Where to now?"

"Wherever you wanted to go before I dragged you to this godforsaken town," she said. "Might as well make a night of it."

In that week before we were to meet the Quatre we both consumed more than normal. For the first time since I could remember, my body was growing. Most of it was muscle. I was glad I wore my clothes baggy.

Ash liked my transformation. I encouraged her to eat as much as she craved. She'd lost weight going through her vampire change. A few days of frequent feeding filled out her hips, restoring her curvaceous figure.

We made a game of it. Ash found that she gained most from human blood. She experimented with her new mental powers, reading their thoughts, projecting her own thoughts into their minds, and generally toying with them.

We traveled to several clubs where I showed her different incarnates. We kept to the shadows of the goth scene. That was where we fit in best.

In one club I bribed the manager to give us a booth in a shadowy corner. There we sat, watching various incarnates. I pointed out a couple of visitors from other planets.

"Really? Another planet?" She seemed amazed.

"Really." I could barely take my eyes off Ash. As I pushed her hair from her eyes, our waitress showed up with four shots of vodka.

She looked at me, puzzled. "Why did you order those anyway? We can't drink them...can we?"

I picked up a shot glass and drank it.

"We can eat and drink anything we want. There's just no real food value or nutrition." I drank another shot. "But just as we can get drunk from the alcohol in the human's blood, we can also just drink it straight, and get drunk even faster. After all, you have to at least try to act human in public."

"But a lot of the customers here aren't exactly human," she said.

I nodded. "That's true, and we should keep that in mind. We can't sit here staring them down. That's going to make them as restless as a herd of wild buffalo. Some of these people are incarnates who don't know it yet. They may not ever find out, but most of them have a kind of sixth sense that tells them something is off about us."

Loud music kept our conversation from human ears, but we could hear ourselves and pick up some of the talk among the incarnates around us. Ash gulped one of the shots.

“So, what do we do to fit in?” she asked, picking up her second shot.

“Look around,” I said. “What do you see?”

“People talking...dancing.”

I bent, touching my nose to her collar bone. I gave her cool neck a massage on one side as I ran my nose up to her ear on the other. I inhaled her. “What else?” I whispered, kissing her softly under her ear.

Her breathing quickened. She ran her fingers through my hair. “People...people searching...”

“For what?”

“Love.”

She kissed me furiously and ran her frozen fingers across my chest. I pulled her close. Her breath was like ice water filling my lungs. She broke the kiss, panting.

“See? Acting human isn’t that bad is it?” I kissed the hollow of her throat. “Now very discretely look to the bar. You will see a medium-build Asian man with wire-rim glasses making out with a blonde girl.”

Ash lay back on the bench, trying to drag me down with her. I laughed and brought her back up again.

“Not here, love.” I chuckled. “Wait until we get back to the hotel.”

With her mind she begged.

Always so eager, I thought. I kissed her again. *The man with the blonde is a demon.*

What? she thought.

That’s what we call them. They’re as old as the Earth. They’ve evolved with it and they try to maintain an equal mix of good and bad in the world. They don’t go through any visible, dramatic shifts because they are always shifting, or evolving. With a single word they can strongly influence a person to do something against his or her will. It could be good or bad, depending on the life they have chosen. If one of these beings chooses good, he or she becomes an angel who gives life, but giving life to others takes away from the angel’s life force. If they choose to become demons, their influence is bad, and they can take lives...

She finished the thought for me: *...and they gain from it.* She glanced toward the bar. I kissed her under the chin, then followed her gazed.

As the blonde girl kissed him, the demon stared straight at us.

I don’t like him. She stared at him, then at me. *He’s not putting up a wall, but I can’t read his mind.* She nuzzled her face into my neck. *He’s influencing that girl. She doesn’t know why she’s doing what she’s doing. Her mind is screaming in rebellion. But she can’t stop.*

Just keep your distance from them and don’t listen to anything they say. I stroked her chin.

I can read the aliens. One doesn’t know and the other does. So that means that the one that knows can shift, right?

I nodded. *Yes. But he probably won’t. Most likely Earth’s atmosphere is different from that of his world. He could shift, but only for a few seconds. Aliens don’t have any special abilities, just the possibility of understanding that they are tourists here.*

What about Sara? You said she is a fairy. Where is she from? Ash thought.

The mention of Sara sent a flash through my head.

“Are you okay? I just saw something...in your mind,” Ash said, using her physical voice.

“Yeah. That’s what Jessica told me about. I had my wall down. Sorry you had to see that, whatever it was. It pretty much blinded me.”

It was a blur of images, she told me. *I couldn’t keep up...*

What were we talking about... I thought. Oh, right...Sara. A fairy. Fairies, elves, trolls, dwarves, and dragons like you, all come from another realm. Fairies and trolls are very similar except for odor and looks. You remember Patti from the store—she was a troll. Trolls are deceitful liars and thieves. They won't stop until they get what they want. Trolls have a glamour effect: they can manipulate their appearance.

Fairies are persuasive, like a demon, and truly greedy. They will tell you whatever you want to hear, and make you believe it, but they don't have any other abilities.

Then there are elves and dwarves. They're good people. They tend to keep to themselves. Both are crafty with their hands. Elves can communicate with animals easily. The dwarves I've met are very good artists.

It's kind of like the whole universe, and all its realms, have to keep an equal ratio of good and evil. You, as a dragon, are the referee. Your job is to make sure the balance doesn't go too far to the evil side.

I cradled her face in my hands and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around my neck and stared into my eyes. A fire ripped through my body. She started to pull me down to the bench again. From beneath the table all I could see was the legs of nearby dancers.

You'll have to wait until we get back to the hotel to seduce me. Otherwise we'll get arrested for public indecency, I told her. So the question is, are we going to eat tonight? Or are we going to skip?

She looked around the club. *One or two?*

One for you will be fine. I'll just take the aura, I told her.

"I think you should eat too," Ash said.

"You're just trying to fatten me up."

"Hey, more cushion for the pushin'."

I laughed as she looked around the club.

A girl in her mid-twenties walked toward us. She was dressed in black and had long black hair, a lot of black eye makeup and bright red lipstick. *She abuses her toddler,* Ash thought. The girl stared at Ash through vacant eyes.

I stood and let the girl in to sit between Ash and me. Ash spoke to the girl, convincing her we already knew her. No one else paid any attention to what happened in our isolated booth. I grabbed the girl's hand and held it.

Ash leaned toward the girl. I looked around. No one was watching. *Careful,* I thought. *Make it look normal.*

The girl's fingers buzzed with vibrations. Ash froze her stiff with a thought. Ash raised her hand to the girl's ear, as if she were telling her secrets. She bit down gently just below the girl's ear. Ash began to feed. I closed my eyes and pulled the aura. I felt the girl's body go limp. Ash laid the teetering head to the side, as if the girl had passed out.

Ash sat up, leaned across the girl, and kissed me. I tasted the blood and it made me hungry in more ways than one. I felt the fire in my chest.

"We need to go," I told Ash. I could barely contain myself. She smirked at me as we left the girl hidden in the dark booth.

The day before the meeting that would determine our fate, Ash and I went to a secluded wooded area. She'd grown tired of smoky dark bars and wanted to be out in the light, but away

from people. I wasn't that thrilled with the daylight. It bothered my eyes more than hers. But it was what she wanted. We drove down a country road to a deserted house. The snow had melted and the ground was soft. The temperature was cold but not freezing. Behind the house lay a dense woods. We walked into the woods and went about a mile.

Why am I so tired? She thought.

"Because you're still cold-blooded," I said out loud. "Your body is trying to hibernate. Whenever we spend a lot of time out in the cold you'll get lethargic."

"Hm. Never thought of that."

She walked up to a tall tree with a trunk at least three feet in diameter. When she pushed, it fell right over, hitting other trees on the way down. She made it look easy.

"Okay," I said. "That tells us what you've got. I might be strong but not that strong. We should get you warmed up." She gazed at the felled tree and shrugged. She followed me back to the car. We were as ready as we'd ever be.

Chapter 16 NO REGRETS

I tried to divert her attention from our possible fates by showing her the new life she'd taken on. The premonitions seemed to be fading. Now when I saw them it was like looking through a window rather than stepping into a scene. They were more like distant echoes of the past than meaningful stirrings of the future.

When the day of our meeting at the mall came I knew I couldn't take Ash. She wasn't ready for a public shopping center. I hoped this wouldn't compromise the Quatre's plans. I felt we could still make it out of this situation alive, but I knew any smart bookie would've set the odds against us.

I woke up early and packed our stuff into the car. I had been through this once before, so I knew the drill. We had to get on the road. Only then would they give us instructions. There would be directions to a plane or train. We would wind up at an undisclosed location. Along the way some people would have pieces of the puzzle, but no one person would be able to get us to the Quatre.

The Quatre never disclosed their location until they had to. They had several safe havens throughout the world and were constantly moving from one to another.

I woke Ash so she would be ready for the meeting. I planned to have her stay in the car as insurance. I knew she could take care of herself if someone decided to make a preemptive strike.

During our travels I'd bought sewing supplies. After she showered I got them out and helped her alter her clothes. We slit her jeans in the back to accommodate her tail, and she selected a belt. She would need one now to keep her pants up. We slit her shirt from the bottom to just below the neck on each side and hemmed the borders to keep them from fraying. We then attached two buttons to keep the middle flap down. To cover her wings she always wore the trench coat. The wings folded close to her back and the trench coat lay pretty flat.

I was fastening the back of her shirt as she asked me, *What will they want to do?*

I turned her around to look her in the eye. "More than likely they want to kill you," I said. "Up to now there might've been a chance they would just want to get control of you and use you in some kind of power play." I pointed to her horns. "But now that you've changed they'll want to kill us both."

That's another reason I wanted this. She looked down at herself. *I wanted to make sure it was all worth it. If I'm about to die, I want it to be for a damn good reason.* She looked back to me and showed me her fanged smile. *And it must be with you.*

"You've seen everything in my mind. You know what we're up against. I won't go down without a fight." I grabbed her chin. "You've given me something worth fighting for. I will do everything I can to keep you unharmed, but from the look of it, you'll be able to take care of yourself." I kissed her. "We need to go."

I put on my holster. I knew they would take the gun from me, but until then I preferred to be armed. I put on my black hooded jacket.

As I watched to make sure no one was looking we hurried to the car. Once we were inside I gave her a blanket and a pillow and she huddled down. She arched her wings out so she could sit more comfortably. After I'd checked out at the front desk, we drove to the mall. The whole way there I kept one hand on the wheel while she gripped the other. She looked at me, as if to apologize for the mess her identity had caused. I squeezed her fingers.

Once we were in the parking lot I looked for a space far from the entrances. As long as Ash had to stay in the car I didn't want anyone bothering her. I gave her one last look, shut the car door, and walked to the entrance. Inside the mall most of the older people stared at me. It was one more reminder of why I wanted to leave the conservative Midwest. As I reached the food court overlook I saw another vampire nodding to me. I assumed he was my contact.

He had the look of a henchman, tall and muscle-bound. He leaned back against the railing, arms crossed, holding an envelope in his fingers. His bleach-blond hair was pulled into a low ponytail and he watched me through the lenses of sunglasses that were too small for him. With his spray tan and muscles bulging from under a T-shirt and ripped jeans, he looked more like a body builder than a vampire. No human would guess, but I knew him by his aura.

I reached the railing and stood next to him. I looked out at the food court as he kept his back to it. I rested my elbows on the railing

His voice was deep, but not threatening. "Where's the girl?"

"Waiting for me to come back with the instructions." I watched as the people below chatted and munched on processed food. They would never know how lucky they were in their ignorance.

The spray-tanned vampire handed me the envelope. He sighed. "There's everything you need for the next step. I hear you've done this before." He smirked. It was no secret I'd been incredibly lucky to walk away alive the first time, but no one met with the Quatre twice and survived.

I took the envelope and walked out the way I'd come in. Outside I glanced in the envelope: a map to a private airport, along with instructions. I shoved it into my pocket, and headed to the car.

Ash seemed to shrink under her blanket. She was shivering. She'd kept her cold-blooded trait. Her skin was always cool to the touch and her temperature fluctuated with the environment around her. I feared that if her body temperature dropped too low she might go into hibernation. "You could have started the car and run the heat, Ash," I gently chided her.

She peeked from under the blanket as I started the car. "It's okay. I'm curious about everything—including how cold might affect me. I wanted to see what would happen."

I handed her the envelope. She took it with trembling hands. Her teeth chattered as she spoke: "What's this?"

"Directions to a private airport." I drove through the parking lot and turned onto the main road.

We'd been on the road a while when Ash finally grabbed a book of CDs. She flipped through them, found what she was looking for, put it in the player, and selected the song she wanted. It was The Used's "I Caught Fire." Jessica had loved that band and hearing them made me sad.

We drove for an hour until we reached a building in the middle of endless cornfields. To passersby this structure would look like a hangar for crop-dusting planes. Two men stood in a hangar entrance waving at us to pull in.

Ash looked worried. I laid my hand on her thigh. "It won't happen here. Read them."

"They don't know about my change," she said, her voice on the edge of panic.

We pulled into the building and parked in the space they indicated. Nearby was a small aircraft.

"Stay here," I said. I got out of the car and examined the private jet.

The two incarnates approached me. They wore plain street clothes: T-shirts and jeans with tennis shoes. Both men were werewolves. I felt a pang of grief for Jason. The bald one was shorter than me. He wore a goatee and a closely-cropped mustache. The other was six feet, clean-shaven, with short spiky blond hair. Both were medium build.

The one with the shaved head spoke: "What's the hold up? Get your stuff and the girl and get on board." He had a gruff Latino accent.

The blond peered in the back window to see Ash. He stepped back. "Something's not right," he said. "She's no shifter. She doesn't smell right." He glared at me.

I glanced from one to the other, then settled on the short one. "Look, this girl is fragile and the last thing I need is you guys making her uneasy." I looked back to the blond. Did he really smell something or was he just talking? "You need to be careful," I told him. "You might upset her and we don't want that...do we? I think we all know what a dragon is capable of."

The blond spoke to the shorter werewolf. "I would have never come if you'd told me..." "Shut up!" the shorter man snapped.

On cue Ash opened the passenger door. I took her hand and helped her rise gracefully from the car. She kept her head down. I turned to see the blond with his mouth agape. The other man's face was flush with anger.

The bald man spoke quietly: "What have you done? You are in some big fucking trouble." He stomped toward us. I could see the muscles in his jaw constrict as he ground his teeth.

Ash's wings started to twitch as she shrunk from him. I grabbed her wrist to steady her, but it was like touching a statue.

The angry bald man cursed, his brown eyes freezing into shock. "What the fuck..." He grabbed the collar of her trench coat and yanked it.

She cried out. Once her arms were free of the coat, she sobbed, clinging to me. She didn't like anyone—not even this man—looking at her as if she were a monster. I drew my gun and pointed it between his eyes. Her wings surrounded me and her tail wrapped around my leg as if she were afraid he was going to do to her what he'd done with her coat.

I glared at him. He stared, shocked. I drew her head close to my neck. She cried and gripped me. She buried her face in my chest, muffling her sobs. If I shot this guy, it would be fatal, maybe for all of us. She kept clutching me as I talked: "You will not upset her again or I will fucking kill you."

The blond trembled. With his gun trained toward me, we were left in a Mexican standoff. I kept his short friend in my peripheral vision.

As the taller one gave me back her coat, I allowed him to take my gun. Ash wept. I soothed her. I hit the button for the trunk, then draped Ash's coat back over her shoulders, directing her to go to the plane.

"They think I'm a freak," she whispered as we climbed into the plane.

They got our bags from the car, argued between themselves, and finally tossed our stuff inside the plane after us. The short one boarded and headed for the cockpit, while the blond stuck his head in the portal.

"The flight will take close to thirty hours," said the blond. "We'll make a couple of short stops. There is a bedroom in back with a full bath. Make yourselves comfortable." He closed the exit door. It felt as if he were sealing our coffin.

The seating area was decorated as a living room with overstuffed recliners and all beige furniture. We had leather-upholstered, first-class plane seats. We walked through the living area and kitchen toward the bedroom.

Ash's face was streaked from her black tears. I laughed. "You look like a kid who's been playing in the dirt." I wiped a tear from her face and showed it to her.

"Here's the bathroom if you want to wash up. I'll get our bags." I helped her with her coat and watched her fold her wings in to go into the bathroom.

I turned to find the blond standing by our bags, staring at her back as she closed the door. It was times like this I hated being so short.

I picked up our bags and looked up at him. The top of my head was level with the bottom of his nose. I gave him a frozen stare and said: "You will not humiliate her or make her uncomfortable. She can, and will, read your thoughts."

"Really?" With that he turned and walked out. The plane began rolling out of the hangar.

The bedroom where I put our bags had a queen-size bed and a small vanity. There was also a flat screen television.

Ash sat on the bed. "I'm sorry for the way I acted. That guy...I read his thoughts...he just..."

"It's okay." I sat beside her and took her hand.

The plane stopped at the base of a runway. A stern voice came over the speaker. "You have five minutes before we take off."

"That means we have to buckle up," I said. Once we were seated, the plane started again. Moments later, we were in the air.

When we leveled, she looked at me, her eyes sparkling. "I've never flown before."

"My heart flies every time I kiss you." I placed my hand behind her head and pulled her to me.

She giggled. *That must be the cheesiest pick-up line I've ever heard.* We kissed. As our lips parted she said breathlessly: "But it's working." For a few more moments we kissed passionately before retreating to the bedroom. There we watched TV.

"They think they know what we're doing back here," she giggled.

"Maybe we should give them something to talk about," I growled. I moved closer to her and kissed her on the neck, pretending to bite her. I growled and snarled.

She laughed and pushed me away. *Now they're certain what we are doing and they're jealous.*

I grabbed her chin and brought her face to mine. I breathed in her scent. "You find amusement in my uncontrollable love for you." I kissed her hard.

"Yes." She laughed breathlessly as she broke away from my kiss.

"Are you happy with the decision you've made?" I asked.

She frowned. She turned and lay on her stomach with her head turned toward me. *What? You have second thoughts?* She asked. *You don't want me?*

No, I thought, that's not it, and you know it. I couldn't leave you if I tried. I belong to you only. My heart and soul. It's just that...you got so upset when they pointed out what you've become. I just didn't know if you regretted it. I ran my hand through her hair.

"I will never regret any decision I make if it keeps me with you." She closed her eyes.

I let her look into my mind to see how happy she made me. She smiled. Her breathing slowed. She slept.

I lay down beside her and ran my hand down her arm as I watched her. I thought I heard her whisper but her mouth didn't move. As I leaned closer I heard conversation. Our foreheads were nearly touching. I closed my eyes and realized I was seeing her dream. I was happy to see myself

there, but soon my feelings turned to fear. What was worse was that the fear made sense. I pulled away from her. She had no peace, not even in sleep.

I was tired. I slept too.

Chapter 17

STILL KICKING

When I woke up I decided to take advantage of their bathroom, if only to wash my face. I walked into the living area, and found the man with the shaved head sitting in one of the recliners. He stroked his short goatee as he glared at me. I did my best to show no emotion. Ash had already indicated she didn't like this guy. I agreed, but I refused to let him get to me. I went into the bathroom, washed up, then came back out. He hadn't moved.

I checked the bedroom. Ash was still sleeping. With nothing else to do I decided to find out what I could about the bald man.

Acting as if I owned the place, I sat down across from him and met his scowl head-on. I said nothing. After what seemed an eternity he asked, "Why did you do it?"

Keeping my eyes locked on his, I said: "I don't answer to you."

He laughed. "I'm sorry," he sneered, gazing up at the ceiling as if to think deep thoughts. "Let me see...how do I explain this." He looked at me directly. "I am in charge. I took my seat on the Quatre two years ago, which is why we haven't met, but I'm familiar with your previous meeting...how many years ago was it? I know you vampires easily forget those things, but it hasn't been that long. My name is Pedro Soto. There's no need for you to introduce yourself. I already know everything."

If my skin had color it would've drained away right then. Why was I still alive? You don't threaten the life of one of the board and live to tell about it.

"Tsk, tsk Verloren." He shook his head. "If you'd given her to us everything would be fine. Instead you royally fucked up."

"You don't understand," I said. It was a statement rather than the start of a plea.

"I do understand." He pointed to the bedroom, raising an eyebrow. "You can't cover that up. It's bad enough with you running around in the open. Then you go and create this...thing that can't even go out in public."

"She is not a thing," I growled.

"We'll see about that. Sara won't be happy." He got up and headed for the cockpit.

Sara...the thought of her gave me a chill, and sent a storm of images through my mind. Then the episode was over. I had grown accustomed to the unknowable flashes. I ignored them, concentrating on questions that mattered. Why would Sara be unhappy? Wouldn't Kale be more likely to be the angry one? But when it came to changing incarnates, he had little room to talk. Look what he'd done to me. If we were going to die, I hoped I'd have a shot at Kale before it happened.

Over 10 years had passed since my meeting with the Quatre. Sara would be almost grown by now. Was that a good thing? Obviously she still loomed large in everyone's considerations. That's why Pedro had mentioned her.

We landed at another small airport. Ash wore her modified jeans and T-shirt. She knelt on a recliner as she looked out the window. People outside refueled the plane.

Her wings were spread and her tail twitched with excitement. Sun shone on her face. I was glad the sun did not hurt her eyes like it did mine.

Our hosts stopped in the doorway and Pedro gave her a disgusted glare, shaking his head. The blond stared at her, fascinated. She gave him a coy smile, showing her fangs.

As they turned to leave Pedro looked at me and said: "We will be back shortly with a meal for you." He glanced at her.

I'll need one too, she thought.

"What?" Pedro stared at her.

"That's right," I said. "She can read your mind, and, if she lets you, you can read hers." Suddenly I recalled how that ability had driven Jason crazy. I missed the guy, even though I knew his smart-ass mouth would have gotten us all killed before we even boarded the plane.

Pedro stomped off the plane.

She laughed. *He doesn't like that at all.*

Ah, who cares? I thought. *Who is he anyhow?*

One of the Quatre. She nodded coldly and told me what she'd learned from reading them: *Sara wants to kill me and eat my heart. She wants to manipulate all four elements.*

"Which one are you?" I asked her aloud.

"They think I'm fire, but now that I'm a mixed breed, that might complicate things. Pedro is afraid of Sara and what she'll do when she learns the truth. They're all terrified of her. They think she's a royal bitch." She looked out the window.

"You've never tried to use your element," I told her.

"I don't know how to work it. I don't think it will work now." She sighed and laid her head back. "My wings either. I haven't tried to fly at all."

"You're much stronger than all of them," I said. "The downfall of the dragons was their compassion. They wouldn't stand up for themselves. In other words...they were lovers not fighters."

"Is that why they are attracted to me?"

"Yes. It radiates off of you. All you have to do is look at them and will them to you.

Remember, that magnetism is a part of what you are now. You could have anyone in the world with a glance. But I also want you to remember that you have your soul mate."

For a moment she seemed embarrassed, then she straightened up in her chair, and was all business. "Um... Sara has promised Pedro and Kale that after she has taken on the four elements, they will be allowed to hunt more dragons. She's promising to find each of them his own set of four elements."

"She would never do that," I said. "She'd kill them first. Sara wants total rule." I knelt down and laid my head in her lap.

She stroked my hair. "She'll get one hell of a surprise."

A few minutes later Pedro boarded the plane. As he came in the portal he wore an evil grin, but as soon as he saw us he got angry.

"You'll have to quiet them down when they get in here," he snapped. "They'll flip out when they see that." He pointed at Ash.

I heard them outside: two girls talking to the blond in broken English. I peeked out at them: two tanned brunettes in short dresses and high heels: top-dollar call girls. I aimed my thoughts at them. They froze, turned, and boarded the plane. The blond followed, keeping his eyes on me.

Once they were in the living area I directed them to the sectional couch. They both sat, staring straight ahead. The blond closed the door. Pedro watched.

I gave Ash my hand as she rose and stood beside me. She put her hands in her back pockets, scrunching her wings behind her. The human girls' eyes betrayed their fear, but they said and did nothing.

Ash whispered to me: "They are both very beautiful."

"Ladies pick first." I bowed to her and waved my hand toward the women.

She went to the first girl, grabbed her chin, and turned it. Ash lowered her head to the woman's collarbone and inhaled as she ran her nose up to the woman's ear. Ash stopped abruptly and huffed, then glared up at the blond. It was obvious what he was thinking. "Men..." she muttered. She tilted the woman's head and bit into her neck. The woman's mouth opened in a silent scream.

I stepped forward and grabbed the woman's wrist, pulling her aura. The woman fell slack in Ash's grip. Ash continued to feed until there was nothing left. She leaned back and licked her lips. The woman dropped to the floor.

The blond picked up the body, took it to the bathroom, and shut the door. Ash smiled at me. I looked to Pedro, who wore an indifferent expression. "Wait until he is done before you do the next one."

Ash returned to the recliner. I sat beside my meal. I could see the terror in the woman's eyes. She'd seen what happened to her friend. Pedro stood over us as we waited in awkward silence. Finally the blond reappeared. I looked at Pedro and he nodded.

I turned the girl's face from me and bit hard into her neck. I pulled her aura slowly and her blood quickly. I felt movement around us but paid no attention. I heard Ash make a disgusted sound. A hand fell on my shoulder. It was Pedro.

"Don't finish her off," he hissed. "I like mine still kicking."

I withdrew and saw blood seep down her neck. Her breathing was labored and her eyes were wide and glassy. Pedro bent to scoop her up.

"Thanks." He flashed a devious smile and carried the girl into the bathroom. Before Pedro closed the door I saw the woman's face. She was lost in death's fear. I let go of her mind and a gurgling escaped her throat.

Ash aimed a thought at me. *He is going to rape her and then eat her while she is still alive.* She crossed her arms over her chest and closed her eyes, disgusted.

I was glad that only she could hear my thoughts. *It's no different than what we do.*

She shook her head in disagreement.

I went on: *Ash, there's only one way for you to become a part of the Quatre. You have to be ruthless, uncaring, and a terror. Now you know what we are dealing with. They care for nothing but themselves.*

Why are they even bothering to feed us? She asked.

These two want to refuel, I thought. It's less messy for them when there isn't any blood. They're not doing it for us.

We listened to the dying cries from the bathroom. Pedro finally finished his meal and we were on our way.

Chapter 18

FOLLOW ME

As we made our final descent I looked out to see a landscape covered in snow. Only the runway was clear. The sunlight reflecting off the snow blinded me, hurting my eyes. Everywhere there were mountains and trees. Jagged rocks poked through the white surface and, under different circumstances, the scene might have been beautiful.

As the plane rolled to a halt we kept our seats. I still had my mental wall up, if only to protect Ash. *Do they let everyone wait in agony this way?* I wondered. The blond sat across from us on the sectional. The silence was deafening.

Ash was first to break it. "Where are we?"

"Ural Mountains," he said. "Siberia."

Pedro differed from his predecessor. He was young, able (he'd landed the plane himself), and not afraid to get his hands dirty.

Suddenly, as if on cue, the blond got up and opened the exit portal. Pedro came from the front of the plane, eyeing us with contempt. Maybe it was the bright light, but now Pedro seemed older, possibly early thirties.

"All right, people," he said, "let's get this over with."

Seeing Ash stand up brought a smile to my lips. She wore a black gypsy dress with an opening for her wings. What amused me was her choice of footwear: combat boots.

She folded her wings as I helped her get her trench coat on. She grabbed the front of my jacket and kissed me lightly on the lips.

"No more of that!" Pedro snapped, pushing us down the steps. "Knock it off and get moving!"

The two men ushered us into a large black Denali. The blond drove. Pedro put me in the passenger seat, then pushed Ash into the back seat ahead of him. When I saw that push I gave an abbreviated growl.

Ash's thoughts filled my head. *I'm okay. He just wants to get you pissed off. He's been arguing with Kale about who gets to kill you. They plan to make a game of it. Both of them like their meals 'kicking'.*

There was no delay in our departure. The blond drove quickly along snow-lined roads.

Jessica showed me that, I thought. Kale takes pleasure in not subduing his victims first. At least I make it quick and as painless as possible. He gets off on showing them how weak they are. He's a sick asshole who loves to hear screams and pleading. That's one reason why they don't want a dragon in charge. They don't want anyone to get between them and their victims. They want control of everything, and they hate anyone who has free will.

What about Hania? Ash asked. *I haven't seen anything about him from these two.*

Hania is believed to be one of the oldest born knowings. He is a shaman and he's the only one of the four I respect. He sits quietly, says little, and only objects when he absolutely has to. He's older physically too. He must be close to seventy in human years.

We rolled over the hills on snow-covered roads, sure our end was near.

We turned off the road and drove through thick woods. Finally we came to a clearing. On the opposite side there was an opening carved in the mountain. The blond drove the Denali into the darkness where we parked and got out of the car.

The blond spoke: "Follow me."

I grabbed Ash's icy hand, while Pedro followed behind us. The blond led us down a long tunnel to a large metal door. Ash tensed as he opened it.

When I saw what was waiting on the other side I had to stifle a laugh. The room was small. Two dark green couches lined two walls. In the middle sat a large wooden coffee table with books scattered everywhere. Two generic landscape paintings hung on white walls. It looked like the waiting room for a doctor's office.

Pedro followed us in and locked the door behind him. Two hand-carved French doors led to whatever was beyond. The blond said: "Stay here. Someone will be back for you." He and Pedro went through the doors and we heard the click of locks.

We were locked in. I eyed the doors, certain that Ash could break through them, but I had no idea what would follow. I felt a pang of panic, but Ash was fine.

"Well," she said, "we're finally alone." She smiled seductively and raised an eyebrow.

"Is that all you ever think about?" I asked.

I helped her take her coat off and she darted around the room noiselessly. I could not help but stare at her. With almost no effort she'd acquired all the skills of stealth. She never made a sound. There in the waiting room she was only admiring the paintings, but she could've snuck up on any vampire, without their even knowing it. She was beautiful, sexy, and her thoughts ran to seduction. She lit a fire in me, though I did my best to resist her.

"Why do you do that?" I asked. "This isn't the time or place. These bastards want to kill us."

"Sorry," she muttered. She sat on the edge of the sofa, adjusting her wings and tail for comfort.

It was amazing how quickly she had taken to her new form. Fitting her movements to her new form was already second nature, as easy as breathing.

I sat beside her and held her hand. She cocked her head, listening. *They're not far, she thought. Just beyond these doors. They're talking about me. One of them is coming.* She paused and looked at me, confused. *I thought you said Sara was my age.*

"Yeah...maybe 19," I said.

Just then we heard the lock click. The French doors opened and the blond man reappeared. "Come with me," he said listlessly.

We followed him down a long white-gold hallway lined with tables holding vases full of white lilies. We reached another set of French doors, white with gold inlay. I reached for Ash's cool hand and gripped it. She tightened her grasp on my fingers to the point of pain.

She smiled. *Everything is going to be okay. You are going to have a lot more respect for Hania in a bit.*

Why? What's going...

No time to explain, just trust me and stay back.

What do you mean stay back? Ash, don't do anything stupid! My mind was moving frantically, but Ash just smiled. I pulled her arm to make her stop, but she hardly felt it. Finally I accepted the inevitable and let her drag me along.

The blond threw open the doors, stood to one side, and bowed mockingly. We proceeded into the dimly lit room. Once we got inside, he closed the doors behind us, and we heard the click of a lock.

It was a large wood-paneled room with a smell that reminded me of old books in a library. The furniture was centered around a huge fireplace encased in marble. A fire roared. On each side of the hearth were floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

Four large leather chairs created a half circle.

We were not alone long.

Chapter 19
CHARRED REMAINS

The next part was straight out of Hollywood. A bookcase slid back, revealing a secret passage into total darkness.

Pedro appeared dressed as before, in plain street clothes. As he sat down he seemed to be stifling laughter. He barely acknowledged us.

Following him was Kale. The moment I saw him I let loose an involuntary growl. Instinctively I crouched. Ash pulled at me and I straightened up.

It's okay, she soothed me.

I couldn't control my low growl, but I didn't move. Kale hadn't changed. His yellow-white hair still fell to his waist and he still wore a black suit on his lean frame. His face, like his body, was slender, and his eerie blue eyes held the story of his long life. His expression said he knew something he would never share. When he smirked at Ash my whole body trembled with rage.

Kale sat next to Pedro and they stared at us, glancing at one another as if to share an inside joke.

Ash directed a thought exclusively at me: *You're right. Those guys are assholes.*

Hania entered, wearing a long brown cloak. The deep creases in his face gave away his age. His golden brown skin told of his Native American heritage. He had the same dark brown eyes, but they now seemed weary. His long black hair was more peppered with gray and his magic staff might now be doubling as a support for his unsteady gait. When I'd seen him last he hadn't needed a staff for magic or walking. Hania was suffering from the weariness of age. He sat and stared at the floor. It was as if his spirit had been broken.

I felt Ash's body tense and release at the sight of Hania. I was sure she and the old man were having an unspoken conversation. I tried to break Ash's wall, but she was far too strong.

Then Sara appeared. My growling ceased as my anger turned to shock. She hadn't aged. In 10 years Sara had grown only slightly. She was still a fair-skinned child with light blonde hair and blue eyes. Her iridescent wings were translucent and hardly visible. Her face had the same childish roundness. She wore a white dress. A human would've noticed something odd about her motions. She was as lithe and graceful as a ballerina, which seemed strange in such an immature body. She was more than a child, more than human and more than incarnate. She took her seat and grinned, showing her true self. How could someone so lovely be filled with so much evil and greed?

I felt numb from the sudden shock of seeing Sara. Ash kept her eyes locked on Hania.

Sara's tinkling voice matched her child-like looks. To me it was like crystal breaking. "Verloren, what are we going to do with you?" she said. "I couldn't believe it when Pedro told me how you'd fucked up again."

I laughed, feeling as if I had nothing left to lose. "You have to excuse me Sara, but such harsh words from such a little girl...you must tell me how you maintain such a youthful appearance."

Kale smiled.

Sara's brow furrowed and her face reddened. "I don't answer to you!" she screamed. "You answer to me!"

Ash glanced at Sara. Wood popped in the fire. Otherwise the room was silent. Sara took a deep breath, smoothed her dress and raised her chin in an attempt at dignity. She sat on the edge

of the chair, crossing her legs. Her feet barely brushed the floor. She addressed Ash: “I assume you know why I brought you here.”

“Yes,” Ash replied. “I know everything. You don’t hide your thoughts well.”

Sara’s jaw clenched and her nostrils flared.

“You have three,” Ash replied, “They’re here already. I would make the fourth element.”

Ash turned to me. “She drank their blood while they were sleeping. She’s immortal.”

“Shut up!” Sara’s voice boomed. She gripped the arms of her chair. “I don’t give a fuck if she is a mutant. Let’s get this over with.” She stood and moved toward us with a strange, unnatural gait.

Hania rose at the same instant, but kept his eyes down. Though his motions were far slower, he never fell more than a few steps behind her. My body tensed. Kale and Pedro lounged in their chairs. As Sara neared I stepped in front of Ash. I knew the dragon’s blood would give Sara incredible strength, far more than I could handle, but protecting Ash was my first instinct.

Ash caught my arm and shoved me back. She froze me with her mind. It was staggering how much stronger she’d become. Sara glared up at Ash and Ash glared back. Sara reached to her side where Hania stood.

Hania pulled a silver dagger from his cloak. My breathing stopped. I could do nothing. Then I saw that Sara wasn’t even aware of the dagger. Her eyes were on Ash. It dawned on me: Silver!

“It’s been a pleasure knowing you,” Ash said.

Silver. To fairies it was poison. Just the touch of it burned their skin. Hania raised the dagger above his head. His head snapped up, his eyes met Ash’s, and he plunged the dagger deep into Sara’s neck.

A screech burst out. It was Sara. As the dagger cut into her neck she flailed, trying to pull it out. As her palms met silver they blistered and she screamed again. She fell to her knees.

Hania glared down at her as she squirmed and writhed.

Ash turned to Kale and Pedro. They sat transfixed, their eyes glassy with shock. An evil laugh passed Ash’s lips.

No! I begged. I want to kill Kale!

She ignored my pleading.

What happened next was quicker than the human eye could follow. Ash spread her wings knocking me back against the French doors. She launched into the air toward Kale. The fireplace exploded. Hania and I were knocked to the floor. Hania nearly fell on top of Sara as she flailed about.

Kale screamed as the fire engulfed him. Ash landed on him, toppling him and his chair. His legs kicked. Ash stomped, making a sickening crunch. Kale’s screams stopped. His kicks stopped. She’d crushed his skull.

The fire had no effect on Ash or her clothing.

Pedro jumped from his chair and stared at the flames consuming Kale. He shifted to werewolf form, ready to fight. Circling Ash on all fours, he snarled. Shreds of his clothing hung from him. The rest had fallen to the floor.

Ash stepped down from Kale’s scorched body. Keeping her eyes on Pedro, she wiped her boot on the carpet. He wouldn’t be a problem.

I looked at Sara. Her skin was turning purple and she barely moved. It wouldn’t be long till she was dead. The silver had poisoned her blood quickly. She lay on the floor gasping for air. Despite her hopes for immortality she had kept her vulnerable incarnate traits.

Hania crawled over by me and leaned against the wall. His voice was raspy. “Looks like your friend can take care of herself.”

Ash’s prediction was right. I did have a lot more respect for him. Ash let go of my mind. I stood and helped Hania up.

He spoke quietly. “I was so sick of the lies and betrayal. All I wanted was peace of mind, but I knew they wanted to kill me.” He shook his head and his hair waved with it under his hood. “The only reason Sara kept me alive was to get information. She wanted power—absolute power. I hoped Kale would keep his mouth shut about the dragons, but he didn’t.”

Pedro had quit moving, but his snarls and growls were still audible. Ash looked him over. “You know, Hania thinks it’s best to resend your soul, and I suppose that would be the proper thing.” She circled him, closing in.

At her silent command Pedro stood up on his hind legs, his arms dangling. He growled at her. She took his hand and examined his claws.

She sighed. “I like mine still ‘kicking.’” She dropped his hand. He lunged. She hit him hard in the chest. His body flew across the room, smashed into the wall, and crumpled to the floor. The blow shook the room, but it wasn’t final. Pedro jumped back up and leapt at her.

She flew into him, catching his throat. She raised him up above her head. He growled, tearing at her wrists and pumping his legs. She slammed him flat on his back. The floor buckled and splintered. Books tumbled off shelves.

Air gushed from his lungs. She bored her arm into his stomach, tearing through flesh. His eyes popped and his mouth opened, but no sound escaped.

Ash thrust her forearm forward into his chest then yanked. She stood, holding his heart. She smiled and dropped it.

With one arm covered in blood, she grabbed the edges of her dress and curtsied to Hania and me. Her boots were covered in charred remains from Kale.

“Ta-da,” she sang.

We all looked at Sara. The dagger protruded from her neck. Her skin was wilted and black and her lips had curled back, exposing her teeth. She’d stopped breathing.

“It’s safe to say she is dead,” Ash said.

Hania picked up a vase of lilies from a nearby table, then dropped the flowers to the floor. He poured the water onto Kale’s remains. A hiss escaped from the chair.

Chapter 20 WE CONTINUE

I wake up in a large bed and find myself alone. I hear small clicking noises and see a dim light shining from behind me, casting shadows on the wall. I roll over in the bed and look across the windowless room. Ash sits on a bench at a large wooden desk typing away on a laptop. She has a blanket draped across the front of her. Her back is exposed and her wings are slightly open; this has become their resting state. They hang over the back of the bench. She stares intently at the computer screen with headphones in, listening to music. Hania gave her his old mp3 player and she's loaded it with her favorite songs. She's trying to type quietly so she won't wake me.

Some time ago a quiet, bashful girl lived in a small town. Then somehow she began to sense she was different. Now she is one of the most powerful, if not the most powerful person, in our world.

In just a few weeks both our lives have changed completely. Ash has become something totally new, and that has turned my world around. Two days ago the Quatre fell. Now there is a new Quatre: Ash, and three dragons I've never laid eyes on. They don't call themselves a "Quatre" and they've made no moves to rule. There's a question as to whether any one person or group should govern our kind. A feeling grows that it might be best for each of us to make our own decisions.

The idea that's emerging is this: vampires and incarnates now have free will to do as they please, as long as it does not interfere with humans' ability to live their lives. We still hide among them, but now there is also refuge for those who do not wish to live in the human world and for those vampires who do not wish to conceal what they are.

In the course of these advances I've had personal bright spots as well. I was amazed to find Jason safe and sound, jailed in a room deep in the mountain fortress. He was locked up with some humans. Kale had planned to taunt me with the plight of my imprisoned friend before killing both of us.

I was surprised when Jason chose to have his soul resent. Weeks of being holed up, and one captive girl in particular, have given him sympathy for humans. We've only talked briefly, but I'm happy to note he's still the same rude, crude Jason. His old personality is no hindrance to his new attitudes about humans. He can't wait to get back to the States and start a new life.

Yet I can't help feeling something is off with Jason. It's like an itch that's still there after you stop scratching. I never could have imagined him wanting the life he now aspires to, but life-threatening events can change us. This is what he wants. It makes me sad to see him go.

Hania exposed all of the hiding places of the previous Quatre and he's opened them all to those who want to live in them. In revealing these places, he's also been spreading the word about the ousting of the Quatre. He's encouraging vampires to live in these areas, so they do not have to hide what they are. Hania has offered incarnates refuge in these same spots. They will be opened to help those who are looking for answers.

Before he set out to do those things Hania had told us of all the history leading up to the present cataclysm. Hania met the first dragon to re-emerge and to his later regret, he told the other Quatre members these long-dormant beings were reawakening. Kale vowed dragons would not regain power. He put this vow into action by teaching Sara all about dragons. These stories of ultimate power, and of immortality free of the complications of the vampire virus, became an obsession with the fairy child. She threw a tantrum, demanding she get her way with all dragons.

She wanted their blood and their elements. As the blood strengthened her, Sara convinced Pedro and Kale that once she had acquired all the elements she would help them do the same. Hania wasn't so cooperative, but as Sara grew stronger she threatened him and found ways to force the information out of him. He was the only one who saw clearly that she intended to get control of the elements, then kill them all. That would have been only the beginning of her reign of terror.

For now we are still in Siberia, but winters here are too cold for dragons. Ash has been talking with Hania about a move back to the States. She's fallen in love with an underground dwelling near the Pacific in the Olympic National Forest. It's warm enough that she and her fellow dragons would be able to go out year-round.

Perhaps that's what she's typing about on her laptop.

I sit up at the edge of the bed. Ash stops typing and removes her headphones. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. I was trying to be quiet." She shivers and somehow that makes the fire inside of me spark up in a blaze.

"I'll never get used to that," I mumble sleepily.

She smiles. It's the same smile I fell for in a store in the Midwest just weeks ago. It seems like a lifetime and, in some ways, it is. I get up and go to her. As I sit down next to her on the bench, she closes the laptop. She bites her lip and looks worried.

I touch one of her fangs gently. "Don't bite too hard, love."

She smiles and moves her wing, wrapping it around me to draw me in closer. As our skin touches I pull the blanket over my body. Her icy skin should stop the fire burning through me but it only seems to intensify it. I wrap my arm around her waist and look at the computer screen. "Who are you writing to?"

"Hania. Trying to get all the loose ends tied up before we leave here. So are you ready to go back?"

"I'll go wherever you go." I kiss her on the neck as she moves her hands across the laptop.

Shedding all worries, Ash lets a gasp pass her lips as she turns her body toward me. My teeth graze the skin under her jaw. She giggles and speaks breathlessly. "You would think that you were the one with the power to seduce."

I chuckle. "So I guess you are willing to put up with me forever, huh?"

"Yes," she whispers. She runs her hands up my back and grips my hair. I could not fight her if I wanted to. I've never encountered such strength.

I bite her neck softly for a quick taste of blood, then pull away and kiss her on the mouth. Our breaths come fast.

"You must be gentle," I say, "so's not to break me."

Read the sequel

Legacy

<http://www.authorcvhunt.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.V. Hunt lives in Ohio and is the author of *Legacy*, *Phantom*, *Danse Macabre*, and *Hand Ramblings*.