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Credits

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Dedication

To Lexi:

May you find your own path in life. I love you.

To Danae:

You inspired me, and pushed me on. Thank you.

To Mom:

You make me want to be a better person. Thank you so much for everything you do.

Chapter 1

My fangs are good for two things: ripping flesh, and injecting neurotoxin to paralyze my prey. Right now, however, they were cutting the inside of my cheek. Not realizing I was nervously chewing my lip, I scolded myself. I wasn't fifteen anymore. Shaking my head, I begrudgingly admitted it was nearer to one hundred and fifteen. This act, this moment, I had been here dozens of times before. *Why were my nerves bothering me?*

A shadow swept out into the rain and moved quickly over the pavement, its footfalls not disturbing the puddles of muddy water.

That was why.

I shimmied up the side of a nearby building, using my claws to grip the brick veneer. I moved quickly and silently. Vaulting over the side, I landed on the balls of my feet and moved to the edge. I watched the shadow, but was careful not to stare at it for more than two seconds at a time. Inhumans have an uncanny ability to know when they're being watched. I couldn't risk it detecting me before I could make a move.

Tossing back my knee-length, black, leather jacket, I crouched down and stared at a point just beyond the shadow keeping it in my field of vision. My blond hair, usually a bit wavier, was matted to my head uncomfortably in the rain. A baggy black sweater, trousers, and boots were wrapped around my athletic frame. I wasn't sure why I favored black now. It certainly wasn't one of my favorite colors, but there was something about the darkness that required black. Plus it was easier to color coordinate when you didn't

have a reflection.

As it moved so did I; a shadow ghosting a shadow. Skittering from roof to roof, I kept my stare locked on the dark form. Stumbling once on an exposed ventilation pipe I nearly plowed into the lip of the building. It was only my preternatural quickness and agility that saved me from what could have been a very embarrassing story to tell my supervisor back at the office. He had chastised me many times for my habit of wearing heavy black boots. I couldn't help it. I had an affinity for chunky shoes.

As the shadow stopped, I threw myself down. Perhaps it had heard my foot hit the pipe or caught my scent on the cool night's breeze. I couldn't tell if it had detected me. Lying silently in a cold puddle of rainwater, I knew a moment of discomfort was much better than anything the shadow could do to me if discovered. I had to move. Hiding behind this lip, I was risking losing it. Truth be told, I was very good at my job. I was a predator. The hunt was now second nature to me. But the job always felt like punishment for what I was. It was either the Brimstone Syndicate or expulsion into the sun. At least this option kept me alive. That was more than I could say for many of my supernatural brethren. Many of whom I had personally terminated.

A strange thought occurred to me. I missed the beat of my heart. In this situation, when I was still human, I knew my heart would have been thumping hard and fast as it pumped the necessary blood to my body. I started to take a slow breath out of habit as I felt the emptiness in my ribcage. Shaking my head, I rolled onto my side.

Lifting my head, I peered down into the street. The shadow hovered just beyond a pool of light spilling down from the streetlamp. It stood completely still amidst the huge drops of rain; the wind barely ruffling its clothes. The dark fabrics it wore were just visible in the darkness, yet I could smell them. Silk had a very distinctive odor, probably because it came from a worm. I watched quietly, waiting for its next move.

It was already too late when I realized it. Its stare was burning into me.

Cursing under my breath, I moved without a second thought. My position had been compromised. The shadow was onto me. Shuffling to my feet, I leapt off the edge of the roof without looking below. I hit the wet sidewalk hard. A mortal's knees would have buckled from that height, but I took off into a dead sprint after my prey. One of the benefits of already being dead, I assured myself.

The shadow was ahead of me, but not by much. Decisions swarmed my brain. *When I caught up with the shadow—if I did—what would I do?* The .45 ACP pistol in my shoulder holster would only slow it down, and in fact shooting it would probably succeed in pissing it off more than anything. Diving over garbage cans and whipping around corners, I took mental inventory of my supplies. I was equipped with the bare minimum. I'm sure my tool kit was at home probably having a lovely night. I had a few spells in my jacket, but those weren't going to do anything either. I gritted my teeth. That only left me with one option. But I had to get close. Too close.

I had been caught off my game. But that's when fate always seems to intervene. Intending to have a quiet drink at a human bar, instead, *he* walked in. It took me a minute, but there was something about him, something familiar. Maybe it was the outdated, expensive clothes he wore. Maybe it was the way he moved; his hands and arms seemed to flow like water as he gestured. But it was his eyes that gave him away.

He was a Vampire.

That itself wasn't a crime, but what he had been doing was. Murder is murder, no matter if the perpetrator is Inhuman or not. He wasn't part of my caseload, but I had seen his mug shot in the Brimstone's database. His name was Vlad, or Gustav, or Adolph, or some other name like that Vampires thought gave them some kind of meaning or connection to the darkness. Mostly it just sounded stupid.

He was older than I was, but by how much I wasn't sure. That alone had me worried. As a Vampire aged, its grasp on sanity became more tenuous, and it grew in strength. Not a good combination. I could break a human's arm with little more than a twist of my wrist. This one, however, was probably strong enough to beat me into to a bloody smear on the sidewalk without giving it a second thought.

Why was he running then?

I skidded to a stop in the street as the warning sirens began to blare in my mind. He had no reason to run from me. He was easily strong enough to destroy me.

It must be a trap.

I became still and scanned the street. The shadow had vanished into the rain-soaked darkness. Reaching into my coat, I slid my hand around the Beretta's grip and pulled it free of the holster. Wrapping my free hand over my wrist to steady my aim, I started to backpedal slowly.

The street was empty. He had taken me to the edge of the city. Boards crisscrossed empty doors and windows only allowing the wind to howl through. Several barren lots containing only trash and abandoned cars that had seen better days occupied the opposite side of the street. A squat warehouse stood in the distance, the number of broken windows along the top outnumbering those still intact. As lightning flashed twice, I thought I could see shadows moving in the flickering light.

It started to make sense in my mind. This one was a tricky old bastard. It was a rookie mistake. I underestimated this Vampire. It could prove to be the final mistake of my afterlife. My instincts were screaming to run away, but I knew the second I turned my back *they* would be on me. I couldn't see them, but I knew they were there. The Vampire had lured me right into the middle of his brood.

Setting my jaw, I reached down my shirt collar and yanked off an amulet slung around my neck. A gaudy affair with a wide purple gem set in the middle of a twisting, silver mount. It was more than just ugly jewelry, though. I hated to do this, but I wasn't sure what I was up against. Dropping it, I crushed it with the heel of my boot. The spell was activated.

Backup was on its way. I hoped.

Magic was an odd thing. Sometimes it worked, other times it didn't. The "foolproof" amulets had become standard issue, but there were numerous reports of the spell malfunctioning and the message never getting through. Brimstone's top Mages *assured* the field agents that they worked. That was after I had seen another Seeker shredded by a pack of Werewolves when no backup showed.

Several ashen faces appeared out of the gloom. Their expressions were drawn, but their eyes glistened like polished black opals. They moved carefully and deliberately into a semicircle, pushing my back to the wall. If I ran, they would be on me in an instant. I started to feel like General Custer making his last stand.

He appeared out of the gloom, safely behind his brood. "This game is at an end, Seeker."

He knew what I was.

"Vlad." He just *looked* like a Vlad. I decided to go with it. "You are in violation of Brimstone Syndicate laws." My voice was firm despite the fear balling in my throat. "Surrender and the Tribunal may show you mercy."

Not entirely unattractive, Vlad's face was slightly thinner than the rest of his brood's. His pure white skin appeared flawless. He looked as if he were just about to turn thirty years old, or perhaps had just passed it. His youthful features were offset by his coal black eyes that told the true story of his age. Dark locks of hair sprawled down perfectly around his face as if never touched by the rain. His lips contorted into an odd smile that didn't seem quite human. It's said the oldest Vampires forget how to actually be human and instead resort to imitating them. His movements, while fluid, were powerful and over-exaggerated. It looked as though he were an alien inside a human's skin.

"Mercy..." Vlad tossed back his head and laughed. It echoed off the sides of the buildings and reverberated eerily into the distance. I was certain I heard a dog yelp in fear then run and hide. "Brimstone means nothing to me."

His accent was certainly European, but I couldn't quite track it. It was almost German, but not. It could have been Austrian, or possibly a more regional accent I wasn't familiar with. "You can't just kill people. There are rules to be followed."

Vlad's eyes flashed with intensity. "You do not dictate to me. We are Vampires, not the lapdogs Brimstone wants us to be." He walked into the circle and stood before me. "We are powerful. We should rule, not be subservient."

I caught another scent on the wind and allowed a small smile to creep onto my lips. I had to keep him talking. "You have no choice, Vlad. Surrender now or be destroyed."

"Vlad?" He pronounced the name carefully. I could tell it left a foul taste in his mouth. "Why do you keep referring to me as Vlad?"

I shrugged. "You look like a Vlad." Pointing my pistol at the Master Vampire's head, I knew the cavalry had arrived. "Last chance."

Vlad leaned forward and pressed his forehead to the barrel of my Beretta. "Then shoot." He knew he could probably disarm me before I pulled the trigger.

He didn't count on my backup.

A monstrous form rose up behind the brood, its yellow eyes luminous in the low light. It tossed back its head and howled. The next moments became a blur. Vlad's brood reacted to protect their master. Swarming and diving onto my backup, they were tossed like rag dolls in all directions. The remaining Vampires who hadn't been shredded scattered. They were young, and not ready to take on a Werewolf.

As Vlad unwisely turned his head to see the source of the mayhem, I pulled the trigger leveling the Master Vampire. It didn't kill him, but it was enough to give me the advantage. Diving on top of him, I pinned his arm behind his back and dug my fangs into his throat. I heard him moan as the neurotoxin began to work into his body. It wouldn't take long, even on one so powerful. I could smell the singed hair and sulfur that clung to his wound. It quickly started to churn my stomach.

Pulling my mouth free, I stood and looked down at the Master Vampire. The wound in his head was

already starting to heal, but at a much slower rate thanks to my venom. Wiping his blood from my lips, I turned my attention to my backup.

Smirking, I snapped my fingers and pointed to the sidewalk next to me. "Toby, heel."

The massive Werewolf rose up in front of me and snarled.

He apparently didn't find it as amusing as I did. Werewolves, with the exception of the ancient ones, couldn't speak in wolf form. Laughing, I lifted my hands and patted the air. I was just happy to see him.

Toby was nearly eight feet tall when standing on his hind legs but Werewolf physiology usually demanded they hunch. His muzzle was more slender than some of the other wolves I had encountered, but no less threatening. His coat was shades of dark gray and white making him resemble an arctic timber wolf. His long, thick tail was solid gray except for the white tip. I always thought it looked like someone took Toby's tail and dipped it in a can of paint. His yellow eyes began to dull. The change was coming. Werewolves, unlike their silver screen brethren, didn't require the moon phases to transform. The moon still held sway over them, but it was only during a Werewolf's infancy that it involuntarily forced the change.

I looked down at Vlad. He was stirring slightly, but my venom seemed to be working. I had bought enough time to at least get him into a cell ... I hoped. I had the feeling that if I picked him up and slung him over my shoulder, he would wake up and take advantage of my vulnerable position. I was fast and strong, but I wasn't stupid.

I leveled my gaze on Toby. It would be some time before he was able to revert to human form. Might as well take advantage of his strength and power. Stepping over Vlad, I reached up and scratched Toby behind the ear. "Thanks, T," I said as he grunted in approval. I pointed down at the Master Vampire. "Could you carry him back to the office for me?"

Chapter 2

The inner workings of the Brimstone Syndicate are a mystery to humans. Most are unaware that such a place even exists. They go about their happy little lives not realizing that the person in the next cubicle is actually a Werewolf, or that their neighbor is a card-carrying member of the Undead. For humanity, ignorance is bliss, and Brimstone is the force which keeps that ignorance intact. We keep Demon attacks off the nightly news, and use disinformation to cover up an Inhuman's handiwork.

Remember hearing about that lion that escaped from the zoo and killed two teenagers last year? That was actually a rogue Werewolf. Seekers cleaned up the mess, and found the Werewolf. Unfortunately the wolf had no intention of being captured leaving us with no choice but to destroy it. We quickly formulated a cover story and stole a lion from the local zoo. It became our four-legged patsy. We had spun the press in such a way to paint a zookeeper as accidentally leaving the lion's cage open after a routine feeding. It had been easy to find someone on the zoo's staff with a troubled past as humans are invariably weak, and even easier to pin the mistake on him. The zookeeper lost his job, and an innocent lion had been euthanised to cement the cover up, but the public bought it. No mention of a Werewolf was ever made. The public remained blissfully ignorant.

This is my job. Equal parts hunter, killer, and public relations agent, I am a Brimstone Seeker.

My chair creaked in protest as I leaned back. It was old, as was most of Brimstone's equipment. I scanned over the fifth floor offices. Desks were arranged in a pattern that never seemed to make sense to me, although I never was an office person. I would much rather be outside on the hunt, under the moon and stars.

I was a Vampire after all.

Sitting quietly at my desk, my fingertips hovered above the keyboard. It was nearing two thirty in the morning and there was still paperwork to be done. I sighed, so much for my night off. Instead, I was at the office, holding a Master Vampire in the basement cells, and staring at a sickly green computer monitor. I tapped the Vampire's name, which turned out to be Garrett Asp, into the database. With a twisted sense of satisfaction, I added "Vlad" into the known aliases field. Garrett was far too mundane for a Vampire. It had no romance, no sense of mystery. It was simply a name not unlike any one could encounter daily.

"Rose?"

Not unlike my name.

I spun in my chair to find Toby leaning uncomfortably against the desk behind me. His face was drawn, flushed, and tired. Dark bags hung under his eyes. The clothes he had taken from the reserve downstairs weren't even close to his size. They hung oddly from his lean frame, looking as though he were about to drown in the orange polo he wore. His salty gray hair was a mess and his hands were shaking slightly. It wasn't easy on the body to transform into a Werewolf and back, especially for one who had been turned rather than born. And that was exactly what happened to Toby about seven years ago.

Still, in his weakened condition, he had been able to sneak up on me. "You look like hell," I offered.

"Thanks," Toby replied with a half-hearted smile.

Even though he was exhausted, he still kept a wary eye on me. He didn't trust me completely, and I'm not sure he ever would. I was a soulless, evil Vampire in his eyes, even though I wasn't evil, or particularly soulless. For some reason long ago, Vampires and Werewolves had fought a bloody war against each other. No one was sure exactly what caused it, as no records remain from that era, but both species were nearly decimated. Some of that hostility remained today, especially in Werewolves. Most hated Vampires. It was that simple. But Toby was different.

I crossed my legs and placed my hands firmly on the arms of my chair. "Thank you," I said softly.

His eyes searched mine for a moment. "For?"

"Helping me."

Toby modestly brushed away my gratitude with his hand as if it were nothing. "I was just lucky enough to be there. Plus, it was nice to smack around a couple of Vamps," he added with a smirk.

There was a distinct possibility that I would be dead *...um, deader* if he hadn't shown up. Even if he didn't think so, I owed Toby.

We fell into a comfortable silence. I had been partially responsible for training Toby for his promotion to Seeker. It must have been a joke from the Powers That Be to pair a Vampire and Werewolf, or just

another test. If Toby had snapped and killed me it probably would have sealed his fate, and mine, come to think of it. There had been many long nights of surveillance when neither of us spoke a word. But during that time Toby had become my friend. I trusted Toby with my life.

"Whose collar did we steal?" Toby asked finally, a bit of his color returning to his cheeks.

He was healing quickly. Most thought the Werewolf's heightened healing ability was one of their gifts. I, on the other hand, realized it was the only thing keeping them alive. Transforming put a tremendous amount of stress on the body. Think about it. Anything that causes bones to break and regrow in different configurations, and organs to shift completely was probably pretty lethal. Which also explained why new Werewolves usually didn't make it to their second full moon. Their bodies couldn't handle the stress.

I turned and looked back at my monitor. Running my finger down the screen, I smiled and turned back to Toby. "Ramirez."

Toby laughed. "That old Witch is going to be pissed."

Elena Ramirez was Brimstone's top Seeker. Transferring from office to office, she went where the powers felt she was most needed. She had been a member of the Syndicate before Vampires, Werewolves, and other Inhumans had been admitted. There were rumors she was one of the very first Seekers, but no one had been able to substantiate the claim. I was under the impression she had created that rumor herself and was helping to perpetuate it. She had been very vocal about her distaste over allowing Inhumans into Brimstone, and time had not eased her position. She was a bigot, plain and simple. She always felt her job was to control and destroy the creatures of the night, not work with them. So most of the Inhumans took great pleasure in screwing with her. It probably wasn't helping our cause, but it was fun nevertheless.

"I wonder how long she was tracking Garrett?" I asked.

Toby shrugged. "Knowing Elena, probably months. She doesn't do anything quickly." He paused, his smile fading from his face. "Think she'll curse us like she did Jacobs?"

I hadn't thought of that. She was getting rather vindictive lately. She couldn't outright kill another Seeker without losing her Brimstone status, but there were ways of making someone else miserable. No one was sure what she did to Jacobs, if anything at all, but he had retired shortly after accidentally capturing a swarm of mischievous Sprites that were part of Elena's docket. He had been a very promising Seeker, but he just gave it all up almost overnight. No one could ever prove that Elena did anything, but we all had our suspicions.

Toby shrugged. "I'll just tell the truth in my report. I was backup. You were the one who made the collar." He stood up and walked around the desk. Sliding into the chair, he leaned his elbows on the desk and laced his fingers. He was looking much better.

"You're a lot of help." I snorted. It wasn't that big of a deal. I would just stop by Witchcraft on the third floor on my way out and pick up a couple of anti-hex charms. That should do the trick.

I ran my hand through my messy hair. The rain had done a real number on it. "So, what are your plans tonight?"

Toby shrugged. "I'm off the clock in fifteen minutes. I was just planning to go home and sleep. You?"

I glanced up at the boring, white clock on the wall and realized it was a quarter to three. I had wasted my whole night at the office. I started to feel the pang of hunger in my stomach. "I'm hungry."

Toby jerked straight up.

I almost laughed, but I remembered how much my vampirism still unnerved him. I shook my head.
"Sorry, Toby."

The Werewolf's posture eased slightly. "Please don't do that, Rose," he asked softly. "Usually when a Vampire says they're hungry, someone dies."

I laughed to try and ease the situation. "I haven't had human blood in nearly ten years. You know that."

Toby nodded. "I know, I know. But you're still a Vampire."

"The synthetic stuff they produce upstairs is actually pretty good," I offered. I was hoping to convince him that I actually enjoyed being on the fake blood, even though I hated it. It made my stomach turn. I hated to admit it, but I missed human blood. I even craved it from time to time.

I looked at Toby. Werewolves tasted unique, powerful, intoxicating.

"Rose."

Toby's voice was low and stern. I snapped straight up embarrassed, realizing I must've been eyeing him like a Happy Meal.

"Sorry." I must be hungrier than I thought.

He stood out of his chair and started quickly for the elevator. "I'm calling it a night," he said, jabbing the call button. He waited a moment then nervously hit the button again.

I thought about stopping him to apologize, but he needed time to cool off. He knew in his condition he wouldn't be much of a match for a hungry Vampire. I lifted my hand and waved goodbye as he slipped into the elevator before the doors could even fully open.

It was probably best that he left. We both needed to rest, but I had to finish my paperwork. Turning back to the computer, I glanced one more time at the clock on the wall. I had about an hour and a half before I had to be home in order to miss the sun rise. I had no intention of spending the night here at Brimstone Central. There's nothing worse than spending all night and all day at your place of employment.

I thought of Toby again. I would have to do something nice to properly apologize. Maybe I could get him football tickets, or something of the sort. That wouldn't be too difficult since Brimstone monitored multiple players in the league. The fans had no idea that their favorite player was an Inhuman. I'm sure I could pull some strings.

I ran my hand over my face to wipe away the sleepiness. It wasn't working. Saving my progress, I shut down the computer and headed for the elevator. The paperwork could wait. I was hungry and tired.

And it was my night off after all.

Chapter 3

Twisting the steering wheel, I guided my blue coupe down into the parking structure. The smell of gasoline, oil, and car fumes was thick in this concrete cave. Dug out beneath my apartment building, the garage was generally well maintained and allowed me to get to my car without dealing with any pesky sunlight. Pulling into my usual spot, I kicked the car into park and turned off the ignition. Pulling the keys free, I leaned back in the plush, dark gray fabric.

Staring out the window, I looked over a row of high-powered sports cars and expensive sedans that seemed to populate the garage. Sometimes I wished I could lose myself in the rich leather interiors of those vehicles, to feel the night wind whip through my hair as I drove with the top down, or the raw adrenaline of gunning the engine to one hundred and thirty miles per hour. I looked down at my coupe's speedometer that terminated just above ninety and smiled. This wasn't the fastest or prettiest ride, but it was reliable and it got me where I wanted to go. I guess that would have to be enough. Running my hand lovingly over the steering wheel, I popped the door and stepped out. Thumbing the remote, I watched the headlights flash to signal the car was locked.

Turning toward the elevators on the far side of the garage, I felt the tiny hairs on my neck stand up. I could feel someone staring holes into my back. There was no need to panic, but my mind snapped into defensive mode. Moving across the concrete, I scanned the garage without trying to look like I was.

Could it be one of Vlad's Vampires seeking retribution?

As I walked, I slid my hand into my jacket and unhooked the safety strap on my holster. Carefully wrapping my fingers around the grip, I pulled the pistol free and laid my finger across the trigger guard. We were instructed during Seeker training to never place our finger on the trigger unless we intended to fire. I slid my finger into the guard and clicked off the safety with my thumb.

Stopping in front of the elevator, I spotted a shadow move behind a parked car. He had allowed me to see him. "Might as well come out, Jared."

Holding my weapon defensively, I watched a dark figure materialize out of the shadows. Jared was gorgeous, even for a Vampire. His pale skin was offset by the sheen of the hip-length black leather jacket he always wore. Dark slacks, a maroon v-neck sweater, and a pair of black combat boots completed his attire. His short, messy hair was dark brown, but with the gel he used, it looked black. He exuded darkness and power. It eddied, swirled, and seemed to roll off him in waves threatening to pull me under in the riptide. But by far, Jared's most attractive feature was the steel blue eyes that seemed to slice through me like lasers. In the right conditions, they could appear almost white, while at other times were a rich shade of azure.

"Rosy," Jared greeted me.

I didn't like him calling me that. He never earned that privilege. I kept a safe distance between the two of us. "Stalking me?"

Jared's expression remained unchanged. "Just making sure you got home safely." His voice was smooth and powerful.

I cocked an eyebrow. "Why?"

"I heard about your catch tonight," Jared answered. "Master Vampire."

I nodded. "That's right."

"They tend to have powerful allies," he noted ominously. His blue eyes flashed beautifully in the low light.

Eyeing him, I shifted my weight from foot to foot. His posture was a little more rigid than usual. He was hiding something. "Why are you really here?"

Jared was silent.

I turned and tapped the elevator call button. The down arrow above the door illuminated red. "You have until the elevator arrives," I pressed.

The Vampire glanced up to the arrow then back to me. "I'll go." He turned away.

"Wait." I regretted saying it as soon as it left my lips. I didn't like to show vulnerability.

Jared turned back to me. A mischievous glimmer in his eyes appeared then vanished just as quickly.

I bit my lip.

"I just wanted to make sure you got home safely," Jared reiterated

I leaned against the wall and crossed my arms. "That's it? Just pop by to spy on me, then vanish again?"

His lips warped into a frown. "I'm sorry." He took a step back. "This was a bad idea. I should go. The sun will be up soon. Rosy," Jared breathed my name as if it were a prayer, "please be careful." A dark shadow fell over his face. "A storm is brewing."

I cocked an eyebrow curiously. "What does that mean?"

"It's not too late." He paused uncomfortably. This wasn't like him at all. Jared was many things, but uncertain wasn't one of them.

"Not too late for what?" I asked.

"To accept my offer," Jared replied. "I can take you away from all of this before it's too late."

His words seemed to settle over me like rain clouds. "Too late for what? What does that mean?"

His stare fell away from me. "Be careful," Jared repeated.

The ding of the elevator caught my attention. Turning back, I watched Jared vanish into the shadows.

I slowly stepped inside and jabbed the button for my floor with my knuckle. Watching the doors close, I stared at my missing reflection in the silver surface. I leaned my head against the cool metal and finally slipped my pistol back into its holster. That wasn't like Jared, at least not the Vampire I knew. Something wasn't right.

As the elevator stopped and the doors opened, I wandered out into the hallway. Without an upward

glance, I navigated to my apartment door and opened it. Dropping my keys on the table next to the front door, I scanned over my apartment with a sigh. It was a disaster. Piles of dirty clothes seemed to live in every corner while half-finished stacks of reports littered the kitchen counter. I should at least buy some dishes to appear human. *But when was the last time someone was actually in my apartment?*

Most humans don't like the company of Vampires. There's something inherently creepy about my species that seems to drive them—the normal ones anyway—away. Perhaps it's our pale white skin, or our unnaturally fierce eyes. Maybe our movements seem too fluid, too perfect. Or was it our razor-sharp fangs never quite hidden by our lips? Most likely it was that we were dead. That seemed like the most logical answer. Every animal on Earth can, in some form or another, sense death, and are repelled by it. This act of self-preservation seems to be programmed in on the genetic level.

And, truth be told, I don't particularly care for the company of other Vampires either. There's something about a bunch of pale people dressed in black that just doesn't do it for me. There's nothing worse than a brood of Vampires. They just look like they're waiting for a funeral. Which, if you think about it, probably isn't too far from the truth.

Plus, most Vampires tend to whine a lot. Ever since Anne Rice published her chronicles, all newly-turned Vampires seem to think they need to be tortured souls with the heart of poets. I just can't handle all of that “poor-poor-pitiful-me” garbage anymore. Our species is one of the few who are nearly immortal. It's true that Werewolves have enhanced life spans, if they could get past killing each other, and some Demons tend to live the span of two or three human lifetimes, but Vampires can live for centuries. Sure, there are trade offs—the whole no sunlight thing bothers me from time to time—but there's no sense wasting my afterlife whining. I just have no stomach for that.

Hanging my leather jacket on the rack next to the door, I wandered into the kitchen and pulled open the refrigerator. The stark emptiness startled me. Leaning against the open door I stared at the white plastic interior in dismay. Not even a half-filled blood bag remained. I closed my eyes and cursed under my breath. I knew there was something I meant to do on my day off. I'd just have to pick up some more tomorrow at the office.

Closing the door, I retreated past the living room into the bedroom. I called it my “master bedroom” even though it was smaller than the lady's restroom at the office. But it was mine. It was my own little corner of the world. Being nearly immortal, I had been forced over the years to move around a lot to keep up the guise of being human. I had been here for a little more than two years, but of all the apartments and rentals I've had throughout my afterlife, this was easily my favorite.

Unbuckling my holster, I slipped the thick leather straps off my shoulders. Holding it in my hand, I kicked off the safety strap, pulled my black Beretta Cougar out, and cradled it in my right hand. I liked this weapon. It wasn't huge or intimidating, but it seemed to fit me. The flat black surface of the Italian pistol felt cool against my hand. Thumbing the release, I pulled the magazine free: one bullet short. I wondered for a moment if it was still imbedded in Vlad's head, or if it had burst free. After snapping the magazine back in with a satisfying click, I replaced the .45 in the holster.

I had never owned a gun before working for Brimstone. For some reason they equipped all Seekers with a sidearm. Not that it usually did any good. Unless the Inhuman had a specific aversion to lead, it was little more than a diversionary tactic. I had only once seen a weapon bring down a raging Werewolf, and it wasn't the .45 caliber that I carried, it was one of those cannons they referred to as “elephant guns.” And it had taken both barrels.

It was kind of like working for the FBI, I imagined. I had a gun, a cute little gold badge, ID card and

everything. Now I just needed a spooky partner who believed in conspiracy theories, alien abductions, a nice basement office, and I would be set.

Kicking off my chunky boots, I sat down on the edge of the bed and relaxed. Still a bit shaken from the incident earlier in the evening, I tried to center myself and unwind. The flavor of Vlad's flesh lingered in my mouth. Vampires tasted like ashes to me. I had never understood the attraction of feeding off another Vamp. It's true that Vampire blood tasted different from humans, but I couldn't get past the tang of ash. I would rather lick a dirty ashtray.

Once I fell back on the bed, I unzipped my pants and pushed them off. My shirt quickly followed creating a heap on the floor. I dropped back into the sheets in my bra and panties and started making snow angels, enjoying the feel of warm cotton against my flesh. I rolled onto my side and slipped my arm beneath my head. Several heavy blankets covered the only window in my bedroom. The bottom edges of the blankets were pinned back, allowing me to enjoy my sixth floor view of Las Vegas. Through the rain streaks I could see the glittering lights of the casinos in the distance.

Well off the Strip, I was still near enough to head down if I wanted, yet far enough away to avoid the tourists who flocked there. Las Vegas had become a haven for Inhumans ever since they broke ground in the middle of the Nevada desert. With the constant influx of humanity, Inhumans could blend in easily and get lost. Vampires especially loved Sin City. The multitudes of naive tourists provided a constant food source and usually weren't missed too quickly. It gave the Vamps a chance to cover their tracks.

I reached out and undid the hook allowing the blankets to fall over the window. Sliding the cool cotton sheets over my body, I rested my head on the pillows. I wasn't looking forward to tomorrow. I had to finish processing Vlad, and deal with Elena.

It was not going to be a good day.

Chapter 4

I was right.

"Worthless leech!"

I struggled against Elena's invisible hold. She caught me as soon as I came in the door. She snatched me from the floor and slammed me repeatedly against the wall with her magic. Office personnel scattered like cockroaches as the powerful Witch advanced on me. A warm trickle of blood ran down my forehead from where it cracked into the drywall. I kicked and fought against her grip, but it was kind of difficult to fight something I couldn't touch. My anger welled up like a geyser in my chest threatening to explode. If she released me, I would bleed the Witch dry.

I fell to the floor.

Acquiring my target, my eyes glossed over black. I charged without a second thought, my fangs bared and my claws fully extended. Leaping off the edge of a nearby desk, I gave myself fully to the kill. I didn't care about my status as a Seeker, that we were in the middle of the Brimstone offices, or that she was one of the most powerful Witches I had ever seen. The blood rage had me. I moved fast, faster than a human could track. I could smell her dry, earthy scent inches from my face.

But I wasn't fast enough.

Grabbing me out of mid-leap, Elena lifted me into the air once again. Her hand began to slowly clench. I felt my throat being crushed under her invisible grip.

"How dare you steal my collar," the old Witch hissed. "Do you know how long I worked that case?"

Elena's eyes were filled with rage as she spoke. Her Hispanic features were drawn into an evil sneer while the power she drew in was whipping her long, black hair around her head. My gaze settled on the pulsating silver amulet she wore around her neck. She wasn't thinking clearly, otherwise the old Witch would have never let me get this close. Lashing out with my claws I tore the necklace from her throat. As it hit the floor, I felt her grip on me release.

Dropping onto the balls of my feet, I returned the favor. Snapping my clawed hand around Elena's throat, I lifted her easily from the ground. She gasped and coughed trying to draw breath. Unlike me, crushing her throat would kill her. She still needed to breathe. I dug my thumbnail into her flesh letting a small trickle of blood loose. I could smell her power in the blood. It smelled of earth and flowers, like a garden. I had never bled a Witch before, but in this case I would make an exception.

"Stop!"

I snapped my head around just in time to see several green spikes headed for my chest. Letting go of Elena and twisting slightly, I kept them from becoming a killing blow by piercing my heart. Instead the spikes dig into my shoulder. As the barbs pulled free, I gasped in pain and crumbled. I felt like my flesh was on fire. With Elena on the floor next to me gasping for air like a fish that had just been pulled from the water, I looked up to see my attacker. I wondered what took him so long to intervene.

"What the hell are you two doing?" Maynard's voice was low and angry. His usually soft brown eyes were glazed over green.

Maynard Markham was the head honcho of the Las Vegas branch and a Dendro Demon. Dendros are basically tree monsters that can grow spines on their limbs which carry a deadly poison. Known for their extreme heights, bark-like flesh, long lives, and abundant patience, Dendros are perfect for management positions. Maynard had been gifted with a spell that allowed him to appear human at will. It was so good that it could even fool most of the Witches in the building. Only the oldest, like Elena, and those of keen smell, like myself, had any idea he wasn't human. He was tall with perfectly kept blond hair styled into the latest fashion. He was an intimidating specimen with the physique of a body builder, but he had a huge heart. He was also one of the few Inhumans in the office not afraid of me, probably because he didn't have any blood.

To really upset him, like he was now, was a truly rare occurrence and in my position, very frightening. Maynard's body was wood. His spikes, which were sharp and hard enough to easily pierce flesh, were also wood. One good shot to my heart and I was dead. I made no move to pull myself off the floor even though it still felt like I was on fire.

"I can't have my two top Seekers tearing each other apart," Maynard growled again.

Elena, rubbing her throat, decided to pipe up. "She stole my—"

"I know who started this," Maynard barked at the old Witch, stopping her in mid-sentence, "and I will speak to you in my office privately." He waited for a moment to see if she moved. "Right now!" He

watched Elena stand and brush a bit of dust off her clothes. Reaching down, she snatched her focus amulet and deposited it in her pocket. Adjusting her shirt, she stared angrily at me and huffed off to Maynard's waiting office.

I felt a flash of joy at watching Elena disciplined.

"Rose."

Damn. The sound of my name told me that I wasn't off the hook either.

Maynard knelt down next to me and placed his hand on my shoulder. I started to feel the poison abate. "How many times have I asked you not to piss Elena off?"

I lifted myself into a sitting position. "I dunno," I croaked. "Twelve? Thirteen times?" I rubbed my throat. Apparently Elena's assault had bruised my voice box.

Maynard smiled but quickly flushed it from his face. "The question was rhetorical, Rose."

"Hey, how about a little sympathy for this devil?" I said, rubbing my forehead. I pulled two bloody fingers away and showed them to Maynard.

He took his hand from my shoulder. "Better?"

Surprised, I nodded as the burning began to ease.

He looked at the holes in my leather jacket he had created. "Sorry I had to spike you, but it really looked like you were about to kill her."

I was.

"You're still in trouble," Maynard pointed out, "but I did see who started it. I'm not going to let Elena off easy this time, but you shouldn't have retaliated."

"What was I supposed to do?" I laughed. "Let the Witch kick the crap out of me? I don't think so. This kitty's got claws."

Not amused by my joke, Maynard stood but kept his stare firmly on me. The green spikes quickly vanished into his flesh. "I want to see you in my office after I finish with Elena. You can head down to the infirmary if you need to."

I smiled politely even though I was still in pain. He may have neutralized the poison, but there was the matter of the holes in my flesh his barbs had created. Leaning against the nearest desk I watched the Dendro return to his office and shut the door.

Standing, I felt a twinge of pain run down my back. I touched my hand to my shoulder and pulled it away. Sticky cool blood clung to my palm and fingertips. There was something about a Dendro's poison that inhibited coagulation. Grabbing a handful of tissues from a box situated on the corner of the desk, I tried to wipe the blood from my hand and shoulder.

Looking up, I watched the rest of the office slowly start to filter back in. I didn't blame them for running. There was nothing worse than an angry Witch. Spells and magic took focus. When enraged, a Witch

usually forgot that little necessity and started blasting wildly. Which is why Elena was wearing the focus amulet. It concentrated her power and kept it under her control. When I knocked it away, she lost her concentration. Even that momentary lapse was enough for me. It was a handy little trick I learned while trying to bring in a coven of Witches last year.

The bittersweet smell of brewed coffee hit my nose. I turned to find Toby waiting patiently with two cups of coffee in his hand. That makes twice he's snuck up on me. He's getting better.

I accepted the mug from the young Werewolf and cradled it in my hands. The warmth from the beverage inside felt good on my hands. "Thanks for watching my back, T." I smiled sarcastically.

"Nothing I could do," he said after taking a heady drink from the mug. "This was your fight." He lowered his voice. "And I knew you could take the Witch."

Toby seemed more at ease with me today. Maybe a little rest had done him good, or maybe because the office wasn't empty. Or, more likely, he had recovered from his change. Whatever the reason, he wasn't eyeing me warily as if I were about to pounce on him. He looked better as well. His skin was rich and his eyes sparkled with life. His gray hair was still a mess, but it was *stylishly* messy. He was wearing a simple pair of jeans, a yellow bowling shirt, and his usual pair of white and black sneakers. And they even fit.

I saw a golden glimmer around his throat. A thin chain wrapped around his neck and disappeared down into the collar of his shirt. As he leaned back slightly to take another drink of his coffee, my brow furrowed. I wasn't sure if I should be insulted, or ignore it. Not remembering if I had ever seen him wear a cross before, I let it drop. It was small enough to go unnoticed. If he started shoving it in my face, then we might have a problem.

I lifted the mug to my lips and took a sip of the coffee. Way too hot, the dark liquid seared the tip of my tongue. Pulling the beverage away with a wince, I waited for the pain to subside. "So what did you do with your evening?"

"Food Network," Toby answered. "They had a great show on Creole cooking. I wrote down a couple of recipes. Might attempt jambalaya this weekend."

I was suddenly thankful I didn't eat food. That meant the inevitable invitation to sample his creations would never come—among other reasons. Toby was a bit of an odd wolf. He claimed he could smell the preservatives and chemicals in pre-prepared food and they soured his stomach. I would have thought he was full of it, but it was well known that Werewolves had the most developed sense of smell of any Inhuman. Therefore, he was teaching himself to be a gourmet chef. Maybe it wasn't that odd after all, but I always had the image of an eight-foot-tall werewolf trying to make pancakes in my head when he talked about cooking. It made me smile at least.

He took another sip of his coffee. "You?"

"Snow angels in the sheets."

He cocked an eyebrow and laughed.

"Seriously," I defended myself.

Maynard's office door flew open as Elena charged out. Holding her fingers over the cut I'd given her on

her throat, she shot me a snarky glance. Moving to the elevator, she disappeared without a single word.

Toby laughed under his breath. "Woo, boy. She is pissed at you, Rose."

Feeling a wad of fear well up in my throat, I nodded. I had done far worse than steal her collar. I had embarrassed her in front of our coworkers. She would not let this end well. Turning back, I saw Maynard leaning in his doorframe waiting for me.

"Your turn, Rose," he announced as calmly as possible. He leaned his head slightly to the right and spotted my Werewolf protégé. "Morning, Toby." He paused. "You might as well join us on this one."

Toby looked awestruck for a moment, but quickly let it drop realizing the disciplining was complete. It was time to get back to work.

Holding his coffee carefully, Toby followed me into Maynard's office. I couldn't help but notice how he clung to my heels as we walked, almost like a loyal pet. The wolf was starting to show dominance while he was in human form. *Interesting.*

Sliding into one of the cushy chairs, I set my coffee mug on the edge of Maynard's desk. His office was a mixture of black and wood tones. I wondered if it made a tree Demon uneasy to have a wooden desk. It didn't seem to bother Maynard, although there were more potted plants in his office than in the rest of the building. It was his personal forest. Long ago the Dendros Demons were protectors of forests. There were rumors some Dendros had never left their posts. They were still fighting off developers and loggers encroaching on their trees. Maybe Maynard still needed his own little grove to protect.

Crossing my legs, I folded my hands in my lap and waited. I saw Toby do the same out of the corner of my eye.

Maynard shut his office door and walked around to his padded leather chair. He looked at Toby then back to me as he sat down. "Why do I keep putting up with you, Rose?"

I shrugged. "Because I'm a pretty good Seeker?"

Maynard snorted. "Must be it." He leaned back with a squeak of leather. "I'm not going to scold you, but you know messing with a Witch is dangerous business, especially if the Tribunal learns of it. You know how they feel about one of their own being assaulted by another Inhuman."

He was doing his best to be my friend and not my boss. I wasn't sure it was working out so well. Still it was good advice. The Brimstone Tribunal, a coven of thirteen Witches, was especially protective of other Witches in the syndicate. It was almost a weird form of nepotism.

Maynard lifted a red folder from his desk and tossed it to me. Flipping it open, I quickly started to leaf through a series of black and white photos. I didn't recognize any of the subjects but they all looked like—

"Vampires," Maynard confirmed, a step ahead of my inevitable question. "A whole brood in downtown. They've been snatching tourists off the Strip. One or two I might be able to turn the other way, but this is becoming an epidemic. They've killed four this week already."

And it was only Tuesday.

"Search and destroy?" Toby asked as he sipped his cooling coffee.

Maynard nodded. "But we need to come up with a cover story as well. The human police are going to want someone they can pin these crimes on." The Dendro leaned back in his chair and steeped his fingers. "The mayor is pressuring them to make a capture. He doesn't think this looks good for tourism."

"I can imagine," I said with an uneasy chuckle. "They want tourists to gamble their money, not their lives." I stared at the surveillance photos of the Vampires. "How did a brood this big form illegally under our nose?"

"That's what we need to know," Maynard replied. "I want you and Toby to take the lead on this one. I'm sending you in with a team of Cleaners. This assignment is top priority. Everything else is on hold."

Toby twisted his coffee mug nervously in his hands. "When do we hit the place?"

"Just before dawn," Maynard said evenly. "That'll give you and Rose a chance to come up with a cover story and scope out the brood's nest. Now get to work." He dismissed us with a wave of his massive hands. "Oh, and, Rose," Maynard leaned forward and leveled his eyes with mine, "don't burn down the building this time."

I stood up and smiled broadly. "No promises."

Chapter 5

"I've got it," Toby said quietly. "How about a cannibal serial killer?"

I shook my head as I perched on the roof of the house opposite the brood's. "That's gross. Plus, I don't think that would look good for Vegas on the national news. This has to be," I paused, watching a Vampire exit the house and move quickly down the sidewalk, "mundane. It has to be forgotten in a few weeks. We don't want a major investigation into this."

Pulling a compact digital camera from my pocket, I zoomed in on the Vampire and snapped a couple of quick pics. I caught his scent on the morning breeze. The smell of fresh blood was heavy on him. He had killed recently, but there wasn't anything I could do about it right now. He was the third Vampire to fly the nest tonight. Clicking off the camera, I returned it to my coat and cursed under my breath. If they didn't come back before dawn, I would have to track them down later. If even one was left, it could start the process again. They all had to be destroyed.

I stretched my shoulder gently looking for a twinge of pain. Only a slight stiffness remained as my wounds had mostly healed from the night's earlier encounter with Elena and Maynard. Leaning forward, I could smell the stench of death from the brood's house. The Vampires were indeed bleeding humans. It set me on edge. As the night had drawn on, the smells had started to overpower me. I think I would have been happy to join them; to feel my fangs sink into the soft flesh of a human's throat, but I had a job to do. I had to remain strong for my sake. I looked over my shoulder, for Toby's sake.

We had been in the same spot for most of the night. Luckily this area of Las Vegas was a bit more rundown than the tourists usually see. The house we had appropriated for surveillance was empty. The brood's nest looked as if it were about to collapse on itself. Large sections of the roof had already cratered into the second floor, and not a single pane of glass remained. The wooden porch was caved in

just beyond the front door as if a bomb had hit it. These were dirty, filthy Vampires.

Not unlike the ones who turned me.

Attempting to tuck the memory back into the deep, dark recesses of my mind, I tried to stay focused. I didn't have time to stew over things that happened over a hundred years ago. But it wasn't working. *They stole everything from me. My life, my family, my husband ...* My lips curled into a sneer as I thought about the ways I would like to torture them. I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I would tear out their fangs, one by one, with a pair of pliers—

"Rose?"

Toby's hand on my shoulder startled me. I spun and stared at the Werewolf with black eyes and fangs bared.

"Whoa," he said, jumping back from me with his hands in the air. "Ease up, Cybil."

The air around us became tense as we both remained still. I stared at the wolf. Slowly my grips on the wooden shingles relaxed as my claws retracted. Shaking my head, I felt my black eyes revert to normal.

"Toby," I said apologetically, letting my gaze fall away. "I went someplace dark for a minute."

"No kidding," Toby growled. "I thought you were going to tear my head off."

"I'm—" I lifted my hand and brushed a lock of blond hair from my eyes. "I'm really sorry." I realized at this rate, he would never want to work with me again. Or he would kill me. Whichever came first.

Toby cocked his head slightly. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" I asked. I just wanted to get back to surveiling our targets. This wasn't a productive area of discussion.

The Werewolf sighed in frustration. "Go all badass Vamp at the drop of a hat?"

"Instinct, I guess. I've been a Vampire longer than I was a human," I admitted and paused. The answer shocked even me. *Had I forgotten how to be a human? Was I becoming more like the elder Vampires, more of a grotesque caricature of a human?* I felt my heart sink. I leaned back on the roof, my interest in the job waning. I turned slowly to my Werewolf companion. "Why are you afraid of me?"

"You're a Vampire," Toby answered without hesitation. "Your kind is responsible for killing more Werewolves than any other race on this planet. Even humans."

I felt a flush of anger. "Have I personally oppressed you?" I wouldn't wait for an answer. "What about other Werewolves? Isn't the average life expectancy for a wolf less than thirty days? Most don't survive to see their second full moon because local Alphas hunt down and kill freshies." I was ranting angrily. My mind was working a thousand miles a minute. All the walls, all the filters between my brain and mouth seemed to suddenly vanish.

"Yes, I have killed Werewolves," I admitted. "But I have also killed Vampires, Demons, and yes, even humans. They were all justified in one way or another." I was lying, but he didn't need to know that. Shortly after I was turned, I killed humans and Inhumans for sport, just because I could. "I am a killer," I

added finally.

Toby's eyes grew sullen. "And that's why I'm afraid of you."

I was hurt. "Do you even like me?"

The Werewolf drew in a long, deep breath and considered the question. "Yes," he said after a moment, but he didn't sound sure of his answer. "I think you're a damned good Seeker, but..."

"But?" I repeated, hoping to coax the rest of the thought from him.

"But I don't know if you would turn on me at any moment." He rapped his knuckles lightly against the wooden shingles. "And I'm not sure I want to find out." It was hurting him as much to say it as it was for me to hear it.

It cut me to the bone. I felt as if my abdomen had been sliced open and my guts were about to spill out. I would put my life in Toby's hands no questions asked, even though he could turn into a hulking monster that could easily reduce me to a red stain on the pavement. It had been a long time since I trusted someone so completely. Lifting my heart from the ground, I slid it back into my chest and fought the emotions bubbling in the back of my skull. Forcefully reminding myself to blink, I crawled back to my perch on the peak of the roof.

We fell into a terribly uncomfortable silence, but I didn't care. I wasn't going to talk to him if I didn't have to, and it looked like he felt the same way. I could barely hear the regular rise and fall of his chest. He was making every effort to be as silent as possible. Even the wind that whistled through the trees was making more noise than we were. For the first time since knowing Toby, I felt uneasy with my back turned to him.

"I think we can call in the Cleaners," I said after a while. "There are only ten or eleven Vamps in this brood. They should have no problem." I glanced over my shoulder, but he was already gone. Apparently he didn't even need to stick around to hear my assessment of the situation.

Falling back off my perch, I laid on my back and stared at the stars. The night was perfectly clear; a far cry from last night's drizzle. The nights were still cool but were starting to warm. This was more the weather I was accustomed to in Southern Nevada. It was hot and dry here forcing even the humans to adopt a more nocturnal lifestyle. It was just too damned hot to go out in the middle of the day. The stars were twinkling brightly overhead. In the hushed lights of the suburbs, it was easy to make out the constellations.

I didn't know what to do about Toby but it would have to wait.

Glancing into the eastern sky, I cringed as I saw the black sky transitioning to blue. It was nearly dawn. We were cutting it really close. Digging into my jacket pocket, I felt my small, clamshell design cell phone. Pulling it free, I flipped it open and jabbed two of the rubberized buttons. The preprogrammed number began to ring immediately. I listened to a gruff male voice answer on the other end. "Eleven targets maximum. Wait for my order to execute." I snapped the phone shut and deposited it back in my pocket.

I hated military jargon, but it was all some seemed to understand. They had been gifted with free will, and chose to ignore it. It was easier to follow orders than think for one's self. They were cattle. Or maybe I was just in a really, really bad mood.

Standing tall, I stared into the street below. Much of the brood had returned home before dawn. The Cleaners would be able to handle them and I would have to pick up the stragglers tomorrow night. It was now or never. Stepping off the roof, I sailed to the ground and landed flatfooted. I waited, my blond hair whipping in the morning breeze. I wondered for a moment where Toby was. He would catch hell from Maynard for leaving a job, no matter what his personal feelings about his partner were.

I smelled them before I saw them. I didn't even need to turn. They weren't built for stealth, but pure destruction. I could hear the scraping of the Kevlar body armor, the clack of their weapons, and the crunch of the grass under their heavy, booted feet as they moved. Mainly Werewolves, there was a single Witch with them. It was his job to clean up the Cleaners' mess.

"The Cleaners" was a nickname one of the groups had earned and it seemed to stick. It had become their code designation in the Syndicate. Designed to take out nests of nasties instead of sending in a mass of Seekers, the Cleaners were comprised of ex-military and law enforcement personnel. There were at least two squads assigned to every Brimstone branch.

The commander stepped forward, but kept an arm's length between us. "Rose."

"Captain," I greeted back. I turned slightly to face him while making sure I didn't present my back to the brood across the street. I was sure they could smell us by now. We had to move quickly.

The squad's captain, Patrick, was built like a tank. He was huge, both in height and girth, his black body armor made him even more impressive looking. He wore a black helmet with a flaming skull painted on the front. A pair of goggles with yellow lenses hung around his neck waiting for use. Seven wooden stakes were slung across his chest bandolier style, while his compact P90 submachine gun was snapped to his chest armor. He was among a growing number of Werewolves who refused to allow themselves to transform. He had access to all the strength, speed, and regenerative powers in human form, but wasn't subject to the more base animal instincts of a Werewolf. They felt the wolf component of their being was too unstable.

I thought of Toby. Maybe they were right.

Patrick handed me a walkie-talkie and voice-activated headset. He watched me with his steel blue eyes as I slid the headset over my ear and slipped the base onto the waistband of my leather pants. We had worked together several times before. He was your no-nonsense military type. I think he told me he had served in Desert Storm, but I was having a hard time focusing tonight. I didn't need to be in a combat situation. My head wasn't in the game.

"Sit rep, Captain," I commanded, trying to sound like I actually knew what I was talking about.

Patrick lowered his eyes and took a slow breath to fight off the anger or laughter. I couldn't tell which. "My men are ready," he said, finally able to muster some composure. "You want a clean sweep of the nest?"

I nodded.

"And if we encounter civilians?"

I thought for a moment, but the conclusion was inevitable. There couldn't be any witnesses for our fake cover story to hold. "Destroy everything. Even civvies. I'll go in with you, but I'll hang back by the

entrance. Maybe I can stop a couple of Vamps as they flee.” I reached over and snagged a stake from Patrick. “Tell your Witch I want this to be clean. No trace of anything in this house after we leave. Got it?”

"Understood," Patrick replied.

"You have your orders," I snapped. "Let's go."

As Patrick stepped into the street between the two houses, the five men of his squad materialized out of the darkness behind me. They charged quickly and quietly across the street and grouped at the front door. Patrick silently signaled his men. Two of the five broke off and charged around to the back door. Counting down with his fingers, one of his men kicked in the front door and charged inside. Patrick and the rest of his team quickly followed. The sound of gunfire shattered the night's calm.

I slipped off my leather jacket and tossed it behind several dying bushes. Don't believe everything you see in movies and television. Those long, black, leather jackets may look cool, but they tend to get in the way during a fight. That's when I spotted another pile of clothes. I recognized the shirt and jacket. The small golden cross lying on the shirt. They were Toby's.

"Shit," I groaned under my breath. "Bad doggie."

He wolfed and went in without me. Drawing my Beretta, I charged across the street and was up the front stairs in a single step. The overpowering scent of blood hit me like a blast of air as I crossed the threshold. Gasping, I felt my eyes beginning to change. I had to fight it. Snapping off the safety on the .45, I tried to make sense of the smells, sounds, and sights assaulting me. The smell of gunpowder hung heavy in the air. I saw a burst of light to my left as a P90 was discharged. The accompanying scream assured me the Vampire had died quickly.

"Captain." Tenderly pressing my fingertips to the headset, I gripped my weapon a little tighter. Walking slowly, I moved further into the nest. A dead tourist lay sprawled in his khaki shorts and Hawaiian shirt in front of an abused fireplace. I keyed the radio again, "Captain, we have another Seeker in the building. He is a gray Werewolf approximately—"

The smells of the nest overpowered me. I didn't even detect the Vampire who circled around the large living room and leapt on me from behind. We crumbled to the floor, the stake skittering from my hand.

Then it let go.

Jumping to my feet, I then swung my pistol around and caught the glint of the Vampire's eyes in the darkness. I could make out his shape in the nearly pitch-black conditions with my preternatural sight. He was maybe in his early twenties and extremely skinny. A shock of brown hair hung down and terminated just below his eyes. I hesitated.

"Brimstone." The Vampire hissed the word as if it were a curse. He started digging into the pocket of his jeans.

"Hands where I can see them," I threatened. I should've shot. It would have been over, but something compelled me to hold. I could hear the Cleaners working their way back through the house toward my position. Patrick's voice was barking in my ear over the headset. Pulling it off, I dangled the wire over my shoulder.

"I have ID," he stammered, scared out of his wits. One hand was raised in the air while the other was still in his back pocket. "We are a legal brood." He carefully pulled the identification card from his pocket and held it in his palm.

Snatching the card from him and returning to my position faster than he could follow, I kept the weapon aimed at his head. Scanning over the card, my eyes grew wide. I tossed the card back to the young Vampire and grabbed my walkie-talkie. I keyed the radio. "Abort! Abort!"

The crack of a P90 startled me. My gaze came up to see the young Vampire crumble to the ground in a pool of his own blood. Snapping around, I came face to face with Patrick. His blood was splattered with the ruby red life of his enemy.

"Call off your men," I ordered. "This nest is legal."

"Stake that Vampire." Patrick tossed a stake to one of his men.

The Cleaner dropped down and slammed the wooden stake cleanly into the heart of the Vampire and stepped back. Shooting straight up with a horrible shriek, the Vampire's hands wrapped instinctively around the stake as his eyes shifted from black to blood red. Gagging and gasping, the Vampire vomited blood and finally fell back to the floor dead.

Patrick snorted and started to walk past me.

This wasn't the Patrick I knew. Grabbing his arm, I yanked him back to face me. The snap-click of multiple P90s told me the remaining four members of his squad had their weapons drawn on me. I was overmatched. I slowly let go of Patrick. "They were legal," I said again.

Patrick said as he motioned for his men to lower their weapons, "Job's done." He turned and started out of the nest followed by his men. Spinning on his heels as he reached the sidewalk, a large grin grew across his face. "Oh, and, Rose?"

I snapped the safety on my Beretta and slid it back into its holster. "*What?*" I couldn't help but sound hostile.

He pointed past me into the house. "We found your puppy."

A knot welled up in my throat. Spinning on the balls of my feet I charged back into the nest. Skittering over a multitude of dead bodies I searched from room to room. Charging up the stairs in no more than three steps, I skidded to a stop on the second floor. Amidst a pile of dead Vampires I saw a bloody patch of gray fur.

I wanted to fall to my knees.

I involuntarily drew a breath, a reflex reaction. The pungent odor of death hit my senses like a slap, but there was something more, something akin to the deep woods. It was weak, but very distinctive. It struck me at once.

Stuffing my hand into my pockets, I searched for my phone. I started to panic then I realized where I left it. Vaulting over the railing, I hit the floor running. I was out the front door and across the street, my feet barely touching the ground. Snatching my coat from behind the bush, I ripped open the pocket and grabbed my cell.

Flipping open the device, I tapped a number from memory and held it to my ear. I barely heard the voice of the Brimstone Operator I was so panicked. "Seeker down! This is Rose! I have a Seeker down!"

Chapter 6

Toby nipped at me twice. He didn't mean to, but he was hurting and lashed out. His yellow eyes appeared glazed over as he lay curled up on the floor. He looked like a poor, abused house pet with thick bandages wrapped around his chest and front paws. His fur was matted with dark areas of blood that probably didn't belong to him while his thick tail was slung around his lower legs and partially obscuring his black nose. The healers had recommended he stay in wolf form while he healed. It meant he couldn't talk to me, but he would recover faster. I was just relieved he was alive.

Sitting against the wall, Toby lifted his head and rested his muzzle on my leg. He whimpered and closed his eyes. I stroked the hair on his neck and back gently trying to comfort him. It was odd to think that less than an hour ago we weren't on speaking terms; now he was curled up in my lap like a loving pet—albeit a nearly eight-foot tall, killer pet.

The wait for the rescue vehicle had felt like an eternity. I had cleared the dead Vampires off Toby and done what I could, which translated to simply waiting with him. I talked to him just hoping that hearing my voice would keep him with me. I had no medical knowledge so I couldn't treat him, and an injured Werewolf is a very dangerous creature. They say a hurt wolf will strike at anyone or anything—even its mate—that tries to come near it out of fear. A Werewolf behaves much the same way, except you're dealing with a massive animal that could eviscerate you without batting an eye.

Dawn had come and gone already. The sun was high in the sky. "Looks like we're both spending the night in the office," I complained to Toby.

He growled, but it died into a pathetic whimper. I think he was telling me to shut up. Or scratch his ear. I couldn't tell.

I stared at the thick, iron bars that locked us in. I'm sure it made the healers feel safe, but it wasn't doing anything for my confidence. If Toby snapped, that was it. I was locked in. By the time they heard the screams and came with the tranqs, it would be way too late. They had, of course, given me the option of sleeping on a cot in one of the back offices, but I couldn't leave Toby. Even though he was a big jerk, he was still my best friend.

As I rubbed Toby's neck, my mind snapped back to the nest. As I checked that young Vampire's ID, I could smell the fear wafting off him in waves. It was thick on the air, and not just for the reason there was an armed military unit in his home, but because he was innocent. At least as innocent as a Vampire can ever be.

The Brimstone Syndicate allowed a few nests in each city to be sanctioned. This was to keep the Vampires in check, much the same way certain counties in Nevada had legalized prostitution. It kept the whores off the street, and made sure they were clean. Brimstone viewed the sanctioned Vampire nests the same way. It kept them away from the population. It was easier to clean up a few dead bodies than a hundred. A Master Vampire usually controlled sanctioned nests. This served to keep the younger Vamps in check and made someone accountable to Brimstone.

There were two things wrong with the raid: This was a sanctioned nest, and there was no Master Vampire on the premises, nor did I see one leave during the night. If the Master had abandoned his brood, which sometimes happened, it meant there was a good possibility he was still alive. If he hadn't, then the younger Vampires had overpowered and killed him. I needed to find out one way or another. But the more pressing concern *was how did this happen?* Brimstone prides itself on one of the most up-to-date and accurate record systems in the human or Inhuman world. Snafus like this were simply unheard of anymore. There would have had to have been a whole chain of errors that placed it on Maynard's desk and eventually in my hands. The chances of this error slipping through that many hands without getting caught were almost astronomical.

I looked up through the iron bars. "Speak of the Devil."

Maynard stood a few steps away, his arms folded across his chest accusingly. "Care to explain to me how Toby came in with seven bullets in his chest?"

"I think you should ask Captain Dipshit with the Cleaners," I spat out. "His team shot Toby."

Toby growled half-heartedly.

Maynard shook his head. "That's not what Captain Peterson says in his report."

Patrick Peterson? I had no idea what his last name was. Sounded like a comic book hero's poorly conceived moniker. "Is that so?"

"As a matter of fact," Maynard breathed, "he portrayed you and Toby in a very negative light. He claims you nearly botched the entire operation and endangered the lives of his men. He says Toby went in without authorization and was gunned down by Vampires."

"Really?" I couldn't hide the sarcasm in my voice. "I was under the impression Captain Peterson was a trigger-happy moron. None of the Vamps had weapons, at least none that I saw. And, Maynard," I scooted out from beneath Toby's head and stood up, "the nest was legal."

Maynard stepped closer to the cell and lowered his voice. "Don't even joke about that."

"One of the Vampires had a current Brimstone ID."

"Damn," Maynard spat out. He took a step back and started to pace. "Can you substantiate that?"

I started to bite my lip again. "Not yet. I lost the card."

He stopped and stared at me. "I want you back at that nest at sundown. I want that card."

I nodded.

"This is both of our asses on the line, Rosy," Maynard whispered harshly. "You're facing censure because of Peterson's claims. If you can find the card, we can turn the tables on him."

I shook my head. "What about you? If I find the card, it paints you in a bad light. You gave the order to take down the nest," I reminded him. "I don't want to ruin your career."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there," he assured me. He took a breath and changed the subject.
"How's Toby?"

"He'll live," I said, looking back at the wolf. "But he's not going to be happy with Peterson."

Maynard smiled. "Seems like you two make a good team then. If he's up to it," he already knew Toby would be much better by nightfall, "take him with you. You're going to need all the help you can get. You're on your own on this one."

I'm sure the confused look I gave him told him the entire story of my emotions.

He took a step back from the cell door. "I have to do this, I'm sorry," he said, motioning to the guards and healers in earshot of our conversation. "Until a full investigation can be completed, I'm afraid I have to suspend your Seeker status."

The iron bars rung as I slammed my hands against them. "What?" I wasn't acting for the benefit of the audience.

"Sorry, Rose. It's procedure. I'm sure everything will be cleared during the investigation." He lowered his voice. "Get me that damned card."

Maynard turned and walked away without another word.

Spinning on my heels slowly, I stared at Toby. His head lifted and he stared at me inquisitively. Making no sudden movements I strode across the cell and carefully sat down next to him. I was sure he heard the entire conversation. Resting his muzzle on my lap again, I lightly ran my fingers over his fur. "Are you up for this tonight?"

Toby whined softly.

"I know," I tried to comfort him. Leaning my head back against the concrete wall, I tried to think of everything, anything I could do. My defense hinged on finding that identification card.

Then it struck me. What if the Cleaner's Witch had already wiped the scene?*Damn.*

There was too much riding on this. Brimstone wasn't a job you just up and quit. If I was relieved of my Seeker status, it was permanent. I would probably be expelled into the light. And Toby, poor Toby ... They claimed the most humane way to execute a Werewolf was by firing squad. Only one of the seven executioners would have silver bullets. That didn't sound very humane to me.

I looked down into Toby's yellow eyes. "You need a bath. You're not going out with me smelling like this."

Toby pulled his lips back and growled at me as if to say, *Try it and you'll regret it.*

I wisely let the idea drop.

"Didn't there used to be a house here?"

I glanced around the neighborhood recognizing several of the houses I had spent the previous night staring at. It was all the same. I knew this was the right place. At least, I thought I did. I stared in awe at several neighborhood children playing on a swing set, merry-go-round, and jungle gym. They squealed in delight as they romped, wrestled, and played on the vast patch of green grass stretched out from the sidewalk to a high wooden fence at least two lots back. The rundown houses on either side of the park looked even worse compared to the brand new equipment and beautifully arranged, lighted, stone path that swept through it. A small pond was situated in the far corner of the grass with a wide, arched bridge spanning it. The park was absolutely gorgeous. No trace of the Vampire nest was left.

The Witch had outdone himself.

I could see the residue of magic with my preternatural sight, but that was the extent of it. I didn't know how much the Witch had actually changed, or specifically what spells had been cast. I had the feeling something remained of the house, but I couldn't be sure. Call it a gut instinct. There was still the lingering scent of old death here. I didn't know exactly what that meant.

The sun had just set leaving an orange glow in the western sky. I knew it wouldn't be long before the children's mothers called them home then I could get down to business. This spell was way beyond anything I was capable of undoing. This was some serious magic. It almost seemed beyond the comprehension of a lowly cleaning Witch. I needed help. And I knew where we could get some.

Sliding into my midnight blue coupe, I glanced across to the empty passenger seat. Toby was mostly healed, but he wasn't quite back to full strength yet. I left him with the healers for one more night. I couldn't risk bringing him with me. *There will be other hunts. Let him take the night off. I could handle this.*

Sliding the key into the ignition, I listened to the engine rumble then settle into a throaty purr. I liked this car, but I was glad it wasn't mine. Part of the Brimstone motor pool, it had been "acquired" from an alpha Werewolf who didn't need it anymore—he didn't need anything but a pine box now. The story was the same for many of the sporty, high-powered vehicles in the pool. The Brimstone Syndicate was an organization dedicated to protecting humanity, but it wasn't exactly the March of Dimes.

The sparkling, spinning, twinkling lights of the Las Vegas Strip loomed ahead of me. I couldn't help but wonder how much power this city consumed on a daily basis. The mob bosses weren't the only ones who were rich here. I imagine the power companies turn a tidy profit as well. Turning onto Frank Sinatra Drive, I could see the backside of the Strip. Across the way I could make out the Tropicana, the New York, New York, and the MGM Grand. I didn't like to drive on Las Vegas Boulevard thanks to the glut of tourists and the multitude of yellow taxis that seemed to appear out of nowhere. It was just safer, and quieter to stay on the backstreets.

Before I could see my destination, I saw the banks of lights that announced its presence. Cutting across Tropicana Avenue, I slid begrudgingly into the traffic on Las Vegas Boulevard. Past the Luxor and Mandalay Bay, I spotted the monument growing out of the Las Vegas desert, and it didn't strike me as odd. Not even a little bit. This was Las Vegas. The Eiffel Tower was four blocks down the street.

Rising four hundred feet into the sky, the Aztec is one of the largest hotels in the United States. The step-side pyramid-shaped hotel and casino boasts four thousand rooms in the two adjoining towers, a casino that's over one hundred thousand square feet, and a meticulous reconstruction of the city of Teotihuacán, or so the pamphlet read. Built from actual blocks transported from Mexico City to Las

Vegas, the main casino was a recreation of the *Pyramid del Sol*, the Sun Pyramid, the second largest pyramid in the new world. Smaller pyramids, including scaled-down reconstructions of the Moon and Feathered Serpent, were situated in front of the main casino around a huge lagoon.

It was also sinking. The designers, engineers, and architects couldn't understand why. It was built on the same soil as the Mandalay Bay and it was solid. They were looking for physical reasons. They wanted to understand the problem with their tiny, closed human minds. In reality, it was very simple: the Earth was reclaiming it.

Pyramids, used by cultures all over the world from Egypt, China, and Mexico, were powerful structures. The triangle shape gathered and focused the Earth's natural energy. To design something like the Aztec and make it a shrine to capitalism was considered by many Inhumans to be an affront to the Powers That Be. It was harnessing the Earth's power with nowhere to channel it, thus the structure was gathering mystical mass. This new weight, combined with the already hefty load on the porous desert landscape, was causing it to sink. The Earth wanted her power back, and she was willing to do whatever it took to get it.

The casino was stained in human blood, even before the doors opened for the first time. By using stones from the actual temples, the designers had harnessed something they didn't understand. Human sacrifice was extremely common in the Aztec culture. Proud warriors, they would take the enemies claimed in battle and sacrifice them to their various gods high atop the temples. Early Europeans who first met the Aztecs claimed to have seen rivers of blood running down the pyramid's steps. Teotihuacán was literally translated as the "city where men became gods." You can't channel all of that power and expect it to simply dissipate.

There was a rumor when the Aztec was first being constructed that an Inhuman was acting as the architect because of the use of supernatural shapes and measurements. But one look inside proved this wasn't so. Only humans could be so egotistical.

Still, I liked it here. I felt powerful here.

The Aztec instantly became one of Las Vegas' most visited casinos as soon as it opened its doors. Some visitors claimed they weren't sure why, but they were drawn here. They weren't the only ones. This lavish creation was a beacon for anything even slightly sensitive to such things. I've been told that psychics, channelers, and Witches could see the massive amounts of power the casino was generating. They said it looked like a pyramidal sparkler on the Strip as the energy was drawn in, but had no place to go. The Aztec had become a mystical hotspot in the city, and that was exactly the reason I was here.

Pulling into the parking area, I handed the valet my keys and accepted the ticket to reclaim them. Adjusting my white blouse, I reached down and flicked a bit of lint off my black pants. Opening another button on my shirt, I made sure the black lacy bra that lifted and enhanced my cleavage was peeking out suggestively. I started toward the entrance running my fingers through my messy blond hair. I missed being able to sit in front of the mirror and style my hair. It had taken some practice, but I had become pretty good at doing it by touch alone.

I reached instinctively to the back of my pants but let my hand fall away. Maynard had taken my weapon when he suspended me. I was so used to having it that I felt naked without it. I smiled devilishly. I guess I would have to rely on my fangs, claws, enhanced strength and speed to defend myself.

A marble floor stretched out lavishly toward the registration area, which was always full. Moving past, the clerks paid no attention to me. To them I was just another person spending money in their casino.

They didn't care. No one did. Humans, with rare exceptions, are fairly oblivious creatures. They claim to have open minds, but in reality are so set in their ways that they wouldn't notice an Inhuman unless it had a huge, blinking sign overhead advertising it. And they liked it that way. Humans felt they had a pretty good grasp on the world. They felt they knew how it ticked.

Boy, were they in for a shock.

It was getting harder and harder to hide. Inhumans would eventually be revealed, but Brimstone was working hard to prevent that. With modern science and technology, humans were closer to understanding the truth of their universe: that they understood nothing. The discovery was almost inevitable at this point. But at the moment, thankfully, the paranormal world was still the domain of crackpots and ghost hunting plumbers. I had no intention of being poked and prodded in a laboratory as they tried to unlock the keys of immortality or my perfect health.

Slithering through the casino floor, I made my way around craps tables, slot machines, and overworked, underdressed cocktail waitresses. The Aztec had beautiful waitresses, but not the most exquisite in Las Vegas. That distinction belonged to the Mandalay Bay. Those women were gorgeous. Even I felt inadequate beside them.

A blue neon representation of a plumed serpent advertised my objective. It was Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent deity of ancient Mesoamerica. The muffled thump of subwoofers could be heard through the walls. This was Club Toltec, one of those trendy destinations in Vegas that smugly turned away the common folk. Aztec styled hieroglyphs ran high up the surrounding walls while a single burly human in a dark blazer worked the door. Red velvet ropes stretched away from the entrance and around a corner corralling a line of hopefuls waiting to get inside. The club enforced a strict dress code and occupancy limit. Unlike some of the other Vegas nightclubs, they wouldn't pack people in like sardines.

Skipping the line, I walked right up to the doorman. He was a Samoan male, probably in his early thirties, and built like a brick house. A pair of dark glasses clung to his nose while his dreadlocked hair spilled down around his face. He looked like he could easily handle anyone who caused trouble, but I wasn't just anyone.

He didn't even glance at me as he continued to hold the line at bay. "Back of the line, lady."

I stood my ground. Placing my hands on my hips, I waited until he turned his attention toward me. I stared, unblinking, at him. I was calm and collected.

Taking a step back from the line, the massive man slowly turned and met my gaze. He pulled his sunglasses off. His eyes held a mixture of confusion and frustration. He was fighting me. "The line," he breathed, having trouble articulating his thoughts. "You really need to stand in line." He tried to look away.

I didn't move. He was almost mine.

His stare caught mine again. "I can't," he stammered. "I can't make exceptions."

He was strong-willed. Not that it mattered, but good for him. I continued to silently stare. He didn't realize it, but the battle was already over. I watched his eyes glaze slightly. His stare locked on me, unable to look away. He was finished. He had put up a good fight, but his will was mine now. Or as the younger Vampires liked to say, he was under my *mythrall*. I personally preferred calling it the *whammy*. Sounded more fun that way, less devious.

The whammy was one of the cooler tools in my arsenal. No one was exactly sure how it worked—even other Vampires—but it was akin to hypnotizing someone. All in the eyes; if my gaze caught a human's for long enough, I could manipulate them. Some Vampires had the ability, others didn't, and it relied heavily on the emotion the Vampire was exerting at the time. If I was angry, I could make the human cower in fear before me. Now, however, I simply wanted inside.

Stepping close to the Samoan, I placed my hand gently on his chest. Slowly I ran my fingertips down his muscular torso. He seemed to shudder in pleasure at my touch. There was a time when I would use the whammy on men much like him, or women, break their wills, and then take them home. After they spent the night pleasuring me in every imaginable way I would bleed them to death. It was my little game. It's amazing what you can do when you don't have to face yourself in the mirror. But that felt like a lifetime ago. I wasn't that Vampire anymore.

I leaned in close, my lips brushing against his ear. "You're going to let me in and then forget about me." I could feel his excitement growing as my body pressed against his.

The Samoan nodded. Reaching behind him, he pulled open the door and stepped aside. I ran my finger across his lips, his dark skin making mine look even more pallid, as I walked past. I could hear the complaints of the humans still standing in line waiting for their turn, but I didn't care. I kept my gaze trained on the doorman until he pulled the door closed again. Finally turning away, I could hear him shouting at the people outside to shut up. He had forgotten me already.

I imagined Club Toltec looked like Mexico two thousand years ago if *space aliens* had come down and swathed everything in neon. Swatches of glowing blue, red, and pink neon ran rampant through the mainly black space. The club was immense. A huge stage area at the front had numerous erotically dressed dancers working on silver stripper poles as they were showered in colored light. A DJ occupied the center stage with multiple plasma screens arranged around him. The screens shot snippets of music videos intermingled with live shots of the dance floor. The music was loud and pulsating, assaulting my sensitive ears, as hundreds of humans bumped and grinded to it on the dance floor.

The multitude of perfumes, cologne, and alcoholic beverages tried to confuse my sense of smell, but I had already found my target. I smiled softly. He was here. I knew he would be. Moving easily through the crowd, I scanned the fringes with my Vampire vision. Though not quite making it as bright as daylight, a Vampire's eyes saw better in the darkness than a human's. Working across several booths near the center of the club, I spotted him.

I started toward him when an obviously inebriated human grabbed my arm. "How about I buy you a drink, sugar?"

I spun angrily and slapped his hand away. "Don't touch me," I growled. That should have been enough.

"Come on, baby," he persisted, grabbing me again. "Let a real man show you a good time."

Fine.

My eyes glossed over black as I stared him down. I could feel the rage boiling just beneath my skin as I slapped him with the whammy. His once cocky demeanor disintegrated to fear as the blood drained from his face. He stumbled back and dropped his drink. He tried to hold up his hands in surrender, but only succeeded in tumbling over backwards. Skittering up on his hands, he turned and ran away as fast as he could amidst laughter and jeers from the surrounding crowd.

"Asshole," I breathed.

Turning back, I caught my target again. He was watching me. Didn't surprise me much. That dirt bag of a human had just blown the element of surprise.

Moving down through the crowd carefully, I stopped in front of his booth. He sat quietly, an array of empty glasses on the table in front of him. Two dark-haired women, obviously prostitutes, clung to his sides. I could smell sex on them. A pair of gold, oval spectacles hung low on his nose, while his short black hair was spiked straight up in all directions. A thick turtleneck sweater pushed up against his gaunt chin and a deep maroon leather jacket hung off his shoulders.

Hoping quickly we could let bygones be bygones, I waited for him to recognize me.

"What you want, Seeker?"

That was as close an invitation as I would get. I looked at the two women and bared my fangs. They quickly slipped out of the booth and disappeared into the waves of humans. Sliding in next to him, I placed my hands on the table and folded them neatly. The whammy didn't work on his particular species.

I had to do this the hard way. I didn't think we were getting off to the best start. "Hello, Crash."

"Dammit, Rose." Crash spoke with a thick Cockney accent. "I dropped good money for those whores."

"There'll be others," I assured him.

Crash cocked his head slightly. "Look, I don't know why you're mucking about in Toltec tonight, but I didn't do nothing. I'm clean."

"I know."

He cocked his eyebrow. "Then what the hell are you doing here? This isn't some kind of social visit." He leaned back in the booth playing with an empty glass. "Or maybe a new Brimstone ex-con outreach program? You know, making sure I'm reintegrating into society." I watched the glass fog over in his hand then melt into a puddle on the table. Drawing his fingertips through the fluid, it vanished leaving no trace of the glass at all. He was trying to unnerve me. "I don't think you would come here on holiday."

I nodded. "You're right. Business." Reaching into my pocket, I produced a thick wad of bills and set them in front of Crash. He eyed them warily. "I need your help."

"And?" He scooted several of his empties out of the way. "You've busted me three times, Rose. You cost me a lot of business, not to mention time spent in Brimstone lockup. That place isn't especially pleasant, you know? I've heard Hell has nicer accommodations."

"At least you're still alive," I offered, refusing to apologize. "We all have a job to do." I pointed at the money. "You gonna help me or not?"

Crash stared at the money. I knew he was deciding if this was some kind of sting operation or not. He was wary of me, and for good reason. He was also extremely clever. But there was one thing I could count on: his greed.

Finally snatching the cash off the table, Crash dropped it into his coat pocket. "What do you need then?"

"Come on." I slid out of the booth. "I'll tell you on the way."

Chapter 8

Crash rolled up onto his toes and whistled. "You say a Brimstone Cleaner pulled this off, yeah?"

"From what I understand," I admitted, looking over the gorgeous park before us. The sprinkler system had apparently come on while I was gone. Beneath the industrial strength streetlights the wet grass glittered and twinkled. It struck me. The illusion was so complete, so well thought out, that it had a sprinkler system. It was simply amazing.

"This bloke worked some powerful mojo," Crash added as he stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets. "I don't know what you expect me to do. This is beyond even me."

"Don't give me that line, Crash," I warned him.

Crash couldn't take his eyes away from the park. He seemed transfixed by it.

I stepped closer to him. "What do you see?"

"Colors, Rose," Crash breathed. "My God, the colors are breathtaking."

With my preternatural sight, I could see some of the telltale signs of magical use, but I was sure it was nothing like Crash could perceive. Magic left a very specific fingerprint that often times looked like a television screen when it was slightly out of whack. Colors jumped and shimmered over objects randomly creating a beautiful prism effect. The more powerful the magic, the more brilliant the colors were. I knew then that the lowly Cleaner Witch had nothing to do with this. The magic users delegated to the Cleaners were indeed powerful, but this was well beyond that. This was simply incredible. But there were always seams where the magic was stitched to reality. The trick was finding and exploiting them.

"What exactly are you looking for, Rose?" Crash asked, finally turning away from the park. "I mean, why are we here? You obviously didn't bring me out to play on the jungle gym with you."

"This used to be a Vampire nest." My tone was flat and even as I stared. "I need to know if there's anything left."

"You can tell there's nothing left," Crash said, motioning to the park before us. "You don't need a bloody Razer to tell you that."

Crash, much like his name implied, was a Raze Demon, a destroyer of things. His species had the particular ability to bring down anything, including complex spells. He had a unique understanding of the world, not seeing it as most of us did. He saw patterns in everything, and with that talent, he saw how to undo them. He was a living wrecking ball, capable of wiping anything from the face of the Earth.

Razers made especially good thieves. There wasn't much they couldn't break into. It was a simple matter of making the vault door nonexistent and they were in. I had caught him fencing stolen goods twice, and once during an actual robbery. He had chosen to knock over one of the smaller casinos off the Strip in hopes he would take enough to retire somewhere. Instead, he had lost his focus during the heist and

melted a hole in the floor. I found him stuck as the floor solidified around his legs. It took a crew with two jackhammers working ten hours to get him out. That one had been a bit difficult to explain to the human authorities.

If you weren't on Crash's good side, then there was a good chance you could stop existing. Luckily, Razers didn't seem to affect vampires. We were already dead, removed from this realm, yet somehow still anchored here. Crash had told me once that when he looked at me, all he saw was a hole in the fabric of space. There was no pattern, no logic to my existence, nothing he could undo. For that alone, I was thankful to be undead.

"Dammit, Crash!" I growled, my eyes glossing over black. "This is important. Don't make me bleed you." I grabbed his expensive leather jacket and lifted him easily off the ground. I didn't want to have to pull the Vamp card on him, but if he wasn't going to help me—

I stopped myself.

Crash was playing cool, but I could hear his heart beating wildly in his chest. He was scared out of his mind. I was one of the few things he had no defense against. If I decided to take him, it was all over. And he knew it.

Setting him down, I took a step back from him and tried to regain my focus. "I just need to know if you can raze it."

Adjusting his glasses, he straightened his leather jacket with a quick tug. He stared angrily at me. "You know I hate it when you do that."

I nodded. It seemed everyone hated it when I went all vampy, probably with good reason.

"Give a bloke a heart attack. Did you ever stop to think that maybe I had a condition? Like a pacemaker or something? Shouldn't do that." He was playing it up now. I had folded my hand. Crash knew I needed him more than he needed me. He turned back to the park. "I don't think I want to raze this one, Rose."

I shifted my weight between my feet impatiently. "Why not?"

"It's a work of art," Crash said gently. "It's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Besides," he turned back to me, "think of the children. You don't want them playing in the street again, do you? A damned shame, that's what it would be."

I sighed in frustration. Now he was just yanking my chain. I was done. There were other ways to do this. I didn't need him. "Fine. Go find your hookers and have a good time," I looked squarely in his eyes, "but I'll remember this the next time." Walking around the driver's side of my car, I yanked open the door angrily.

His eyes widened. "Wait," Crash said, rushing toward me. "I was just jerking you around. You know, a little payback for going all *Queen of the Damned* on me."

I shook my head. I had given him his chance. "I don't have time for this, Crash."

"Okay, okay." He turned and walked back to the grass' edge. "Down to work." He paused and leaned slightly to the right. "There's a seam right there," he said, pointing just past the jungle gym. "I can see the

house's foundation. It's still here."

Reaching into my backseat, I grabbed a black tote bag of supplies and slung it over my shoulder. My bluff had worked this time. I moved to his side. "Any bodies?"

"No," he said, scanning over the park. "It looks like they..." He let the sentence die and started into the park. I was quickly on his heels. Moving to the pond in the center, Crash squatted down next to the water. "Never use water in an illusion," he said, shaking his head. "Tell me what's wrong with it."

I cocked my head slightly and stared at the pond. I saw a telltale hint of magic, but nothing more. It looked like a pond to me. "I don't know," I said in defeat. "What's wrong with it?"

"The pattern's all wrong," Crash answered.

Ah. He was seeing with his demon eyes.

"It's so hard to get water right," he admitted. "I've only seen it perfectly created a few times. Looks normal enough, but it will always be a few degrees cooler than it should be, and there will never be any plant life in it. It's barren."

I waited. "How does this help us?"

He pointed excitedly at the water. "This is your entrance. I don't think I can raze the spell over the rest of the park, but I can use this error." He waited for me to comprehend, but it just wasn't coming. He sighed. "The basement is still here, buried beneath the magic. There are seams in the park, but this is a powerful spell. The errors in the water will allow you to access the nest's basement."

"Us," I corrected him. "I'm not going in alone. You're coming with me."

"Bloody hell," he protested. "That wasn't part of the deal."

"I never made a deal," I said, slapping him on the shoulder. I stood up and took a step back. "Do it."

Leaning over, I watched Crash's hands transform. The dark flesh fell away leaving what looked like red armor plating. A Raze Demon was a very intimidating creature when revealed. I was secretly glad he chose to remain in human guise most of the time. He had only ever shown me his true form once when I busted him. That was enough. As he dipped his hand into the water, I couldn't help thinking of Moses parting the Red Sea. The water spun away from him creating an almost perfect hole. A little more than six feet in diameter, we would have to go inside one at a time.

I peered inside. "Care to do the honors?"

Crash stood up, shaking his hands until his true appearance was completely hidden again. "You're such a sissy." Pulling off his glasses, he then folded them shut and slid them into his jacket. Without any hesitation, he jumped through the hole and disappeared below the water.

Slinging my bag onto my back, I looked inside one more time then jumped.

Landing with a hollow echo, I couldn't stop a gasp escaping from my mouth. The basement was completely intact, down to the broken pool table in the far corner, but that wasn't why I was gasping. Above us the illusion of the park shimmered, twisted, and folded in on itself. Thousands of colors swirled

and combined creating a Technicolor ceiling over our heads unlike anything I had ever seen before. I understood now what Crash had been seeing the whole time. It was indeed beautiful.

"Holy hell." I heard Crash mutter from further in.

Pulling my attention away from the colors, I walked across the basement floor. But something wasn't right. It was bare wood. *Shouldn't the basement floor be cement?* "What's up?"

Crash pointed to the corner of the basement. I felt my jaw drop. "What the hell is going on?"

"A Cleaner Witch didn't do this," Crash said in disbelief. "The whole house is still here. It's just been flipped." He pointed to the reversed staircase we were both staring at. It seemed to descend into the floor, instead of up, with the handrails on the bottom. "The bloody house is upside down!"

"How could someone do this?" I paused. "More importantly, *why* would someone do this?"

"I don't know," Crash admitted. "I have never seen something this dramatic done. We've stepped through the looking glass, Alice."

I knew exactly what he meant. At any moment I expected to see the Cheshire Cat or the Mad Hatter charging upside down along the stairs shouting, "Change places!"

"Come on." I grabbed Crash's arm and headed for the stairs. My nose caught the scent of death again but this time I didn't smell dead tourists. "The bodies are still here. They didn't wipe them!"

Crash tried to fight against my pull, but I easily overpowered him. "Rose!"

Lifting him up, I jumped onto the stairwell without even looking. Sailing through the darkness all I could hear was Crash's screaming. Hitting the floor, I set Crash gently behind me and adjusted his leather coat. He stared at me bewildered then flipped me off. That must be the legendary English charm I'm always hearing about. Ignoring him, I scanned through the darkness. We were on what used to be the first floor, very near the front door. I recognized the upside down fireplace as a marker. This was exactly where I wanted to be.

"Look around for a Brimstone ID card," I instructed him. "It has to be here."

The floor was a mess of broken furniture, dead bodies, and spent shell casings. Sifting through debris, I started to become more and more exasperated. None of this would have been necessary if Captain Dipshit had just listened to me. Grabbing a thick recliner from the floor, I lifted it over my head and slammed it into the wall out of frustration.

"Easy, Rose," Crash scolded from the other side of the room. "Don't want to squash your friend Crash, right?"

I wiped my blond hair out of my eyes. "Sorry. Just frustrated." I turned and faced Crash. "It's not here."

"What now?"

I started to shrug but spotted the Vampire Patrick had killed. His body was laying painfully over a broken end table. The gunshot wound in his head and the stake buried in his chest was readily visible. I stared at the dead Inhuman. Something wasn't exactly right. His fangs seemed slightly shorter than they

should be. I shrugged. Each of us was a bit different.

Slipping my tote off my shoulder, I walked quickly to the Vampire and dropped down to my knees. Opening the bag, I pulled a portable battery free and set it next to the Vampire.

"You're not doing what I think you're doing," Crash said worriedly as he watched.

I looked up and nodded. "Only choice. I have questions." I looked back at the Vampire with a frown. "He has answers."

"You can't do this, Rose," Crash argued. "You know what happens to Vampires when they get Franked?"

Ignoring Crash's warnings, I yanked a couple of steel bolts out of the tote. The ends were sharpened, while the opposite side had a thin tab to attach wires to. Yanking the stake out of the Vampire's chest, I tossed it to Crash. "If he goes nuts, use this."

The Raze Demon frowned. "Not very comforting."

I jabbed the first bolt into the Vampire's neck, just below his jawbone. Rolling his head over, I pushed the second one into the opposite side with a disgusting squish of flesh and fluids. Reaching back into my bag, I grabbed a glass vial filled with a purple substance. A heavy black rubber stopper was fitted securely in the end. I really had no idea what the stuff was in the vial—magic wasn't my strong suit—I just knew that it worked. Popping the stopper, I set the edge of the vial on the Vampire's lips. Tipping it up, I emptied into its mouth.

"Don't you think you're using a bit much?" Crash was wringing his hands around the stake. "We don't want him too energetic."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Will you relax?" Pulling a slim set of jumper cables out of my bag, I attached an alligator clip to each of the bolts. "Nothing can go wrong." I was a terrible liar.

And Crash knew it. "Sure, you can think that all you want. I don't like mucking about with Frankenstein reanimation spells." He shifted his weight back and forth from foot to foot. "It's dangerous."

He was right, but I needed answers. This was the only way. Odds were that the Vampire wouldn't know anything, but I had to try. Attaching one of the clips to the battery, I gave Crash the most confident smile I could muster. I attached the second clip.

A jolt of blue electricity skittered over the Vampire's body. It convulsed as the electrical current hit its muscles drawing its back tightly up into an arch. I could smell the purple powder in its mouth beginning to react. The Vampire convulsed. As he shook, a thin wisp of purple vapor wound out from his mouth and encircled him. I could smell burning flesh from around the bolts. I heard the Vampire moan.

"Cover your ears," I said, standing up.

"What?" Crash asked unable to take his eyes away from the scene unfolding before him.

"Cover your ears!"

I clamped my hands over my ears just as the Vampire shrieked at the top of its lungs. The scream was

unearthly and bone-chilling. It was reliving the last moments of its life: being shot and staked. Its hands wrapped around its bloody head. I was certain the pain was crippling. As the scream slowly died, its hands shot up to its neck and ripped the bolts free. Rolling off the table, it spit the last of the purple concoction out of its mouth. The Vampire looked up with milky white eyes and focused on me.

"You," it stammered. It tried to move toward me, but it wasn't coordinated enough yet. Its reanimated body was still mostly dead. I had used a very mild mixture to bring it back. This pretty much negated the possibility it would go on a killing spree in downtown Vegas, or even kill Crash or me. Stumbling over more debris, its eyes became angry. "You did this to me, *Seeker*."

Well, at least it remembered me. I stood my ground. The Frankenvamp was no match for me, but I needed it to trust me. "No, I didn't. I tried to help you."

"I don't like this, Rose!" Crash shouted, holding the stake tightly. "Kill it!"

"No," I said, holding up a hand to silence Crash. "This will pass. He's disoriented and in pain." I took a step closer to the Frankenvamp. We didn't have long. He was dying ... for the third time. "I need your help."

The Frankenvamp eyed me warily. He seemed to be regaining control of more of his faculties. Reanimation was a dangerous game. If things didn't go right, you created a powerful zombie with a taste for brains. The mind had to remain intact. "What's your name?"

"Luke," he said as if the name sounded alien. His face slowly started to soften. His anger and pain were beginning to subside. He remembered.

"Luke," I repeated, letting him hear it. "Can you tell me why Brimstone would have sent the Cleaners into your nest?"

The Frankenvamp pressed his hands to the side of his head as if it hurt to think. Which, looking at the gaping hole in his cranium, it probably did. "I don't know. We were legal. I was legal."

"I know," I assured him. "But was your brood doing anything against the law?" A trickle of blood ran down his bottom lip and started to pool on his shirt. His gaze seemed far away. I was losing him. "Stay with me, Luke. Was your brood doing—"

"Our Master," Luke replied, during a sudden burst of clarity. "Our Master abandoned us." The Frankenvamp looked at me with despair thick on his face. "He said he would protect us. He wouldn't let them take us anymore. He didn't protect us..."

I leaned closer. "Wouldn't let who take you? Protect you from who?"

Luke didn't answer my question. His mind was starting to turn to mush. "*He* did this to us by leaving. Didn't he?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "But I'm trying to understand why this happened. You didn't deserve to die."

"Seeker," he added cryptically. I wasn't sure if he was addressing me, as his gaze seemed far away. Luke crumpled to his knees unable to support himself. He was just about gone. Another moment of clarity struck him. "I don't want to die."

It was too late for that. His body convulsed as a throaty moan escaped his lips. Falling forward, Luke hit the floor hard. His skull made a terrifying crack as it struck. Watching the last wisp of purple escape his lungs, his body became still. He was dead. Again.

"Toss me the stake," I said, looking up at Crash. Catching it out of the air, I knelt down next to Luke and placed my hand on his back. "Sorry, kid." With one swing, I staked him again, just to make sure he stayed dead.

Scooping up much of my equipment into my black tote, I slipped it back onto my shoulder. Lingered just a moment longer, I stared at Luke's body on the floor. He was just a kid, in human and Vampire terms. Standing, I settled my gaze on Crash. "Let's get out of here."

Crash nodded. "That's the first smart thing you've said all night."

Chapter 9

Admittedly, it wasn't much to go on.

I had worked my ass off, not to mention the three hundred dollars of my own money I slipped to Crash, to find out that the brood's Master had jumped ship. And the new park? That was easily one of the most incredible things I had ever seen. Regulations called for the bodies to be removed, the stench of death wiped away, and any trace of Inhuman activity removed. They didn't call for the house to be inverted and a freaking monstrous city park created. That will draw more unwanted attention than the nest ever did.

Still, there was the odd reference to a Seeker, and Luke's comments about being taken. The problem with reanimating the dead is their minds aren't always cohesive. Even though Luke had been dead for less than twenty-four hours, his brain had already started to decay. I didn't know if he was telling me the truth, or if his brain was trying to understand random memories that were meshed together. It was too hard to tell. That's why reanimation had been effectively abandoned by Brimstone as a means of information gathering.

There were a lot of things that just didn't seem to add up. But I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't know where to go from here. And the worst part? I didn't even find the ID card. Maynard wasn't happy when I phoned in my report. Forget Maynard, I wasn't happy.

I signaled the bartender to refill my glass.

After returning Crash to the Aztec, he disappeared into the wilds of Club Toltec, no doubt to try and recover his whores with the money he had earned. With nowhere to go and nowhere to be, I decided to drown my concerns at the bar. It seemed like the only logical thing to do. I was on suspension after all.

The constant thump of bass mixed with the multitude of neon was making my head hurt. It could have something to do with the four Hurricanes I'd had, but I couldn't be sure. Worst of all, I was starving. I had forgotten, again, to hit the blood bank at work and refill my supply. It had been three days since any blood had touched my lips. A Vampire didn't need to ingest blood every day to survive, but it certainly put me in a better mood.

The bartender, a svelte young thing with breasts that seemed to defy gravity, placed a thick glass in front

of me. I looked up into her soft, brown eyes slightly confused. "This isn't what I ordered."

She stared back at me, the emotion washing from her face. Pulling my gaze away I muttered a curse under my breath. She wasn't very strong-willed if all it took to put the whammy on her was to look into my eyes. That particular personality trait infuriated me. I bet she wasn't even capable of making her own decisions, and needed to have a lover to validate her very existence. I lifted my hand and snapped my fingers in front of her face. She shook her head once looking disoriented. I held up the drink. "Hey, this isn't what I wanted."

It took her a minute, but she realized what she'd been doing. "Oh." She pointed over my shoulder. "Compliments of that gentleman over there." Throwing her hand towel back over her shoulder, she turned and walked away slightly bewildered.

Frustrated, I hung my head. I hated bars. *Why is it that a woman couldn't walk into one without getting the obligatory free drinks and request for her phone number?* I just wanted a nice, quiet drink. *Was that so much to ask?*

Apparently so.

Curiosity overwhelmed me. Turning on my stool, I shot a quick glance over my shoulder. I didn't know it was possible, but my mood worsened. *How the hell did he keep finding me?*

"Hello, Rosy."

"Jared," I acknowledged as emotionlessly as I could manage. His unearthly blue eyes appeared luminous in the low light.

I kept my gaze from meeting his, all the while trying not to seem as though I was. No one was exactly sure how old Jared was. He had somehow skillfully avoided a paper trail that seemed to plague most really old Vampires. He had even avoided Brimstone. The first entry in the database had been input by me only about a year ago after he first approached me. He was good. There was no doubt about that.

Jared pushed his black leather jacket aside and slid onto the empty stool next to mine. "How can Brimstone keep such a beautiful Vampire away from the moonlight?"

Now this was more like the Jared I knew. He seemed like himself again, instead of the unsure Vampire I had encountered in the parking garage. Probably because he was drunk. "Been busy," was all I could think to reply.

Setting his glass on the bar, his hands moved languidly toward mine. I wanted to shrink away, but didn't want to show fear. As his pale fingertips met the back of my hand, I felt a tremor run up my arm. It was almost electric. I turned away from him, focusing instead on the glass of wine he had ordered for me.

"I haven't received your answer yet." His voice sounded far away, almost lost in the thrum of the club's bass. "I have been waiting so long for you, Rosy. Don't make me wait anymore."

Dammit! He was trying to put the whammy on me. And it was starting to work. *What was I saying about weak-willed people? I take it back.* I needed to get out of here and away from him. "Listen, Jared, I've had a long day."

"They treat you so unfairly at Brimstone," he acknowledged. "If you accept my offer, you would never

have to work again. You would be a queen."

I had to admit, that sounded pretty good right now. I shook my head. I had to be strong. "I am not joining your brood. I'm sorry."

"How can you say that?" Jared recoiled. "Brimstone makes you drink that horrible fake blood, and work with those barbaric Werewolves. It's inhumane. You are a predator, not a caged animal. How can they deny you the hunt?" He licked his pale lips, exposing a hint of his fangs. "And now you are suspended because a group of Werewolves botched an assignment?"

My eyes widened for a moment, but I controlled my emotions. *How does he know about that?*

"You deserve more, Rosy," he continued. "You will find that in my brood," he paused, "*and more* ." Spinning his glass gently between his fingertips, the rest of his body became still, waiting.

"L..." *Dammit*. I wanted what he was offering. I really wanted it. My fingers ached to run down his chest, and over his perfect face. His scent seemed to envelop and dance around me playfully. I wanted him in that moment. No, I craved him. He would make me a predator again, kill indiscriminately, and allow me to live life to its fullest potential. I realized in that moment I was wasting my afterlife in Brimstone's service. Turning toward him on the stool, I was about to give in.

"Rose," said a familiar, but somehow distant voice.

Using every shred of concentration I had left, I turned away from Jared. As if emerging from water, the world around me burst into existence again. "Crash?"

Crash stood a safe distance from Jared, but close enough that he could put himself between us if need be. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

My head throbbed as I tried to cut through the fog that had settled there. I ran my hand slowly down my face as my focus returned. I heard Jared curse under his breath so quietly that I barely heard it. "Crash," I motioned toward the Master Vampire at my side without looking at him, "this is Jared."

"Pleasure," Crash said quickly before turning back to me. "Listen, Rose, I got a lead for you. Didn't think you'd mind me butting in."

"No," I replied, trying to hide my smile. "That's fine. Thank you." I stood from my stool without looking at Jared. "Sorry. Duty calls. If you'll excuse me."

Jared frowned deeply contorting his perfect face into something monstrous. "There will be another time." Sweeping off his stool with a flash of leather that almost seemed like bat wings, he disappeared into the crowd without another word. His anger was almost palpable.

Waiting until I was sure Jared was out of earshot, I nodded to Crash. "Thank you."

"No worries," he replied almost modestly. "Didn't like the look of that bloke. Eurotrash. Could smell his disgusting cologne halfway across the club."

Crash started to turn away, but I stopped him. I had to know. "Why did you help me?"

The Raze Demon smiled broadly. "Now you owe *me* one." He started back into the crowd. "And I

won't forget, Seeker."

I watched him disappear into the mass of people as well. Realizing I needed to vacate before Jared decided to return, I pulled several bills from my pocket and dropped them on the bar next to my empties. It was time to go home for the night.

I really needed to stop coming to bars. Bad things always seem to happen.

Chapter 10

Claws and fangs ripped at me. The darkness seemed to swirl and fold in on me again and again. I tried to fight it; I tried to get away. Swinging wildly, I only heard their laughter. I wanted desperately to go home. I wanted to see my husband and daughter. They were all I could think of as I fought. I had to get free of this place. I ran, screaming at the top of my lungs. Why could no one hear me? Why would no one help me? I knew this place. I had seen it before. My mind started to whirl as the darkness swarmed again. I felt a pair of arms clamp over my chest and razor-sharp fangs sink into my neck again.

I sat straight up and realized I was alone in my bed. Nothing had changed. It was just a bad dream. Leaning forward, I placed my head in my hands. It struck me as slightly amusing that I, a Vampire, had a nightmare. I was supposed to be the stuff of nightmares, not having them. I let the thought fade as I turned and dropped my legs over the edge of the bed.

Lifting my arms above my head, I arched my back and stretched like a cat after a long and restless sleep. Collapsing onto myself with a yawn—some things never change, alive or dead—I lifted the heavy curtains on my window and stared into the darkness. The lights of Glitter Gulch were sparkling brightly in the crisp night air, truly a sight to behold. It was true what they said: there really was no place on Earth like Las Vegas.

My mind wandered back to the dream. I hadn't thought about that place, that night in a long, long time. I felt wrong and I couldn't exactly explain why. I was just off slightly. My mind was somewhere else, somewhere dark.

Snatching my worn wool robe from the back of my closet door, I pulled it over my naked body and enjoyed the warm comfort it offered. The dark blue fabric robe was starting to fray badly after years of use, but it didn't bother me. I really liked it. After putting my hair up in a messy ponytail with a scrunchy I found on my dresser, I sauntered through the living room toward the kitchen. Still a bit groggy, I pulled open the fridge possibly expecting a miracle or hoping the grocery fairy had visited me during the day.

Still empty. Good thing I couldn't starve to death. I would have to visit Brimstone tonight whether I wanted to or not. I had to get more blood.

Pushing the door closed, I spun and stared at the mess on my kitchen counter. There was a coffee pot here ... somewhere. Turning slightly, I spotted Mr. Coffee's smooth, white top partially buried by a stack of unopened mail. Brushing the envelopes promising I might already be a winner, and the postcards claiming I could lower my home mortgage rate onto the floor, I pulled the glass pot from the base and walked to the sink. Popping the top and cranking open the tap, I wondered if the bulk mail companies ever did any research before they sent out their offers. First, I didn't have a house or a mortgage to refinance, and secondly, I was dead. That pretty much excluded me from any of their offers.

Glancing down into the sink, I watched the water overflow the pot and drench the sleeve of my robe. With a sigh of frustration, I snapped off the tap and realized it was going to be *that* kind of day. Dumping a bit of the water out into the sink first, I poured the remainder into Mr. Coffee. Sliding the pot back onto the warmer, I started the search for filters, and the all-important coffee. Fairly certain I had some, I pulled open cabinet after cabinet until I spotted a red and orange can. Another quick rummage proved I had no filters. Being a student of 80's television icon MacGyver, I used the next best thing: a couple of paper towels and scotch tape. Dropping a couple of heaping scoops of coffee into my makeshift filter, and reasonably satisfied it would work, I turned it on and headed toward the living room.

Pushing a pile of dirty clothes onto the floor, I crumbled into my couch. It had certainly seen better days, as had everything in my apartment. Most Vampires were snobs when it came to decorating their lairs. They wanted the most stylish furniture, the most lavish decorations, and the latest technology with which to surround themselves. I seemed to be the exception to the rule. I just didn't care. The couch was old, but it was comfortable. Propping my feet up on an equally old end table, I listened to the coffee brewing in the kitchen. Pressing my knuckle to my bottom lip, I started to chew on the inside.

Something was stuck in my craw. It didn't seem possible, yet I kept coming back to it every time I ran the information in my head: Brimstone was covering something up, perhaps its own tracks? It was the only solution that fit the puzzle. *But then again, why did it seem so far-fetched?* It was an organization swathed in deceit and disinformation. Brimstone was surreptitious by nature and its mandate was to keep the inhuman population a secret from humans. *Why was it so hard to believe it was doing something nefarious right under my nose?*

Because even though Brimstone may be a cloak-and-dagger operation, it was a good operation. It policed, served, and took care of Inhumans. It wasn't like if a Werewolf caught the flu, it could go to the doctor. That could raise too many questions. Suppose the doctor wanted to take a blood sample? How would the wolf explain the unique characteristics of his blood and body? It was only a hop in logic from there to find the Werewolf in a laboratory being dissected. Personally, that wasn't how I wanted to spend the rest of my eternity. There was only one place for Inhumans to turn: Brimstone. It was all we had.

I was treading a dangerous path. If I didn't find the evidence to support my claim, I was facing dismissal, and possible death. But if I found evidence that Brimstone was killing Inhumans, I was facing certain death. Either way, things didn't look good for me.

A loud knock on my front door startled me. Pulling my robe tightly around me, I walked to the door and peered through the peephole. A smile crossed my lips. Pulling open the door, I stepped aside to allow the Werewolf to enter.

Toby looked me over. An odd look of bemusement dawned on his face. I think the robe threw him off. "It's a good thing one of us is trying to get our suspensions overturned."

"I just woke up," I growled. I pointed to myself. "Vampire, remember? Nocturnal? Ring a bell?"

Toby laughed. He started to step inside, but hesitated. "Do I need permission or something like that?"

I shook my head. "It's Vampires who need permission to enter your home, not vice versa. And anyway, that's an old wives tale. Didn't they teach you anything in Seeker school?"

"Take it up with my teacher," he jabbed.

"But I was your..." I let the thought die, realizing it was a knock at me. I really was groggy. I needed coffee.

Toby stepped inside and stared at my messy home. A crooked smile appeared on his face. "You eat the cleaning lady?"

Choosing not to laugh, I closed the door behind him and walked back into the kitchen. Grabbing a mug from the cabinet, I left it open and hesitantly kept my hand inside. "Coffee?"

The Werewolf cocked his head slightly. "At ten at night? Pass." Toby moved toward the living room.

"Your loss," I said, closing the cabinet. Pulling the pot free, I poured the heady, black liquid into my ceramic mug. A picture of a kitten hanging from a clothesline with a caption that read, "Hang in there, baby," adorned the side. I thought quickly of breaking the mug and hiding the pieces, but at this point it didn't matter. My image was already ruined the moment Toby saw my apartment. I'm sure he was expecting coffins, bondage equipment, and chains hanging from the walls.

Stepping into the living room, I noticed he was sitting on my couch exactly as I had been before. "How are you feeling?" I asked. This was the first time I had seen him in human form since before the raid. He looked well.

"I'm good," he confirmed. Lifting his shirt, he ran his hand over his athletic chest. Only a few slight red scars remained in the flesh, and even they would be gone before long. "Healers got all of the bullets and the shrapnel. I should heal perfectly."

Sinking down into a wooden chair opposite the couch, I crossed my legs to avert any accidental sightings of my nakedness. "What's up, T?" I asked as I took the first sip of my coffee and winced. The flavor was slightly repulsive. I would have to remember to clean the pot, or buy a new one.

"Did you find the ID card?"

I shook my head. "Nope."

Toby snapped his fingers as he thought. "Did you find anything that could help us?"

"Not sure," I said after swallowing down another gulp of the coffee. It wasn't so bad if you ignored the taste. "Whispers from the dead. I don't know what to make of them yet."

"Well then," Toby said, standing up, "It's a good thing I did some research. Get dressed. We're heading to Brimstone."

I didn't move, instead cradled my mug between my hands. "Why?"

"You know that Master Vampire you caught the other night?" Toby waited for me to nod. "Guess whose name was listed as the brood's Master that we wiped out?"

This time I stood up. "No way. Really?" I paused. "Vlad?" I ran over the information in my head. It all seemed to fit. "How did you get access to the Brimstone databanks?"

Toby smiled. He wasn't going to tell.

"What an amazing stroke of luck," I gushed, setting my mug on the table in front of the couch. I started back toward my bedroom for clothes, but stopped short of the door. My mood darkened. "Wait, how are we going to question him? We don't have Seeker status at the moment. They're not going to just let us in."

"I have a plan," Toby offered.

Ah, youth. So naïve. But I believed him. We had to find a way. Our lives depended on it. "Okay. Let me get dressed, and we're on our way. Ten minutes?"

"Ten minutes?" he asked impatiently. "I could be ready in two."

"I need a shower," I said, holding my robe closed. "I just woke up, remember? I've still got sleep stink on me."

"Fine," he said after a moment. "*Tenminutes,*" he said, glancing at his watch.

"Fine," I echoed and turned back toward my bedroom. I saw Toby take a step into the living room so he could better see into my bedroom. I shook my head playfully. "That's not polite."

He blushed and turned away.

Chapter 11

I took fifteen just to bug him. Added to the drive to Brimstone, it had turned into nearly forty-five minutes. A hive of activity this time of night, the day shift was cleaning up while the night shift was just starting to check in. It was easy to get lost in the shuffle, and that was exactly what we were hoping for.

The building Brimstone was housed in was fairly good sized. An old office complex on the outskirts of the industrial section, it was four stories tall with an additional two sublevels hidden from prying eyes. The upper floors were mostly offices, medical, and labs while the basement levels were reserved for the motor pool, weapon storage, prisoner cells, and those deep, dark things no one really wanted to deal with. No one was really sure *what* was in the basement, but company officials didn't like anyone snooping around down there. It was company policy not to go into the basement unescorted—for safety reasons. Unfortunately, that was exactly where we were.

Ditching my coupe back in the motor pool, Toby and I had swept past weapon storage and down into the basement. We were heading for Vlad's cell, but taking the scenic route. We hoped to keep interaction with the staff to a bare minimum. We weren't supposed to be here after all.

Despite the basement being well lit, the cement walls and floors seemed ominous under the green hue of the industrial-strength fluorescent lights. I knew it was psychosomatic, but the light was so bright it felt like my skin was burning. Water leaking from a broken pipe created that constant, echoing, ever-present dripping noise in horror movies. Various discarded projects and experiments littered the corners creating heaps anything could hide in.

Toby was moving just behind my heels, his senses on high alert. "Have you ever been down here before?"

"No," I glanced at a dark pile of ... something just beyond us. "You think the stories are true?"

"I don't know." He laughed uncomfortably. "I'm not sure I buy a man-eating monster in the basement of the Brimstone Syndicate. Just seems..." He paused and straightened up.

Skittering to a stop, I turned and stared at the Werewolf. My senses were very attuned, but his were well beyond anything I could hope to achieve. I waited.

"Thought I caught something's scent," he explained after a moment. "It was there then just gone. The ventilation system is moving the air down here, but not that fast..." His words trailed off. "Sort of smelled like," a smile flashed on his face, "Goblin."

I shook my head and hoped his nose was wrong for once. We didn't have time for one of those nasty little beasts. I had no idea why Toby liked Goblins so much. He said they amused him, but I personally thought they were disgusting. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if there were actually a Goblin living down here. Seemed like the perfect place for one. I caught the flickering scent of a Goblin as well. I understood what it was doing. Using a common cloaking spell, the little beast was trying to mask its scent in order to remain hidden. Fortunately Goblins have a very distinct, easily identifiable aroma. Unfortunately, they tend to smell like rotten eggs. It, or they, was very near.

I saw a service elevator on the far wall. I assumed—hoped, rather—that it would take us up just beyond the detention area. From there it would be a simple matter of getting past the guards, through the guard barracks, and to the cells. Seemed easy enough, or utterly impossible. But I was being Ms. Positive tonight. I turned and started toward it.

"Wait," Toby said in a hushed tone.

I turned and looked at the wolf. It hit me. I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck. *This wasn't his plan, was it? Please, don't let this be his plan.* "Toby," I said warily, "you didn't..."

Toby looked past me with a grin on his face. "Karl!"

Karl? I turned and saw him in dismay. *Karl the Goblin?* Scarcely over a foot in height, his flesh was an olive shade of green. Deep-set emerald eyes were expressive and spoke volumes of his age and knowledge. His black hair was slicked back to his head exposing his tall, pointed ears. Dressed in a miniature pair of jeans and a white t-shirt, he looked like an alien version of the Fonz. He was laying suggestively on several crates with his hand propping up his head. This was just getting weird.

"You can't be serious," I said, turning back to Toby. "I am not working with a Goblin."

"You got a problem with Goblins, lady?" came Karl's shrill reply. His voice sounded as if he were constantly breathing helium. He hopped off the crates and marched toward me.

"Karl's a good guy," Toby defended himself. "He's offered to help us get into the detention area."

"He's a *Goblin*," I argued, pointing at the little green man standing next to me. "He steals babies." I turned and scowled at him. "Then does who knows what with them."

"Yeah, like you're a saint, honey," Karl spat. "You're a bloodsucking Vampire. You *kill* people. And by the way," he said spitefully, "that's a myth. Goblins don't steal babies," he lowered his voice and turned away from me, "anymore."

"Ha!" I laughed and pointed at him.

Karl balled his fists and kicked me hard in the shin with his tiny black boots.

With a yelp, I felt my eyes go black. "You're a filthy little beast."

"You're a leech," came Karl's shrill reply.

"Knock it off," Toby growled. I saw his eyes flash yellow for a moment. "Karl's here to help." He stepped close, dwarfing me. "If you can't deal with that, I suggest you leave."

I couldn't help but step back from Toby's anger. He had never before rebuked me. I felt a flash of fright. It occurred to me in that moment why he kept his distance from me most of the time. Beneath his human exterior, he was a raging monster ... just like I was. I couldn't get any words past the lump of fear in my throat.

Toby shook his head and lowered his voice. "I don't want to hear anymore of this." He glared down at the Goblin. "From *either* of you."

"The suckhead started it," Karl protested.

Toby folded his arms across his chest. "I'm paying you, right?"

Karl nodded.

"Then I don't want to hear it." His eyes flashed solid yellow. "Understand?"

There were many things Goblins were capable of. Outrunning a pissed off Werewolf was not one of them. Karl acquiesced. "Fine." He took a breath into his little lungs. "Let's get this over with." He turned and started climbing back onto the crates.

Goblins were experts at finding "alternate" ways into just about anything. Their tiny stature allowed them into places other Inhumans couldn't get to, and they were devious. Always thinking, their minds presented them with ideas others wouldn't even consider. In ancient times, it was not unheard of for a family's baby to vanish without a trace from a completely sealed room. No one was really sure what the Goblins did with the babies, and they certainly weren't telling. One myth had them eating the children, while another had them selling the babies into slavery. Still, some felt Goblins weren't responsible at all, but because of their unique skill set, and inhuman appearance, they were blamed for the disappearance of children. No one had actually ever caught a Goblin with a stolen baby.

Still, I didn't trust them. "Why are you living in Brimstone? Shouldn't you be under a bridge or something?"

"Damned trolls took all the good bridge spots," Karl grumbled as he neared the top of the crates. It would have been easy for me to lift him up to the top, but I would rather watch him climb. "Ever try to raise a family under a bridge, suckhead?" He stopped and peered over his shoulder. "No, I guess not."

The obvious shot at my barren Vampiric womb sent a shock of rage down my spine. It wasn't my fault I couldn't have children, rather a quirk of my adopted species. I looked back at Toby and bit my tongue. Another remark like that and I would bite Karl's.

Reaching the summit of the crates, Karl pointed off the opposite side. "You're going to have to move these boxes, Toby. There's a ventilation shaft we need to get to."

"Are we all going to fit?" Toby asked.

Karl peered over the edge and thought carefully. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" I echoed in dismay.

"It's all you've got, honey," Karl said with a devious grin. "Otherwise, feel free to take your chances with the guards at the top of that service elevator. I'm sure you'll do fine."

That's it. I'm going to smash him.

"Rose," Toby said, slowly sensing my growing displeasure with his plan. "You may have to go alone."

I closed my eyes for a moment and focused. Toby was right. After all, I could smoosh the little bugger when I got back. "All right."

As Karl kept a careful lookout, it only took Toby and I about five minutes to move the massive pile of crates. With his Werewolf and my vampiric strength, we easily picked them up to allow access to the ventilation shaft. The shaft, covered by a dark red grate, was just about four feet square. Karl would be able to easily maneuver through it, while I was going to have a bit more difficulty. Still, I knew I could make it.

Climbing inside, I discovered that the vent stretched out horizontally for almost seven feet before turning toward the upper levels. Composed of aluminum, it didn't look like it could hold my weight. Snaking my way in, I made the difficult turn up and lifted myself to my feet. Staring up the seemingly endless shaft, I braced my hands and back against the walls and began to inch my way up. Karl, using some arcane Goblin technique, seemed to skitter along the aluminum almost silently ahead of me. Occasionally stopping to check on my progress, he would drop a derogatory remark and continue on his way. I was really starting to hate that Goblin. Passing several connecting horizontal shafts, we finally arrived at our exit.

Karl, standing completely upright in the vent, was leaning against the side tapping his foot impatiently. "Took you long enough, suckhead. I thought you Vampires were supposed to be super fast."

"It's four feet wide," I argued. "Plus, I'm not a foot high freak like you."

"Kiss my green ass," Karl responded cheerfully. He turned and pointed down the shaft. "The detention area is directly ahead. We can drop down in the cell block and miss the guards altogether."

I nodded. It was all sounding too easy. "What about alarms?"

Karl shrugged.

"You don't know if there's alarms or not?" I asked in disbelief. "Isn't breaking and entering your specialty? Shouldn't you know this stuff?"

"Look, I'm sure you were just as pleasant in life as you are dead, but could you cut me a little slack? I'm

putting my hide on the line here, too. I've never wanted to get into the detention area before." His lips were drawn into an angry frown. "In fact, I usually avoid it. It's not some place an illegal Inhuman usually wants to hang out."

I had suspected he was. As a Seeker, you start to understand the differences an ID makes. I had learned to see it in their body language, the way they spoke, and how they carried themselves. Some legals still clung to the old ways of life, like living in basements or under bridges so it wouldn't be that shocking to find he was, but an illegal Inhuman living inside of Brimstone? He was just rubbing our noses in it. I liked him even less.

"Okay fine," I said after a moment. "Let's go."

"I'm not going," Karl said as he slid into the shaft next to me. "I did what I told the big wolf I would. That's it. I'm out." He skittered into the darkness.

"You little shit," I said quietly. I was definitely squishing him when, or if, I got out of this.

Pulling myself into the adjoining vent, I wriggled ahead as quietly as I could. Realizing the guards were probably below me, I carefully calculated every move. Pushing past the first two openings in the shaft, I came to my destination. Through the thin slats in the vent grill, I could see the brightly lit detention area. A long row of cages lined both sides of the room with solid glass fronts. I knew from experience the glass was electrically and magically charged to keep the beasties in. They were also soundproof, reducing the chance one of the other prisoners could yell for the guards and screw me.

I spotted the cell I had personally escorted Vlad into. Three up from the door, it was almost exactly beneath the vent shaft. I popped the vent cover free and set it neatly inside the shaft. Pushing my head and shoulders through, I rolled my legs over and dropped silently onto the floor. My senses on high alert, I turned my attention toward Vlad's cell. Our gazes met. I didn't realize until that moment how much danger I was in. I stepped to the side and activated the intercom.

"Seeker," Vlad greeted me.

Vlad's white shirt was stained with blood from the fight, but his head had healed nicely. Only a large bruise and barely any scarring were visible despite the fact I had blown a gaping hole in his head. The two fang marks on his neck were still readily visible though. The residual effect of my venom was slowing down the healing process. His hair still looked perfect. I had to find out how he did that.

Sliding off the bench built into the wall, the Master Vampire moved languidly toward the glass. His limbs seemed almost too heavy for him to control. He hadn't fed enough. The guards had been giving him just enough to keep him going, yet this could easily backfire. Vampires often kept a reserve of energy in situations like this that enabled them to capture prey and feed. We were, after all, predators. Vlad was like a tightly coiled spring ready to explode. I had to be wary of the Master, even though six inches of charged glass separated us.

"Garrett," I acknowledged, using his real name. I didn't think needlessly upsetting a hungry Vampire by calling him "Vlad" was my best option right now. Vampires in his condition had been known to kill other Vampires and feed off them just to survive. Blood was blood after all.

"What brings you to my humble crypt?" Vlad asked, spreading his arms wide. "I would have prepared tea if I had known you were coming."

"There's no need to be pissy," I spat out but quickly bit my tongue. He was baiting me. "I need you to answer some questions."

"You attacked me, blew half my head off, and bit me," Vlad said, gesturing to his head, "and now you expect me to help you?"

I nodded. "Yeah that sounds about right."

He smiled politely. "What's in it for me?"

"If you cooperate, it will reflect well when your case is judged by the Tribunal," I answered.

He raised an eyebrow. "And how can you claim that, little Vampire?"

Little Vampire? "I am a Seeker," I replied.

"Don't Seekers usually use the door," he pointed toward the ceiling, "instead of climbing around in the ductwork?"

He had me there. I had lost my only bargaining chip. Pausing, I had to rethink my tactics. "A lot of Vampires are dead. I need your help."

"Actually," Vlad said smugly, "I thought *all* Vampires were dead."

"You know damned well that's not what I meant." I ran my hand over my face in frustration. He was just being a jackass. "Vampires are being killed."

Vlad started to turn away. "Why should I care?"

"Because they were *your* Vampires," I said, stepping closer to the glass. I wasn't sure this would work. Vampires like Vlad often had no sympathy for anyone but themselves. "They were your brood. There is something strange happening at Brimstone. I need to find out what."

Vlad paused.

I waited, but decided to push ahead. "Why did you abandon them?"

"I don't have to tell you anything," he said, shaking his head.

"They said you would protect them," I pressed, "but you abandoned them. What were they doing to you?"

Vlad remained silent.

I was tired of pushing a little bit. It was time to kick down the wall. "You left them to die!"

"I would have died, too!" Vlad turned, slamming his fists against the glass. A buzz like a hive of angry wasps pushed him back from the barrier. Staring at me with his coal black eyes, I saw a trickle of blood run down his nose. The security measures had done their job. Daubing the blood with his fingertips, he slowly took a step away from the glass and composed himself. "We're done here. I have nothing more to say. I will only speak to my Chithula representative."

"Chithula?" I echoed the word in dismay. A knot began to build in my stomach. That was *exactly* the name I didn't want to hear. I looked at Vlad one more time. I hated to admit it, but I was getting the vibe he was a victim, too. We were indeed done here. He had just told me everything I needed to know.

The jingle of keys startled me. Whipping my head to the access door, I saw a guard through the window in his pressed, brown, rent-a-cop uniform. Luckily, he hadn't spotted me yet. Then a familiar smell hit my nose, something like old earth and incense. Looking past the guard, I saw her: Elena. She stopped in the hallway as the guard started to unlock the door. Cocking her head slightly, she looked up directly at me.

She had sensed me, too. Her face contorted into a sneer. She pushed the guard out of the way and started to work the keys herself.

Jumping straight up, I caught the edge of the vent and pulled myself inside. I had to hurry. If I wanted to grab Toby and get out, I didn't have time to be subtle. Pushing off, I slid back into the shaft listening to the aluminum bend, pop and stress below me. Hitting the back of the vent with my feet, I bent at the hips and plunged straight down into the shaft. Pulling my arms in tight I felt the air whistle past my ears and through my hair. Hitting the bottom, I rolled out of the vent and found Toby exactly where I left him.

Karl, unfortunately, was there as well.

Without even stopping, I placed my hand on Toby's shoulder and started back toward the motor pool.

"We need to go," I urged.

Toby didn't protest. "What did you find out?"

"Yeah, wait up, suckhead!" Karl shouted from behind as he tried to keep up.

I shot Toby a warning glance. "What is he still doing here?"

"Suckhead!" I heard him yell again. "Where are we going?"

"We?" I asked Toby. "What is this 'we' stuff?"

Toby shrugged. "He won't leave."

I ignored the Goblin. "We have a lead."

We moved quickly through the basement, carefully watching for any other Seekers or guards who might be waiting for us. I wasn't sure if Vlad ratted us out, or if Elena sent troops down to find us, but we couldn't take the chance. We had to get out of Brimstone.

"What's the lead?" Toby asked.

"We're going to see the Chithula," I answered.

Toby stopped. "No. No way."

"No choice," I said, grabbing his arm. Pushing him ahead, we disappeared into the motor pool.

I was seriously beginning to regret my decision to visit the Chithula tonight. We were nearing the point of no return, and I really didn't want to have to spend the day locked in my own trunk to avoid the sun. As the lights of Las Vegas were completely swallowed by the darkness, I pushed my coupe further into the Southern Nevada Desert. Well off I-15 and deep onto Rural Highway 93, we were nearing the exit for Rachel, Nevada. To UFO and conspiracy buffs, this was Mecca. Home of the Little A'Le'Inn and the infamous black mailbox, it was the nearest town to the most well-known secret military base in the world, Area 51.

The atmosphere in the car was thick with unease. As we neared the Chithula, Toby's furrowed brow became more intense. Toby and I hadn't said more than five words since leaving Brimstone. Still angry he had used a Goblin without telling me, I was giving him the cold shoulder. I was being petty, I know, but that's my prerogative. I just don't like Goblins, and Toby knew it. He didn't look like he was backing down this time though. He wasn't going to apologize. I'm sure somewhere in the deep recesses of his brain he was certain I was making him go see the Chithula because he made me work with a Goblin. That was Werewolf logic.

"Where the hell are we? We must be halfway to Tijuana by now."

"We're going north, Karl, not south. I thought Goblins had a good sense of direction." For once, I was thankful there was a Goblin sitting in the back. It broke the tension and at least I could yell at him.

"Rose," Toby warned, never raising the tone of his voice. "Ease up on Karl."

"Yeah, suckhead," Karl chimed from the back seat with his annoying helium-filled voice, "be nice to the Goblin. If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have gotten to see your boyfriend in the cage."

"He's not my boyfriend," I spat out and suddenly realized I sounded like those snobby hotel heiresses that dominated television.

I was *definitely* going to smush the little beast, or maybe leave him by the side of the road in the middle of the desert. A devious smirk swelled on my lips. How Karl had persuaded us to take him with us, I would never know. I think less persuasion was involved than sheer will. I wasn't sure if he thought there would be more money involved for him, or if he thought he was helping us, or he was just simply bored and wanted to tag along. Whatever the reason, a nasty, green Goblin was firmly seated in my car.

I wasn't exactly sure where I was going. Having only been here once before, I squinted my eyes in the darkness. The headlights barely illuminated the road and surrounding foliage as if they weren't powerful enough to fight the darkness. An oppressive feeling washed over me. I knew we were getting close. No one—with the possible exception of the Air Force—was willing to try and tame this hazardous landscape, explaining why the Chithula had remained secret all these years. Even Bugsy Siegel, when he planted stakes in the middle of the desert for the Flamingo, hadn't known about them. And they wanted to keep it that way.

Spotting an ill-maintained dirt road ahead, I let the car decelerate. Turning the wheel carefully, I felt the shocks bounce as we rolled over the first washboard. The car jolted and bucked as I tried to weave through the deep ruts. Reaching across the center console, I placed my hand gently on Toby's hoping he wouldn't pull away. To my delight, he rolled his hand over and laced his fingers into mine. We were heading into the belly of the beast—all of us.

Amidst the rolling valleys, I began to see the lights of the Chithula's compound glowing ominously.

Coming over a crest in the road, I saw it. A Spanish Mission that had been claimed and converted to their needs, it seemed smaller than I remembered. Not native of the American Southwest—or this plane of existence for that matter—it was a mystery how the Chithula had gained so much power and influence. *Why had they stopped here? Why not rule the world?* It was hard for me to fathom that the Chithula would settle for just a fraction of the power they could have. Still it was comforting that they had.

Pulling up to the front gates I saw an armed guard materialize out of the darkness. I'm sure there were many more just out of sight with a bead drawn on my head. Throwing the coupe into park, I placed both hands on the steering wheel in plain sight as a gesture of our peaceful intentions. I nodded for Toby and Karl to do the same.

The guard stopped a few feet from the driver's side of the coupe, an AK-47 cradled in his hands. He was dressed in a drab, tan uniform, the brim of his hat slung low over his brow. No markings or insignia were visible. His face was stern and emotionless. He couldn't have been more than twenty-three. "State your business," he commanded.

I rolled down my window and sniffed the air. Amongst the pungent smell of sagebrush, I clearly caught his scent. He was human. "We're with the Brimstone Syndicate. We have business with the Chithula."

The guard's expression remained unchanged. "Name?"

I missed what he said. "What?"

"Your name, Vampire," the guard barked. "What is your name?"

He knew I was a Vampire. *Why doesn't that surprise me?* "Rose. Rose Webb, Brimstone Seeker."

"Yes, ma'am," the guard answered, a spark of recognition on his face. He eased into parade stance, his feet spread the same distance as his shoulders. He motioned toward an unseen guard on the other side of the gate. "You are expected."

I couldn't help but hide the shock on my face. "Pardon me?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. "The Chithula has been awaiting your arrival."

I felt a ball of snakes begin to writhe in my guts. Still, all things considered, I shouldn't be too surprised. This was the Chithula we were talking about. I heard a thunderous squeak as the gates ahead of the coupe started to open.

"Do not deviate from the path," the guard instructed. "Another guard will meet you at the entrance." He stepped back from my car and nodded. "Have a good evening, ma'am."

I wasn't sure if that was an actual sanction, or a warning. Shifting the car back into drive, I gave it a bit of gas and we slowly started into the compound. In the rearview mirror I could see the massive gates closing behind us. I could feel the sizzle of bile creeping up my throat as my worries became deeper. I glanced down at the digital clock on the stereo face. Only a few hours from dawn, we weren't going to make it back to Vegas tonight. I leveled my eyes out the windshield. Forget worrying about sleeping in the trunk, I didn't want to stay here during daylight.

The mission's roof reached high into the night sky, the crucifix long since removed from the steeple. Its drab, brown sides matched the desert. To the left of the entrance, I spotted what looked like a used car

lot containing some of the most expensive cars I had ever seen. I wondered why the Chithula would have such lavish vehicles and keep the road to the compound in such a bad state of disrepair. As we pulled up to the entrance, Toby turned and shot me a worried glance as if to say, *We don't have to do this*. But it was already too late for that. We couldn't simply turn around and leave, especially since the Chithula was somehow expecting us. To say the least, it would be insulting and they didn't take disrespect lightly. I knew the odds were good we weren't going to make it out of here alive anyway, but we were already staring down the monster's gullet. We had no choice but to move forward now.

A guard moved quickly down the front steps and around to my side of the coupe. With his weapon slung over his shoulder, he reached down and opened my door. Shifting the transmission back into park, I unbuckled my seatbelt and slipped out. Toby and Karl followed suit.

"Ma'am," the guard greeted me exactly as the other had, "if you and your companions will follow me, Chithula is waiting."

I nodded for him to lead the way.

As we moved up the stairs, Toby was on my heels. "I don't like this."

"What would you like?" I asked in a hushed tone.

"I don't know," Karl chimed in. "They seem very friendly. If you ignore the automatic weapons in their hands, I mean." The little Goblin stopped in front of a guard standing motionless next to the front door. Snapping his small frame rigid, his face became very serious as he saluted. "Semper fi, Marine."

"Hoorah," the guard barked without changing his facial expression.

Toby cocked an eyebrow at the Goblin. "How did you know he was a Marine?"

Karl shrugged. "Just looked badass. Took a guess."

The Goblin was going to get us killed. "Come along, Karl."

The Goblin snickered and rushed to my side. "That was fun."

I shook my head. "Karl, you're an idiot."

The guards on either side of the massive double doors reached in and slowly pulled them open. As my eyes adjusted to the light pouring out of the doors, I wondered if this was what the Taj Mahal looked like inside. Clearly reflecting the Chithula's Arabian and Persian heritage, the interior of the mission had been completely gutted and redecorated. Marble stretched along the floors while tall arches dominated the walls and doors. It was beautiful. As the guard escorted us through the main hall, I couldn't help but notice how immense this place looked. From the outside, it seemed it would be much smaller inside. The power of the Chithula was on full display here. Noting the gold etching on the vaguely Roman designs, I knew I wouldn't mind living in a palace like this. Yet there was a staleness to the air. This place was lifeless. Not actually constructed by living beings, it felt dead.

We stopped before another set of equally massive and impressive doors. This time however, the doors weren't constructed of wood. Seeming somehow created out of pure gold, the doors glistened in the light. Their polished surface was extraordinarily exquisite. This would have marked a good time to check my hair and makeup before meeting the Chithula ... if I could see my reflection.

"Please step back," the guard instructed.

His two fellow guards moved to the center of the gold doors and grabbed onto the handles. Throwing their entire body weight into it, they started to move the doors slowly. I had expected a deafening roar from the hinges, but as they opened, they were completely silent despite their immense weight. It made sense though. The Chithula would only have the finest things.

As the golden doors opened, I saw into the main audience chamber. Never having been this far before, I craned my head to see inside. During my last meeting with the Chithula, a high-ranking official had met me just inside the front entrance. A routine case involving a wayward Werewolf, the creature had sought asylum within the Chithula's walls. It was my job to retrieve the wolf, so I asked if they would release it into my custody. I was told no on the spot and sent on my way.

After coming to the Chithula, the wolf seemed to vanish completely off the face of the Earth. It seemed their protection was all-encompassing. So much so that the beings in their charge were never heard from again. No one, and I mean no living soul anywhere, ever spotted the wolf after that day. When I couldn't retrieve him, his name was added to the global Brimstone database in case he skipped the country. To this day, the wolf hadn't been captured or surveiled. Anywhere.

Which was odd about Vlad. *If he was indeed in the Chithula's protection, why did I find him loitering in a bar? And how did a Vampire like Vlad come into the protection of such a powerful organization in the first place?* These were just some of the questions I had for the Chithula, assuming he didn't kill us on the spot.

The audience chamber was slightly less opulent than the main hall but no less impressive. The dominant color was again white marble, yet there seemed to be less of it. A thick, black rug ran from the mouth of the room to an elevated platform at the rear. Inhumans of all shapes, sizes, and breeds lounged in lavish furniture against the walls. All dressed in the finest fabrics and the most modern styles, this was the Chithula's court. These Inhumans worshiped, and obeyed. Nothing more. They chattered as if their lives meant something not realizing it was all a façade created by the Chithula. He wanted people to rule, and these Inhumans came willingly.

I saw him then. Walking out of a large door at the rear of the platform, he was magnificent and awe-inspiring. He was Chithula, one of the most powerful Ifrit on this plane of existence. He was completely engulfed by flame, making his hulking outline appear only as a black shadow beneath it. His head had two long curved horns that swept forward from his temples and terminated near his jaw. His eyes appeared as two glowing coals in his eye sockets while his mouth was wide and filled with angry, jagged teeth. His powerful arms hung almost to his knees, while his massive hands looked as if they could crush me with little effort.

"Did anyone bring marshmallows?" Karl asked under his breath.

I reached down and smacked the Goblin across the back of his head. "Shut it, Karl. One more outburst like that and we'll be roasting you over the fire." I let my eyes gloss over black and showed my fangs. "I hear Goblin is an acquired taste, but I'm very open-minded."

As Toby chuckled softly under his breath, Karl shrank back from me for the first time since we met. I returned my attention to Chithula.

Ifrit, one of the three classes of the Demon species known as Jinn, were powerful creatures of fire

supposedly created by Allah Himself. Often malevolent, they felt they were better than all other creations because of their elemental nature. The Jinn were first written of in the Arabic world and even made an appearance in the holy Qur'an. Jinn—composed of the Maryut, Ifrit, and Shaitan—were a robust species whose power had never been truly charted. Often confused for Genies, there was an old maxim that helped explain: Not all Jinn are Genies, and not all Genies are Jinn.

An Ifrit can appear however it wants, but Chithula found it distasteful to masquerade as a human. He looked poorly on any species that disregarded its own heritage and tried to steal the human's. Chithula was less racist than most Ifrit, but his hatred was still palpable.

Moving to the front of the platform, the Ifrit stood staring expectantly at the three of us. "Approach," Chithula commanded. When it spoke, it sounded like several voices of different intonations all speaking together. He clasped his hands behind his back and waited.

Toby, Karl, and I walked quickly along the black rug all the while being watched by several guards. It seemed the guards were pointless as the Ifrit could easily kill the three of us, but I knew it was a power thing. They were there to enforce Chithula's will when he could not be. We stopped several paces short of the bottom of the stairs and bowed our heads in respect.

"Rose Webb," Chithula spoke slowly drawing out the dual syllables of my name, "I am honored you grace my court."

I couldn't help but look confused.

"You have made quite a name for yourself as a Seeker," Chithula explained. "I have been very pleased with your performance."

"Thank you," I said finally, still rather confused.

The Ifrit's burning eyes seemed to stare right into me. "You should have come to me much sooner."

My mouth was dry. I could feel the heat rolling off Chithula as if I were standing too close to a campfire. "You know why we're here?"

The Ifrit threw its mighty head back and roared in laughter. I didn't think my question was particularly funny, but apparently he did. "Brimstone has become corrupt," Chithula explained. "What once was just is in danger of losing itself to the darkness."

"Cryptic," I assessed. "But—"

He dismissed my question with a wave of his hand. "We must return it to its former glory. That is why you are here."

Toby stepped forward. "Why do you care what happens to Brimstone?"

"It keeps us hidden from the filthy humans!" Chithula roared. "They are not worthy of our presence, let alone our knowledge. For that alone Brimstone needs to survive."

"Mighty Chithula," I said, trying to be more diplomatic than my wolf partner. "That's not why we're here."

The Ifrit's eyelids became slits over its eyes as he stared at me. Chithula shifted his weight from foot to foot as he assessed me. He obviously wasn't used to being questioned, or told he was wrong.

"A nest of Vampires was destroyed by Brimstone recently," I explained. "The brood's former Master has told me that he has Chithula representation. I need to know why."

"You seem to misunderstand, Rose Webb." A smile grew across his wide mouth. "That is at the very heart of the matter." He looked up and motioned to several of his court. "I'm sure our guests are tired. See to it they have rooms for the day."

"Thanks," I said, taking an uncomfortable step back, "but we really need to get back to Vegas."

"I won't hear of it," Chithula growled. He took a step down the stairs toward me, the flames engulfing him seemingly intensifying. "You and I have much to discuss, Rose Webb."

Chapter 13

My room was exquisite. After the servant left, I couldn't help but stand in awe in the doorway. More marble stretched off as far as I could see in all directions. A gorgeous wood table dominated the foyer with four chairs arranged around it. Drapes of heavy red velvet with golden fringes seemed to decorate every wall. Beyond the table were several plush couches arranged in a horseshoe shape around an impressive plasma screen television. Walking through the living area, I stopped. Instead of being separated, the bedroom was elevated slightly above the living room. The bed was huge, bigger than any I had seen, and swathed in black silk. An immense Jacuzzi sat in front of the bed just behind the stairs while an equally impressive bathroom lived on the opposite side of the living room.

Squinting my eyes slightly, I could see the telltale shimmer of magic on just about everything. I wasn't sure if the furniture, decorations, or even the room had been created by magical means, or just spelled in some form. My senses weren't that attuned. Still, it was beautiful, no matter how it was created. Walking up the stairs past the Jacuzzi, I couldn't help myself. Turning around, I spread my arms wide and fell back onto the bed. The black silk wrapped around me as I stretched and made snow angels. It was more wonderful than I could possibly imagine. The mood quickly passed as I noticed my lack of reflection in the mirrors on the ceiling. Reality always had a way of bringing me back to the fact I was a monster.

Nothing could change that.

Sliding off the silky bed, I then walked between the couches and snagged the remote from the coffee table. Clicking it on for some background noise, I noticed the last viewer had left it on one of those twenty-four-hour news channels. Trying to ignore the overly gorgeous brunette anchor reporting the horrific news—I wondered if a beautiful woman made bad news easier to swallow—I perched on the back of the couch and stared at the door. My mind started to wander. *Should I stay here and wait for Chithula? Should I try and get some sleep? Should I go smash Karl?*

I had to do something, and I was too wired to sleep despite the fact I could feel the sun rising beyond the compound walls. I was starving, too. I still hadn't had any sustenance. I was going on four days now. I could feel the hunger clawing at my insides. I had to feed soon to avert any possible accidents. It was best not to think about it.

After scooting off the back of the couch, I walked quickly to the heavy wooden door that led to the

adjoining hallway. Clicking the latch, I listened to the hollow echo in my room. Every noise, every sound seemed like a cavernous boom amidst the marble floors. Pulling it carefully open, I stepped into the hallway. I had seen the servants leading Toby and Karl further down the hall when I entered my room. I stared into the hallway that seemed to reach out endlessly with doors staggered on opposite sides of the walls. They had to be down here somewhere.

Moving to the first door, I pressed my ear to the heavy wood. There was nothing but silence inside. Running my fingers against the cool marble, I stared down the hallway. Skipping over the next door, I headed toward the third. I drew my fingertips down over the wood. The lingering scent of Toby was there. Perhaps he had brushed against it going inside, or merely touched it as he passed. Resting my hands on the doorframe, I listened. The sound of running water met my ears, and ...*singing*? It was muffled and I didn't recognize the song, yet the voice sounded familiar.

I pulled back and paused. I'm not sure what Toby would think of being alone in his room with me. I wasn't even entirely convinced he would let me in. I swallowed once, balled my fist and knocked. I listened as the singing and the sound of running water stopped. The light clinking of glasses followed then the muted sound of footfalls. As the latch disengaged, I took another step back.

"What are you doing here?"

A wry smile grew over my face as I stared at Toby. I knew in that moment exactly what he had been doing. "Enjoying a nice dip?"

Dripping wet and wrapped in a thick, white robe, he realized he had been found out and grinned sheepishly. "I don't know if your room has one, but I have a Jacuzzi."

I nodded. "My room has one, too." But that was the last thing on my mind. Well, not anymore. The idea of Toby and I in a hot, bubbling Jacuzzi made my insides flutter inappropriately. He was my partner. I couldn't let myself think that way. "I can't sleep, mind if I come in?"

He hesitated. I could see the thoughts churning behind his eyes. He finally stepped back and opened the door.

I smiled softly at his polite gesture and stepped inside. His room was nearly identical to mine, except where I had red drapes, his were midnight blue. They still seemed to somehow match the décor of the room perfectly. Moving past the table to the couches, I wasn't sure what to do. I really wanted to start peeling off my clothes and slip into his warm Jacuzzi, but I'm not sure he would have thought that appropriate. I could see a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice on the edge of the spa. Turning, I leaned against the back of the couch and waited.

Toby, after closing the door, stood silently in the entrance. It was clear he wasn't sure what to do either. We had never spent any time alone together away from the office, or when not involved with Brimstone business before. Sure, there had been long nights on stakeouts, or making the best of sleeping in the same hotel room while on a case, but that was business and we both took our jobs very seriously.

"You seem to be enjoying your stay," I assessed.

"When in Rome." Toby smiled. He walked around the table and pulled out one of the chairs. Spinning it so it faced me, he sank down into it. "Why are we here, Rose?"

"Vlad," I answered. "He said he wouldn't answer any of my questions. He was waiting for his Chithula

representative. I had to know why the Ifrit would choose to defend that seemingly insignificant Vampire."

"There does seem to be some kind of connection," Toby agreed. "But it just doesn't make sense. Why would Brimstone wipe out a legal nest, and have the Master on the rap sheets? They're trying to cover something up," Toby concluded.

I nodded. At least he was on the same path of logic I was.

"But Chithula is a criminal," Toby protested.

"No one's ever proven that," I pointed out.

Brimstone had been investigating Chithula for quite some time. Many wondered how he had obtained such wealth and remained hidden, while others were sure he was breaking every magical law in the book and creating his possessions from nothing. Still, there were rumors that Chithula was nothing more than a drug lord, cultivating and selling his drugs on the streets using the Inhumans under his control. This had never been proven and I couldn't imagine a being of this much power choosing such a mundane profession. I didn't sense any malice when I stood before him, even though I was a supposedly "lesser species." He seemed open and honest, and in light of the fact I questioned him and he didn't outright kill me, very patient. Perhaps we caught the Ifrit in a good mood.

"The fact alone that Chithula was expecting us frightens me a bit." Toby paused. "And I don't like the way he looks at you."

I raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"He's eyeing you," Toby breathed, "like he wants you for his own."

I saw his ego deflate right there in front of me. "I don't think—"

"Yes, Rose," the Werewolf interrupted, "he does. I can see it in his eyes, the way he moves, and the way he looks at you. Do you realize," he paused, "that he didn't look at me or Karl even once in the audience chamber? Not once."

"I didn't realize," I admitted. My skin was starting to crawl. "I'm just a nobody Seeker," I defended. "Why would anyone want me?"

Toby didn't answer. I wasn't sure I expected him to, but I would have liked him to.

"We need to get out of here," he said finally.

"We can't." I stood and walked around into the living room. "Brimstone is already upset with us; let's not add Chithula to the list."

"I don't care," Toby argued. He stood up and followed me. "The investigation isn't worth this."

I looked at him dumbfounded. "Why would you say that? If Brimstone finds us guilty of botching a hunt, they'll do more than just fire us. They'll *terminate* us."

Toby stared at me with his deep, brown eyes. "We can run."

The words hit me like a slap. Reeling back, I fell into the luscious couch and tried to stop my world from spinning. "Where would we go?" I asked finally. "Brimstone is everywhere."

"I don't know," Toby admitted. He sat down carefully on the couch next to me. The gold cross he still wore around his neck glimmered and caught my eye. *Why was he still wearing it?* "We need to go back to Vegas and wait for Maynard's investigation to be completed. It may turn out that nothing happens and we can just go back to our lives. But if they find us guilty, we have to run."

The raw conviction in his voice was startling. "I can't believe what I'm hearing." This didn't sound like the Toby I knew. *One minute he was claiming he could never trust me, and the next he wanted us to run away together?* I was starting to feel a bit like a yo-yo attached to his mood swings.

"Excuse me, Ms. Webb?"

My head snapped to the door, startled. I hadn't heard it open. One of Chithula's servants, a Vampire in a jet-black suit, was peeking in cautiously.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," the servant apologized, "but Chithula requests your presence."

Toby and I stood. I nodded at the servant.

Toby walked quickly to the Jacuzzi and started to gather up his discarded clothes. "Give me just a minute to put some pants on."

"I'm sorry if I wasn't clear," the servant said quickly, "but Chithula only seeks an audience with Ms. Webb."

Toby slowly straightened up and stared at me. In that moment, all of his theories about the Chithula had been confirmed, at least in his mind.

My gaze fell away from the Werewolf's. I had to make a choice on the spot. Toby wanted us to run. I wanted to know what was going on. Curiosity bested me. I muttered a curse under my breath. Turning away from Toby, I walked briskly toward the door. "Lead the way, Jeeves."

I could feel Toby's angry gaze burning into my back as I walked, but there was also a twinge of fear. He didn't want me to go. Fighting the urge to turn and run back apologetically, I slid through the door and pulled it closed behind me.

Chapter 14

We walked briskly down the hallway and onto a winding staircase that seemed to descend into the bowels of the Earth. If it wasn't clear before, it was now. Chithula's compound was an alternate reality. We were in a different plane of existence as soon as we entered the mission. It was quite an ingenious system, actually. If someone slipped past the gates and guards and tried to enter the mission without Chithula's permission, they would find nothing but an old, empty, rundown church. It was the perfect security system.

The Vampire ahead of me moved fluidly, every movement calculated and lissome. So quiet and precise, in fact, it barely seemed as if he touched the floor. His smooth, bald head glistened slightly in the low light.

He was the epitome of what all Vampires strove to be: powerful, elegant, and beautiful. I, unfortunately, didn't consider myself any of those things. Poor self-image I assumed.

Coming to the bottom of the stairs, there was a single, square room. Two torches burned on either side, and a massive fifteen foot door sat in the middle of them. Constructed of simple wood, heavy, black, iron hinges spread almost entirely across the face of the door. The servant stepped to the side and paused allowing me to pass, his features looking very devilish in the flickering light. Standing in front of the door, I held my position, unsure what to do.

"Chithula is awaiting you," the servant informed me. "Just enter."

He turned and started back up the stairs. As his shadow quickly vanished, I realized I was alone with the door. The handle, located about chest level, was a single round hunk of iron. Lifting it in my hands, I swallowed once and pulled, opening it with little protest.

I couldn't help the disappointment I felt as I looked upon Chithula's private chambers for the first time. None of the marble or luxury of the upper floors was present here. Even my guest room was more elegant than this. Drab brown colors dominated everything as far as I could see. The room, basically rectangular, was filled with bookshelves stuffed with volumes upon volumes of forgotten lore. A simple chair sat to the left of the room, while a heavy rug dominated the other side. Torches, similar to the two outside of the room, were strategically positioned to offer the most light. The room smelled ancient as the books' pages yellowed and rotted threatening to destroy the information they contained within. Mildew hung heavy on the wooden bookshelves.

This couldn't be Chithula's private sanctum, could it?

A large door on the far side of the room opened and it was instantly filled with a bright, orange light. Stooping slightly, Chithula stepped inside in his full glory and closed the door. The flames wrapping around his body licked at the floor, walls, and ceiling, but didn't seem to burn anything. I could feel the heat rolling off his body in waves. His radiant eyes focused intently on me.

Instantly intimidated, I shrank back against the wall. Nearly eight feet tall, the Ifrit dwarfed me. My hand reached for the still open door. I wasn't sure where I could get to in this place, this reality, but anything was better than this tiny room with a huge fire demon.

"Rose Webb," Chithula's unnatural voice boomed as if a choir of Demons spoke with him. "Sit with me," the Ifrit commanded as he walked to the middle of his rug and sat with his legs folded beneath him.

I hesitated, unsure what to do, but I was here for a reason. Pushing the door closed, I moved slowly onto the rug. Sinking down to the floor in front of Chithula, I folded my hands in my lap and waited. I didn't feel entirely uncomfortable, but I wasn't exactly at home here either. If the Ifrit decided to rip me limb from limb, there wouldn't be anything I could do to stop him. Beads of sweat were rolling down my face from the heat. "Thank you for seeing me, Chithula."

"Vampires are such odd creatures," Chithula said without acknowledging my statement. "I personally think it's distasteful to look like a human." He paused and looked at me. "But you don't have any choice, do you?"

"No," I said quietly. That's the one place the movies got it wrong. I couldn't alter my form at will. No bats, no wolves, and no form of smoke to slide through a keyhole—*Although, wouldn't that be an odd sensation?*

"You clearly aren't human, but you desperately want to appear so," the Ifrit surmised. "You have gifts that make you better, stronger, and faster, but you spend your entire existences trying to fit in with these creatures that are your food source. You don't see people trying to act like cows, do you?"

"Only celebrities." I laughed.

The Ifrit studied me for a moment, not amused by my joke. "You weren't given the choice, were you?"

I felt a dark shadow cross my face. "No. I was forced."

His expression remained unchanged. "By whom?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. I didn't like where this was going. "A brood in San Francisco abducted and raped me. They decided I was fun as I struggled and screamed, so they turned me to ensure they could keep doing it over and over again." Venom was heavy in my voice. "I never found out who they were."

"How terrible," the Ifrit commented, but I don't think he really felt any grief for me. "But through the pain, and anguish, did you not receive gifts most mortals spend their entire lives dreaming about?"

I shook my head. "They took everything from me. I don't see—"

"But they gave you a new life," Chithula countered. "A life without disease, without sickness, without death. You have lived on this plane for one hundred and forty years now. Didn't that make the pain and suffering worth it?"

"One hundred and thirty-nine," I corrected, adding my human and my vampiric years. *He was testing me, playing devil's advocate, but why?* "Yes, I'm immortal now, but that simply gives me the rest of eternity to grieve for those I lost and relive the pain of that event."

"Why don't you let it go?"

"Let it go?" I asked, almost insulted. "How can you even consider that an option? I lost those I loved. I lost my family." My voice became small. "I lost my daughter."

"Humans define themselves through suffering," Chithula offered. "They build complex social and economic systems with no other purpose than to bring more pain into their lives. Everything they do, every choice they make is measured against how much anguish it will cause. If a human being isn't suffering, they don't feel alive for some reason. You are not a human, Rose Webb." He paused letting the statement sink in. "You don't have to suffer."

"I need it," I whispered.

"Why?" Chithula's question was stark and raw. I almost recoiled from it as if it were a punch.

I felt my face flush. "It makes me who I am."

"Interesting." Chithula stared at me for a moment. He adjusted his body slightly and rested his palms on his folded knees. "Why are you here?"

"I already told you," I said, slightly confused.

Chithula frowned. I obviously wasn't playing the game by his rules. His burning eyes flashed with intensity. He wasn't going to ask the question again.

"There was a nest of Vampires in Vegas that Brimstone wiped out," I said slowly. "They were legal. I have spoken to the brood's former Master. He claims to have a Chithula representative defending him. I need to know why."

Chithula soaked in my statement, considering each and every word. "Mr. Asp, the Vampire you have in lockup, is indeed under Chithulan protection. He came to me and felt his life was in danger."

"Then why did you let him leave?" I asked point blank.

"Mr. Asp was part of a larger picture, Rose Webb. It wasn't merely his life I was protecting." Chithula stopped and reconsidered his words. "But the Vampire has done what he was intended to. He has unwittingly spread this information and set events in motion."

I couldn't help let my mouth fall agape. "What?"

"He brought you," Chithula smiled, his eyes flashing with fire again, "to me."

I suddenly felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Any comfort I was feeling was ripped out of the room as if he had dropped a bomb between us. The urge to flee gripped me. It took every bit of my strength to remain sitting in front of him. I started to understand one thing: I wasn't a guest of the Chithula. I was his prisoner.

"Someone is trying to subvert the Brimstone Syndicate," Chithula said darkly.

"How do you know this?" It was the obvious question, but the only one that came to my mind.

"I had a vision of things to come nearly two thousand years ago." Chithula paused, allowing me to consider his age. "I saw a place that seemed to rise out of the desert and glitter, and before the Brimstone Syndicate even existed, I saw your face, Rose Webb."

The admission stunned me.

"It is no coincidence that I have made my home outside of Las Vegas," Chithula said, answering one of my lingering questions. "It is here I was destined to play my part and once Mr. Asp arrived, I knew what I saw was in motion. I haven't seen the complete picture," he admitted, "but I have to trust the Powers That Be," Chithula finally acknowledged. "The rebellion is upon us."

"Rebellion?" I felt the word choke in my throat. He was starting to frighten me. I fidgeted on the rug, seemingly unable to sit still. "I still don't understand what I have to do with all of this."

"I don't have that answer," Chithula said. "I just know that something is threatening the Brimstone Syndicate from within, and you are a key player." He paused and considered me again. "I need to know whose side you're on."

I looked carefully at the Ifrit before me. He had been testing me the whole time, ensuring I was worthy of his knowledge. "What does it matter to you? Why are you concerned with Brimstone's survival?"

"My motives are my own," he said casually, as if in passing. "I have set myself up to profit if Brimstone continues or not."

"This is all fine," I said with a tinge of anger in my voice, "but you haven't given me anything concrete. I have vague references to a rebellion; that someone is trying to subvert Brimstone from inside, and that I play a part in this," I paused dramatically, "somehow. I'm sorry if I sound angry and ungrateful, but where do I go from here? What's the next step?"

Chithula stood and started back toward the door he had entered from. I didn't know if I had angered or insulted him. Opening it, he turned and paused. "Matthew Sumner."

I couldn't hide my shock. "Matthew Sumner, the Brimstone Overseer? *That* Matthew Sumner?"

Chithula nodded.

I felt a shiver run down my spine.

As the Ifrit stepped through the door I finally felt the heat in the room begin to abate. "You and your companions are free to go," he said, closing the door.

Apparently I had passed his test. I sat in the center of the rug reeling. This was far bigger than even I imagined. If he was right, if this name was the key, there was more going on here than the death of a few legal Vampires.

Chapter 15

"I don't trust him!"

I stared at Toby, my brow furrowed angrily. During the ride back to Vegas, I had revealed everything Chithula told me. For a long time we all sat in silence, considering the implications of this information. And yet, it seemed to corroborate the facts we already had.

Insisting he was hungry, I had pulled into the first twenty-four-hour pancake house I spotted from the interstate to try and quell the wolf's appetite. Still standing in the well-lit parking lot, we were starting to draw attention from the skeleton staff inside the restaurant. I could see them poking through the Venetian blinds to watch us. This wasn't a good place to be.

"Look, kids," Karl said, sliding out of the back seat. A heavy bag of items he had stolen from the Ifrit's compound were over his shoulder. "You have fun, but I'm leaving."

I turned and glared at the Goblin. "Where do you think you're going?"

Karl was already walking away. Turning, he continued to backpedal. "Home. I don't care what happens to you two. There is no way I'm going to help take down an Overseer."

"He's right." Toby lowered his voice and stepped closer to me. "We may still have a chance to live if we walk away right now. I am not bringing allegations against a Brimstone Overseer. That's suicide!"

Stepping away from the angry Werewolf, I snatched the Goblin's loot bag. "Nobody is going anywhere," I spat at Karl. I turned and pointed at Toby. "And you need to get a hold of yourself." I leaned against the hood of my car and folded my arms. "We have information, even if it isn't true, that paints us as conspirators. If this gets out before we have proof, we're all sunk." I paused. "Nobody leaves."

The Goblin hung his head. At least he acknowledged I was right. Walking slowly back to the car, he kicked the rear tire with his wee boots. "Crud."

I returned the Goblin's loot. "Matthew Sumner may be an Overseer," *and a very powerful one at that*, "but we don't even know what Chithula meant when he told me the name. I don't know if he's involved in this alleged rebellion, or the person we need to take the evidence to. I don't know."

Toby took a step back and started to pace as he stewed. "This doesn't make any sense," he admitted in frustration. "Why would anyone want to subvert the Syndicate?"

"Don't be naïve," I growled. "Brimstone has enemies just like everyone else. The question we need to be asking now isn't why, but *who*. As in who is trying to hurt the Syndicate?" I felt a drop of rain hit my shoulder. Glancing up, I searched the skies but couldn't find a single rain cloud. Ignoring it, I returned my attention to Toby and Karl. "Are you two with me?"

Karl nodded half-heartedly as he rooted through his bag of stolen goodies. "Yeah, whatever, suckhead." He wasn't even paying attention.

Toby was still fuming, but he knew he wouldn't change my mind. No matter how much he argued, I wasn't going to run away. He stopped in front of me and folded his arms. "Where do we go from here?"

I felt another drop of water hit the back of my ear. Wiping it away, I shrugged. "I honestly don't know. I think we need to find Overseer Sumner and see what he's up to. Beyond that, I'm really not sure." Several more drops hit me. I looked up into the sky. "Is it starting to rain?"

Toby grabbed my hand. "Rose, you're bleeding!"

"No I'm not." I stared down at my hands. Red smears of blood were indeed visible where I had wiped the raindrops away. "That's kind of strange."

"I don't know," Toby said, inspecting me with a worried look on his face. "I don't see any cuts."

I felt another raindrop hit my forehead. Reaching up to wipe it away, I felt something sharp embedded in my flesh. Wrapping my fingertips around it, I yanked it free and held it in my hand. I lifted it close to my face but couldn't make out any detail on the tiny object. It simply looked like a tiny sliver of wood. I started to feel a bit woozy. "What the hell is going on?"

Toby stared at the sliver in my hand. "It kind of looks like a dart."

Karl leapt out of the car and pointed into the night sky past us. His eyes were wide with fear. "Swarm!"

"Crud," I said, repeating Karl's earlier curse. I looked up to see a swarm of glowing, yellow dots swooping toward us. I then understood what I held in my hand. It was a Pixie Stick, a poisoned spear used by tiny, wingless Inhumans known as Sprites. One Pixie Stick wasn't enough to bring down a normal-sized being, but Sprites never traveled alone, and I'd already been hit at least six times.

"Toby." My reaction time started to slow as the world shifted around me. "Help me," I slurred.

"Rosy?" The Werewolf picked me up and dove into the open back seat of the coupe. Pulling the door shut, he started to frantically roll up the windows. It simply wasn't enough to get in the car and seal it off. Sprites were tiny. They could get into anything, even through a heat vent. We had to get out of here. He slid my head into his lap and held me firmly. "Stay with me," he commanded.

The Werewolf looked at the tiny, green Goblin still standing frozen in the parking lot. "Karl, we're leaving!"

"Yeah, right!" The Goblin snapped around and started for the passenger door.

Toby slapped the window to get the Goblin's attention. "You drive!"

"What?" Karl asked incredulously as he climbed into the vehicle. "Are you blind, puppy? I'm a freakin' foot tall! How the hell am I going to drive?"

Toby glanced down at the floor. Snatching my unused umbrella from behind the seat, he handed it to Karl. "Wedge this on the accelerator, then just steer!"

I moaned as the toxin worked deeper into my system. Everything around me was starting to feel disconnected as if I wasn't really there. I could hear the Pixie Sticks hitting the glass behind my head, sounding almost like a light sprinkling of rain.

The Goblin stared at the umbrella and cursed something in his native tongue. Hiking across the center console and into the driver's seat, he jumped up and grabbed the keys I had left in the ignition. Twisting with all of his strength, the car roared to life.

"Let's move, green bean," Toby growled from the backseat.

"Eat it, puppy," Karl spat back.

The Goblin dove down onto the floor and pulled the umbrella off the seat. Wielding it like a staff, he pushed the tip into the gas pedal and lodged the curved handle into the soft fabric of the seat sending the engine racing. Once he climbed back up into the seat, the little Inhuman could barely see over the steering wheel. Grabbing the gearshift, the transmission growled in protest as he pulled. Slipping past neutral, the car jerked backwards as it shifted into reverse.

I heard Toby's head smack against the window.

"Wrong way, Karl!" the Werewolf protested angrily.

Karl's entire weight was hanging off the shifter. "I'm trying, puppy! You're not helping!"

Several small, yellow Sprites emerged from the heat vent. They glowed slightly due to their natural bioluminescence. Flitting up between the seats, they took aim at Karl's head.

Jerking down with his feet, the knob finally slid past reverse and into drive. The car's tires squealed on the pavement as it skidded to a stop and lurched into the opposite direction. Karl fell into the seat but quickly recovered and skittered back to the steering wheel as several Pixie Sticks whizzed past him.

“Little help, puppy!”

Toby swatted at the Sprites with his meaty hand. “Shoo, you little bastards!” Snatching one of the Sprites out of the air, Toby flung it at the back window. I heard it hit with a crunch and fall dead to the carpet below.

Standing on the bottom loop of the wheel, Karl was amazingly able to steer us around the pancake house and onto the road. “Chicks dig guys with cars.” Karl laughed with glee as he honked the horn with his hips.

The remaining Sprites turned their attention to Toby. Launching a volley of sticks, they buzzed in and began to swarm around his head. He waved his arms wildly in the air all the while trying to keep me steady on the seat. The tiny, wingless creatures zipped like fireflies around the Werewolf. Knocking another out of the air, he grunted as a Pixie Stick hit him just below the eye.

A wave of sinister chipmunk-like laughter sliced into our ears. The Sprites were obviously having a wonderful time trying to kill us.

“Hold on!” the Goblin yelled from the front.

I felt a wave of nausea hit me as Karl spun the wheel hard to avoid slower-moving traffic and nearly tumbled off. Grabbing onto the plush seats, I tried to keep myself from getting thrown to the floor. My head was spinning full force as the poison marched through my system. I had to help, but I could barely hold up my head. I looked up at Toby who was still swinging wildly at the Sprites. “Console.”

“Not now, Rosy!” Toby barked.

I reached up and grabbed the collar of his shirt with every bit of strength I had left and pulled the wolf's face down to mine. “Console,” I repeated firmly.

Toby stared with bewilderment for a moment then it struck him. “Oh,*oh* !”

Reaching over me, he pulled open the center console between the front seats. His face lit up as he felt my little, black, emergency kit. No bigger than a CD holder, Toby unzipped it and folded it open like a book on my stomach. Doing my best to lift my head, I ran my fingers over the various charms, spells, and amulets contained within. Toby knocked away a Sprite that landed on my chest with pixie stick at the ready.

Grabbing a small vial filled with what looked like Mercury, I lifted it in my two hands and cracked it like a glow stick. As the vial snapped open, the substance vaporized when it hit the air while a chemical and mystical reaction occurred. With a pop no bigger than a firecracker, the interior of my car was instantly filled with a glittering substance that resembled confetti.

“Don't breathe deeply,” Karl warned, his focus still on the road ahead, what little he could see of it.

We watched the tiny Sprites begin to fly erratically in the car, their shrill gasps and screams audible above the engine noise. As the miniscule creatures started to drop from the air, the soft thump of their bodies hit the carpeting repeated all over the vehicle.

Toby waved the sparkling confetti out of his face. “What is that stuff?”

"Sprite repellent." I coughed. "Nebulized iron."

Blackness encroached on my vision. I felt as if I was looking at the world from the bottom of a well. As my hands became heavy and fell to my chest, the broken pieces of the vial fell away. I looked up at Toby again. He seemed almost ethereal amidst the sparkling Sprite repellent.

I felt my eyes close as the darkness took me.

Chapter 16

I ran my hand over my face and slowly opened my eyes. A moment of confusion engulfed me as everything seemed warped and alien. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I realized I was in my apartment lying on the couch with my feet propped up on the arm. Licking my lips, I could feel the sandy dryness of my flesh. My arms felt as heavy as stone when I tried to lift them. Grabbing the edge of the couch, I rolled onto my side and summoning all of my strength, I pushed myself into a sitting position. My head swam for a moment, but I didn't pass out.

Slowly I became aware of the voices coming from my kitchen. I could hear Toby's voice and, unfortunately, the shrill whine of Karl's. *Great. That's just great. I have a Goblin in my apartment.* Another voice, barely audible, caught my ear. Tiny and muffled it would have been easy to miss. Curiosity overwhelmed my aching, tired body. I had to know what was going on in the kitchen.

Leaning forward, I braced myself against my coffee table and carefully stood up. My legs felt like Jell-O for a moment, but I found my balance. My insides felt as though they were twisting over and over. I knew it was mostly the poison acting on my system, but I was still starving. I desperately needed to feed. Brushing a lock of hair from my eyes, I waited until the dark edges receded from my vision. The Sprites' Pixie Sticks must've been more powerful than I realized.

Stumbling toward the kitchen, I caught the partial wall that divided the rooms and used it for support. Leaning my head against the cool plaster, I couldn't stop the laugh that seemed to roll out of my stomach. The sight of Toby holding his hand over the top of my blender with Karl standing next to it cheering him on was too much for my mind's fragile state. Looking into the blender's glass jar I saw the source of the third voice: a glowing Sprite.

"Oh lord." I sighed as I let my head fall into my hands.

Toby looked up at me with an evil grin on his face. The smirk quickly melted away, replaced with concern. "Rosy." He started to walk toward me, but realized he was still holding the captured Sprite in place. Searching over the counter, he finally grabbed Karl and plopped him firmly on top of the blender. "Don't move," he instructed Karl and turned toward me.

"What's the deal, puppy?" Karl asked angrily. "Do I look like a freaking stopper? What am I supposed to hold the Sprite in with? My glorious green ass?"

"Shut up, Karl," Toby quickly spat out. Stopping in front of me, he placed his powerful hands on my shoulders. "You shouldn't be up. Are you okay?"

I nodded. "I'm fine. Little woozy," I admitted, "but fine." I looked past the wolf into the kitchen. Karl was taunting the Sprite and mooning him. I closed my eyes, certain I had just been permanently scarred.

"What are you two deviants doing to that Sprite?"

"Interrogation," Toby replied matter-of-factly. "Trying to find out who sent it."

Amused, I decided to play along. "And if it doesn't cooperate?"

"Puree," Toby answered.

I tried to take in the moment, but it was simply too strange. I had a Werewolf and a Goblin in my kitchen threatening to blend a Sprite into a fine paste. *Where was Rod Serling when you needed him?* I had definitely entered the Twilight Zone. I turned back to the wolf. "Any luck?"

"No." Toby sighed. "I don't think the Sprite thinks we'll actually hurt it so it isn't talking."

I rubbed my temples for a second trying to regain some of my composure. "Okay, let's do this right."

Toby cocked an eyebrow. "What?"

Marching into the kitchen I snapped my fingers at Karl. "Move."

The Goblin leapt off the blender without protest.

"New player." The Sprite laughed as I approached.

Reaching into the blender jar, I snatched the three-inch tall Sprite careful not to smash it. Scooting the blender aside, I pressed the Sprite to the counter and reached into a nearby drawer with my free hand. Grabbing the largest knife possible, I held up the shiny silver blade for the Sprite to see. "I'm going to ask questions and you're going to answer," I instructed.

"Or what?" the Sprite asked confidently. "You're Brimstone. You won't hurt me."

I stared at my would-be assassin through narrowed eyes. Its yellow flesh looked rich against my white hand. Completely naked, Sprites had no need for clothing. Asexual, there were no male or female Sprites. They simply multiplied like cells through mitosis. One Sprite became two. Two became four. Four became eight ... you get the picture. Only a small, empty quiver for its Pixie Sticks was slung across its chest. The Sprite's hair, green and wild, reminded me of the novelty Troll dolls that flooded stores a decade ago. Sprites were notoriously vain about their hair, often dying it every color of the rainbow and spending hours styling it. Sprite hair was a status symbol in their society. The bigger and brighter it was, the better.

"Let's try this again," I said as I held the knife just above its hair, "I ask questions, you answer them. Understood?"

The Sprite snorted grotesquely at my threat. "You don't have the *huevos*, Princess."

"You don't know who you're dealing with." Karl snorted.

"Well," I smiled, showing my perfect fangs as my eyes shifted to black, "you're right about one thing." Pressing down, I cut a massive chunk of hair off the Sprite's head. The tiny Inhuman shrieked in disbelief as I picked the hair up from the counter and showed it to it. "I start on body parts next," I warned.

"Okay, okay! Don't cut me again," the Sprite gasped between sobs. "Cripes, lady! You're freaking insane!"

Pleased with our captive's newfound spirit of cooperation, I handed the wee beast back to Toby. I desperately needed to sit down. Going vampy on the Sprite had taken more out of me than I realized.

Toby dropped the Sprite back into the blender as I perched on the edge of the counter. "What's your name?"

The Sprite peered angrily through the glass at me then gave to his attention to Toby. "Braxis."

"Good," Toby said, delighted from finally getting an answer to one of his questions. "Who sent you to kill us?"

"Who's 'us,' dog-boy?" the Sprite asked. "You got a mouse in your pocket?"

Karl rolled onto his back and laughed out loud.

"We were sent to kill the Vampire bitch who cut off my mane," Braxis explained, running his hands through his now spiky hair.

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"We just tried to kill you and the annoying Goblin to get to her," the Sprite offered cheerfully as he pointed to me. "Kind of a buy one get one free kind of deal, you know?"

Toby crossed his arms across his chest. "So Karl and I were basically added bonuses?"

The Sprite nodded and shrugged. "Whatcha gonna do?"

"It's good to be needed," Toby joked, trying to hide his discomfort. The wolf shook his head and turned away.

Ignoring Toby, I glanced angrily at the Sprite. "Who hired you to kill me, Braxis? I want a name!" I started to lift the knife from the counter again.

Braxis pushed himself as far away from me in the jar as it could, its tiny hands clawing at the glass. "Lucas," it breathed. "Lucas Nash."

I knew the name. He was another powerful figure connected with Brimstone. *Why did it seem like the fates were aligning against me? What did I ever do to them?* "Why does Lucas want me dead?"

Braxis was silent.

I snatched the knife fully into my hand. "Why did Lucas hire you to kill me?"

"I don't know," Braxis spat. "I'm just a contract employee! I don't know why."

I set the knife back on the counter. That wasn't the answer I wanted to hear, but I knew it was the truth. "Okay," I turned to Karl, "keep an eye on the Sprite."

Karl jumped up from the counter next to me and charged toward the blender.

"And don't kill it," I warned him.

"Crud." The Goblin skidded to a stop and sighed. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he kicked the blender.

Scooting off the edge of the counter, I paused to make sure I was still strong enough to keep my balance. Turning back toward the living room, I frowned. I caught sight of my partner standing in the dark staring out the window. He was sulking. *Fantastic*. That's all I needed tonight, a morose Werewolf.

"Toby," I said, announcing my presence. I knew how he hated it when I snuck up on him.

The Werewolf glanced over his shoulder to acknowledge me but returned his gaze to the window.

I moved closer. "What's the matter?"

Toby shook his head as if to say, *Nothing*.

"Come on," I pushed playfully.

He spun and faced me. His face was a mixture of anger and frustration. "I was interrogating that stupid Sprite for almost forty minutes before you woke up and it wouldn't tell me a thing!"

Was that really his problem? That I had gotten the Sprite to talk when he couldn't? "Are you serious?"

"It just proves why you're one of Brimstone's top Seekers." He paused uncomfortably. He stepped away from the window and closer to me. His face seemed stern in the low light, harder than I could ever recall seeing it. "You're willing to take chances, and my gut instinct is to run."

I knew this would come up again. His comments to me at Chithula's compound were haunting him.

"You're a good Seeker," I offered. "You just wanted to protect me."

I could hear Karl razzing the Sprite again; his strident voice was slowly boring into my brain.

"I can't do this," Toby said in defeat.

"What are you talking about?" I lowered my voice. "Toby, I need you."

"You don't need anyone," the Werewolf growled. "I'm just getting in the way."

He was angry and I didn't understand why. "Toby," I said, reaching for him, "wait. Please?"

"I don't know what I'm doing," he lashed out. "First it's information that says Matthew Sumner, a Brimstone Overseer, may be connected to some kind of plot to sabotage the Syndicate, and now Lucas Nash the Warlock, a known Brimstone freelancer, is trying to kill you? None of this makes sense." He sank down onto my couch. "This is all too much."

It suddenly clicked in my mind. He was scared, for himself and for me and he simply didn't know how to handle it. My face softened. I sat down on the couch next to him and lowered my gaze. "I can't do this

by myself."

A pregnant pause grew between us.

I saw Toby's hand tentatively move toward mine. I made no motion to stop him. I could hear the pace of his heart quicken. As his fingertips brushed against the back of my hand, I felt an electric spark run up my arm. "Rose," he said quietly.

I brought my gaze up to match his.

He looked at my face as though he had never seen it before. "I apologize." He took a deep breath. "It's all so overwhelming."

"I know." I smiled. "But we can do this."

Toby smiled, even though I knew it was just for show.

"Are you two done? I'm gonna be sick!"

I looked up to see Karl watching us from the kitchen making pretend retching noises as he grabbed his stomach. He was worse than having a toddler around. "Shut up, Karl."

"Rose and Toby sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G," the Goblin sang mockingly. Worst of all, he was starting to dance, shaking his so-called glorious green ass. "First comes love, then comes marriage—"

I snatched a pillow off the couch and flung it at him. The stuffed projectile hit him and knocked him into the sink. I heard him hit with a dull thump. I looked at Toby with wide eyes.

I hadn't meant to kill him.

Before Toby even stood up, I was off the couch, across the living room, and into the kitchen. Tossing the pillow out of the way, I lifted Karl out of the sink. I pushed a stack of junk mail out of the way and set him gently on the counter. "Karl?"

"Woo-hoo!" The Sprite laughed from the blender jar. "Nice shootin'!"

The Goblin slowly opened his green eyes. He tried to look at me, but couldn't seem to focus. He pointed his finger accusingly at the empty space next to me. "You'll be hearing from my attorney." With that, his head fell limp as he passed out.

At least he wasn't dead. Slipping him into my arms as though he were my infant, I walked back into the living room and set him in the recliner. "Where did you find this guy?" I asked Toby as I put a blanket on Karl.

"We play poker on Tuesday nights," Toby replied.

"Nice." I looked down at the Goblin. He looked like a favorite doll tucked neatly in the chair. "Since Karl's sleeping here tonight," I turned back to the wolf, "I think you should stay too. You can sleep on the couch. There are blankets next to it."

"Thanks." Toby peered over the arm and found the blankets. Grabbing several, he dropped them on the

couch next to him.

I started for my bedroom.

"Rose?"

I stopped and looked back at Toby. "Yeah?"

"Are we cool?"

Smiling, I nodded at my partner. "Yeah, we're cool. Goodnight, Toby."

"Night, Rosy." Toby pulled the blankets onto his lap and stretched out on the couch. It was barely long enough for him.

Looking at him one last time, I seriously considered it. He seemed willing. Despite his unease with my true nature, and Lord knows it's been a long time for me. I ran my fingertips down the doorframe imagining it was his chest. I couldn't.

Sighing, I walked into my bedroom and closed the door.

Chapter 17

The smell of blood woke me.

I was up and out of bed before my conscious mind was aware of what my body was doing. My hunger pushed me to my bedroom door. Somehow remembering my guests, I snatched my robe and pulled it over the black tank top and panties I had worn to bed. The blood's odor was sweet and heavy on the air. It seemed to waft into my room and caress my face. I was starving.

Throwing open the door, I stopped dead in my tracks. This wasn't my apartment. I ran my hand over my face. This didn't even look like Earth. You know those designs by M.C. Escher with upside down and backwards staircases leading to doors set at impossible angles? It felt like I was smack in the middle of one. From my vantage point on the floor—*or was it really the roof?*—alternating black and white catwalks twisted around each other creating massive knots while staircases shot vertically into the ceiling over a checkerboard floor. Doors opened from every direction that seemed to lead nowhere, and everywhere at once. I was standing in a room that scoffed at those that only utilized three dimensions. And it was making me nauseous to look at.

Directly ahead of me was a small table. A single, yellow mug occupied the center. Filled with still-warm blood, it beckoned to me. My senses were on overload, but I couldn't resist the smell. My bare feet plopped against the cold floor sending echoes off into the various dimensions as I approached. I studied the table and mug. Unlike this place, there didn't seem to be anything fantastic about it. It was simply a table and porcelain mug. Ravenous, I started to reach for the blood. I could already feel its warmth sliding down my throat replenishing me. I wanted it. No, more than that, I craved it.

I stopped and took a step back. I couldn't do it. The alarms in my head were blaring. *What was this place? Was I dreaming?*

"This isn't a dream," a disembodied voice answered. It was deep, smooth, and creamy in tone. "The blood is very real," the voice paused, "and completely safe."

I refused. My hunger had temporarily overwhelmed me, but I was in control again. I looked up into the room that seemed to rise indefinitely. "Where am I?"

I saw a tiny figure emerge from a far door at least four levels above me. Walking down a vertical catwalk, he seemed to be standing on it horizontally with no problems. From this distance, I couldn't manage anything in the way of description. "This is my home," its voice boomed as if right next to me. "I admit, it's a little extravagant, but I find the design stimulates my imagination."

I pulled my robe tighter around my frame as the air in the room seemed to cool at the figure's entrance. "Who are you?"

"Ah!" the figure remarked exuberantly. "I thought you knew! Time for a proper introduction."

The figure retreated into a door and emerged from another—upside down—on the opposite wall. It seemed normal physics weren't in effect here. Walking briskly along the catwalk, he stopped before me, his maroon robe displaying no signs of bowing to gravity. Made from thick wool, his robe draped off his shoulders and licked at his feet. The long, V-shaped neckline showed the collar of an expensive black dress shirt with a blood-red tie knotted at his throat. Probably in his late sixties, his facial features seemed to be chiseled out of granite, while his mousy brown hair fell lifelessly over his brow. A pair of smoky black sunglasses perched on his nose hid his eyes. Only the tips of his perfectly white sneakers were visible below the robe.

"I'm sorry, Rose. I thought you knew who I was."

How did these nuts all know my name?

He extended his hand down to me. "Most call me Lucas."

Fear pulled me several steps back from him. "Lucas Nash the Warlock?"

Lucas bowed, confirming the answer. "Don't worry, my dear," he laughed, "I won't try and kill you here. You're my guest and that wouldn't be proper in the slightest. At least," he smirked, "until you leave."

His threat sent a chill down my back. I knew he meant it. "Why am I here?"

Lucas looked more like a professor from old college photos than a powerful, and possibly evil, Warlock. He had an air of power and knowledge about him, yet he seemed quite gracious with nearly flawless manners. Lucas stood tall and clasped his hands behind his back and started to pace. "I find myself in somewhat of a quandary."

I remained silent, but my confidence was shrinking. I was in his domain at his mercy. Lucas held all the cards.

"First, congratulations on surviving the Sprite attack," the warlock said respectfully. "It's amazing how persistent those little creatures can be, but you and your companions stopped them. Well done." He lowered his head slightly. "It is a shame some had to die though. They were good employees."

"Indeed," I replied stoically.

Lucas started to continue, but paused when his gaze caught the still full mug of blood on the table. He seemed slightly perturbed I hadn't accepted his offer. "I assure you the blood is safe." He paused. "But it's getting cold. You really should drink it before it starts to coagulate."

I looked at the blood one last time then returned my gaze to Lucas. "No thank you."

"I know you're hungry, Rose," Lucas pressed. "If you think you will offend my senses by drinking blood in front of me, you won't. I have worked with many, many Vampires in my time. Please," he said, gesturing to the mug.

"I'm fine," I assured the warlock.

"Very well," he said then sighed. Leaping down—*or was it his "up"?*—he spun in the air and landed on his feet directly in front of me. "Tell me about the Ifrit."

"Who?" I played coy.

"Chithula," Lucas confirmed. There was a sharp edge to his voice that wasn't there before. He had dispensed with the pleasantries and was getting down to business. "What did he tell you?"

"That was a very private conversation. I don't think it needs repeating," I said boldly, deciding that if I were to die here, I would do so with my dignity intact.

"This isn't the time for bravery, child," he threatened, even though I was certainly older than him. "I want to know what the Ifrit told you. Tell me."

"That would violate Seeker/Demon confidentiality rules," I mocked.

"I can take it from you if I want," Lucas said spitefully.

I studied the Warlock for a moment. If he could, he already would have. He was bluffing. "I was simply visiting an old friend," I lied. "That's all."

The Warlock tipped his glasses down so they barely clung to tip of his nose. He looked at me with solid red eyes over the rims. "You're lying."

I smiled wryly and held two fingers up. "Scout's honor."

"Don't toy with me, Vampire," Lucas growled. "What did the Ifrit tell you?"

"That he just saved a bunch of money on his car insurance by switching to—*urk!*" An invisible grip clamped around my throat stopping my witty comeback.

"I am growing tired of this," Lucas warned. "Tell me what you know!"

I saw a bead of sweat on his forehead. I surmised this wasn't his lair and its upkeep was taxing his powers. Warlocks, unlike Witches, were the result of a pact with a Demon for power. Witches were born with their power while Warlocks were made. Their power wasn't limitless and unlike Witches, it could be taken. "I won't talk."

Lucas drew a slow breath into his lungs and shook his head. "Not a wise decision."

Dropping me to the ground, he pointed his fingers at me and mumbled something under his breath. Before I could react, a dark swarm of insects appeared around me. Massive fly-like creatures, the buzzing of their wings was almost deafening as they flitted in and bit me repeatedly. There seemed to be thousands of them all over me. My skin should have been burning and raw ... but it wasn't.

Standing up, the swarm still buzzing and chewing my flesh, I smiled broadly at Lucas. "First mistake. And you only get one."

His eyes widened.

I charged. Before he could raise his hands in defense, I was on the Warlock. My momentum knocked us to the ground. Lucas tried to throw me free, but I pinned him down and bit into his throat. I felt two tiny muscles above my gums flex as I injected him with venom. Ripping my fangs free of his flesh, I bit again, and again until I had created a gaping wound.

Contrary to what you may have seen in movies, a Vampire's bite doesn't usually leave two, small, perfect, puncture wounds. There is a time and a place for that mark, but most Vampires are much more savage when feeding.

The Warlock moaned as my neurotoxin started to course through his body. His eyes fluttered and the swarm of bugs vanished. Wrapping my lips around the wound, I sucked hard drawing his blood into me. Pulling back for a moment, I stared at the crimson life running down his neck and the dark purple bruise I had created. A state of euphoria washed over my body as his blood worked into my system rejuvenating me. Diving forward, I dug into the wound again, deepening it with my fangs. His blood spurted into my mouth as I severed an artery. I felt a moan well up from me as his blood rolled down my throat. My hands moved passionately up his body and finally wrapped around his head. As I pulled again, I felt his skull crack.

Stop, Rose!

Forcefully pulling myself away at the sound, I fought the Demon inside me roaring for more. I wanted him. I wanted his life. My teeth gnashed and my lips curled ... I wanted to finish him.

I stood up and stumbled back trying to wipe his still warm blood from my chin but only succeeded in smearing it. I could feel his gifted power skittering up my spine. I felt strong. I looked down at Lucas. His body was convulsing as he tried to fight my venom. Whatever control he had was gone now. The illusion around us melted away and revealed the room's true identity. Not as lavish, eccentric, or as warped as he had once led me to believe, it was simply an old, rundown warehouse. I could hear the thrum of machinery. Empty glass tubes, seemingly large enough to hold an adult, were stacked in the corners awaiting use. This place may appear run down, but my instincts told me otherwise.

I didn't know what to do. I couldn't simply kill him. I was a Seeker after all. But I couldn't just leave him here, nor could I take him to one of the specially designed cells at Brimstone since I was on suspension. If, and when, he recovered, he would be pissed at me. He would be paralyzed for a while, though. At least I had that going for me.

I stared down at my bare feet and frowned. Crouching down next to the warlock, I lifted his feet and started to untie his shoes. "You're not going anywhere for awhile, Lucas, so I'm going to borrow your shoes. Okay?"

Lucas groaned in protest.

Pulling the white sneakers free, I sat on the cold concrete floor and pulled my robe aside. The smell of ozone tickled my nose, but I didn't pay any attention to it—although I should have. As I laced them on my feet, I heard what sounded like a rolling thunderclap. Glancing at the warehouse's dirty windows I could see stars through them. Confused, I stood up in the shoes that were easily two sizes too large.

Glancing straight up, I watched a heavy, black cloud roll along the roof toward us.

"Crud," I breathed.

A lightning bolt arced down instantly from the cloud and struck me solidly in the chest. The bolt would have probably stopped my heart, if it were actually still beating. Instead, it knocked me hard into concrete. As my head snapped forward, it bounced off the floor, and splitting pain roared through my skull. Rolling onto my side, I watched another lightning bolt slowly descend from the mystical cloud and wrap around Lucas' body like a hand. The bolt carefully lifted the injured Warlock and pulled him back into the cloud. Looking as if the cloud was rolling in reverse, it started to pull away. Within moments it, and Lucas, were gone.

Sitting up, I felt a surge of pain in my chest where the bolt had hit me. Holding my arm across my chest, I stood up with a grunt. Peeking inside my robe, the smell of charred flesh smacked my nostrils. A black scorch mark spread out just above my cleavage. The burn was cracked open angrily, letting blood spill over my tank top and down my chest.

By all rights, I should be dead. Something saved me. That was the only explanation that made any sense. Although my aching body and the pounding headache told a different story, I was lucky to still exist.

I looked down at the white shoes on my feet. At least it didn't take those. I sighed. I was going to need them to walk home. Returning my attention to the warehouse, I knew I better get out of here before who or whatever took Lucas decided to come back for me. Holding my arm across the burn on my chest, I hobbled painfully toward the only door I could see.

Chapter 18

I wasn't entirely sure where I was. From ground level, I couldn't see anymore than the dilapidated warehouses surrounding me. The glow from the downtown casinos seemed to spread evenly over the city giving me no clue as to which direction I needed to go. The wound in my chest ached each time I took a step. I could feel the blood cooling and becoming crusty on my skin. Constantly brushing my hair away from the sticky smear on my face, I was sure I either looked like a battered woman, or a deranged killer. I was betting on the latter.

This wasn't the first time I had drunkenly wandered down a darkened street with blood covering me, but each time I hoped it was the last. My mind swam with memories of a time when this was all I was. And how I hated myself for it. I was a killer. I was the wolf in sheep's clothing desperately wanting to be one of the flock while each night picking them off one by one. Even as the Warlock's blood swam in my veins rejuvenating me, keeping me alive, I hated myself.

Stumbling off the street, I tried to brace my arm against the side of a nearby building but misjudged the distance and missed. Tumbling to the ground, I felt the edge of a broken bottle dig into my forearm.

Snapping away from the sharpness, pain ripped through my chest again. Scooting myself up against the wall, I drew my legs tight to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. I was a mess, and the sun would be up soon. I felt tears streak down my bloody cheeks. I knew what was troubling me so deeply, yet I refused to face it.

This was the first time I tasted human blood in ten years. But that wasn't the burden weighing heavily on my soul, was it? It was more troubling that I enjoyed it.

I knew this wasn't who I was anymore. I knew it in my soul. I had to do it. Lucas hadn't given me any choice. It was either him or me. He was going to kill me, I assured myself. It was self-defense. Letting my head fall back against the cold veneer of the wall, the familiar tingling sensation of fresh blood in my fingertips sickened me. The urge to retch gripped me, but my body wouldn't surrender any of the blood.

The sound of breaking glass caught my attention and a familiar scent hit my nose. I was so engulfed in myself that I hadn't even heard the car pull up to the curb. Looking up, I saw a dark form standing before me. It reached its hand down to me and waited.

How I wanted it to be Toby offering to scoop me up into his arms, but it wasn't.

As I took the offered hand and slowly stood up, another bolt of pain ripped across my chest. Grunting and leaning over slightly, I looked into the shadow's face still hoping to see Toby's salt-and-pepper hair and big brown eyes. I was met with Maynard's visage instead.

"Are you all right, Rose?" His voice sounded deeply concerned.

I shook my head at Maynard's question, but knew I would live. "Where did you come from?"

"That isn't important right now," Maynard assured me. "I'm just happy to see you alive." He paused. "Well, *stillexisting* anyway."

As the Dendro Demon placed his hand tenderly on my shoulder I felt a slight prick. I shook it off thinking it was another piece of the glass I fell in. Starting me away from the building, I could see Maynard's car waiting just beyond the curb, its doors open and the headlights still on. "Come on, we've got to get you out of here. Sun will be up soon."

In no condition to argue, I nodded.

Maynard poured me gently into the passenger seat of his luxury sedan. As he shut the door, my fingers found their way down to the adjustment controls. I pushed the silver switch with my thumb and listened to the motors whine as the seat leaned back. Maynard slid into the driver's seat and closed his door with a satisfying thump. As he snapped on his seatbelt, he shifted the vehicle into gear and slowly accelerated. Pulling my robe tight, I closed my eyes.

The ride was thankfully quiet. Maynard didn't use the radio, instead opting to leave his window slightly cracked to enjoy the sounds of the night. I listened to the rhythmic thump of the tires on the asphalt and found it somehow soothing. The soft rocking of his high-quality suspension seemed to diminish the blood euphoria in me. My body started to feel very, very relaxed.

Opening my eyes, I watched the lights pass by the window. Somewhere we had merged onto the freeway and the lights of downtown Vegas seemed distant and unimportant. We were heading out of town and I just wanted to go home, even though I knew that was the last place I should be. If Lucas

could take me right out of my bedroom, it wasn't safe anymore.

It hit me. I turned to Maynard and grabbed his arm. "Toby?"

"Christ, Rosy," Maynard complained, breaking free of my grip. He took a breath, "Toby is fine. He alerted me when he found you weren't in your room. We've been searching all over Vegas for you."

"That little devil," I said quietly, allowing a major smile to grow on my face. The wolf was coming into my room to take advantage of me. I pulled my mind out of the gutter and back to the conversation.
"How long were you looking?"

Maynard sucked in an uneasy breath. Focusing his eyes on the road ahead, he seemed distant. He was avoiding the question.

"Maynard," I said persuasively, "how long have you been looking for me?"

As the Dendro changed lanes and snapped off his turn signal, he slowly turned and looked at me. "Two days."

I fell speechless. Certain I had said goodnight to Toby and gone to bed no more than an hour ago, I couldn't understand how I had lost two entire nights. I glanced down at the glowing green digital clock in Maynard's dashboard in hopes an answer would be found there. I finally looked back at Maynard. "That can't be right."

"Listen, Rosy, why don't you put your head back and rest?" Maynard suggested. "We'll meet up with the others at my ranch and I'll explain everything."

I didn't like being kept in the dark. Sliding back into my seat, I noticed the lights of Las Vegas were growing dimmer. We were heading *way* out of town. My brow furrowed. Rolling back over, I eyeballed Maynard. "You have a ranch?"

Maynard laughed at the question. "Get some rest, Rose. I think you're going to need it."

I nodded. I wasn't sure why, but I felt exhausted. Leaning my head back against the comfortable leather headrest, I fell quickly asleep.

Chapter 19

Lifting my head from the pillow, I became aware of a puddle of drool that had accumulated there. Wiping it away with more than a hint of embarrassment, I sat up in bed and looked around the room. I vaguely remembered Maynard carrying me in here and shutting the shades tightly. One of his guest rooms, I guessed. Tall green potted ferns sat in every corner. I wondered for a moment why a tree Demon would keep potted plants. *Wasn't that akin to some form of slavery to their species, or perhaps kidnapping? Maybe he was holding these ferns against their will.*

Trying to shake the cobwebs from my mind, I let that train of thought depart the station without a second look.

Once I managed to sit up, I pulled my legs up Indian style. As I arched my back and stretched, a slight

tingle of pain skittered up my sternum. I looked down to inspect the wound, but realized I wasn't wearing the same clothes I had arrived in. Slightly amused, I gazed in awe at my new ensemble. A bulky pair of gray sweats wrapped around my legs while a simple white t-shirt covered my chest. Someone had cleaned me up and changed my clothes sometime while I slept. I must've really been out of it. I glanced quickly into the shirt collar to see that my black tank top was gone. Whoever had done this had got a quick peek, too. I nervously pulled the waistband of the sweats out and found, to my relief, my black panties were where they should be. At least they had kept some of my dignity intact.

I pulled the t-shirt up and noticed the wound had nearly healed. Only a dark bruise and a slight red crease wiggling up toward my collarbone remained. Almost all of the scorch marks, and the cuts on my arm from the glass were gone as well. Which made me wonder how long had I been sleeping.

With another tentative stretch, I turned and slid off the edge of the bed into the thick carpeting. As I stood, a wave of dizziness washed down from my skull. Teetering, I braced my hand against the wall and closed my eyes. I waited for the feeling to pass. Licking my lips, I pressed my hand to my forehead. Usually after feeding, I felt ready to take on the entire world. This time, however, I felt like everyone in the world had taken turns kicking the crap out of me.

"Must've been something I ate," I moaned, thinking of Lucas.

I had never fed from a Warlock before—or anyone magical for that matter. Perhaps there was something about them that gave Vampires a sour stomach. Maybe it was the blending of human and Inhuman physiology that created them. Unlike Witches, Warlocks weren't exactly human anymore. Or perhaps it was merely the power that coursed through his body. By ingesting his blood, I had taken some of that into me. Magic users had to train for years to make their bodies capable of channeling massive amounts of power. Maybe I simply couldn't handle it. That seemed like the most obvious answer.

Once I opened my eyes, I stumbled toward the door unevenly. With each step I took, I started to feel a bit more like myself. Placing my hands on the door to steady myself, I heard voices on the other side. I pressed my ear gently to the door and listened. Clearly making out Maynard and Toby among them, they seemed to be in a very serious discussion. I felt myself smile at the sound of my partner's voice. My frown quickly faded as I heard Karl's helium inflated intonation, and then Elena's.

What is she doing here?

Twisting the knob, I slowly pulled the door open. The bedroom opened into the massive living room dominated by dark wood, brick, and glass. The far wall was constructed completely of glass and stretched up to the top of the room's cathedral ceiling. Beyond the glass barrier was a lush, green garden that didn't seem to belong at all in this harsh, desert climate. An atrium filled with numerous quaky trees and flowers was on the far side masking a mostly open staircase. Four large black couches were arranged in a square in the center of the room with an equally impressive stone coffee table between them.

Toby propped his elbow on the arm of the couch and smiled softly. "Morning, Rose."

I nodded to my partner with a smile as I walked into the living room. Toby, Maynard, and Elena each sat on their own couch, while Karl paced eagerly around a jar containing the captured Sprite on the coffee table. I gravitated toward the side of the room that contained Maynard and Toby. Elena sat motionlessly staring at me. She had been ever since I emerged from the bedroom. A dark bruise still clung to her throat where I had choked her a few days before. Realizing I was staring at it, she buttoned up the collar of her blouse and lowered her gaze.

Maynard stood and placed his hand on my shoulder. I remembered the slight sting I had felt the last time he did that, but didn't feel anything this time. He guided me toward the couches. "How are you feeling?"

"A little off," I admitted. "I don't feel exactly like myself."

"Yeah," Maynard said with hesitation, "sorry I had to tranq you."

"You tranquilized me?" I asked in disbelief.

"When I found you," Maynard glanced warily to Toby and then back to me, "you were hurt and had just fed. I just wanted to make sure *both* of us made it back here safe." He paused. "You're a Seeker, Rosy. You would have done the same thing."

I considered his logic for a moment and finally agreed. An injured Vampire is dangerous. We have a tendency to lash out at whoever's near, no matter if they're friend or foe. Add that to the blood euphoria I was feeling and Maynard was completely justified in tranquilizing me. He was right about another thing. If the situation were reversed, I would have done the same.

"How long do the affects of this stuff last?" I asked, running my fingers through my messy hair.

"Should be wearing off anytime now," Maynard answered. He slid down into his couch and crossed his legs.

Toby placed his hand gently on the small of my back as I walked past. It felt comfortable, yet somehow inappropriate in this setting. Sliding between the couch and coffee table, I perched on an armrest anxious to know what had transpired during my apparent abduction.

Apparently they were just as curious about me.

"What happened to you, Rose?" Toby leaned his elbows on his knees.

"Lucas Nash," I answered.

Elena sat forward quietly studying me, her curiosity piqued.

"He wanted to know what Chithula told me," I explained. "When I wouldn't tell him, Lucas tried to kill me."

"Bullshit," Elena spat.

I looked up at the Witch with eyes wide. "Excuse me?"

"That's total bullshit," Elena repeated, her words dripping with venom. "Lucas Nash, despite his questionable Warlock heritage, has always used his power justly. He has even consulted with the Syndicate on several occasions with exceptional results."

Maynard sat back in his couch eyeing us warily. He wasn't going to intervene. Yet.

"It was Lucas," I assured. "He took me right out of my bedroom."

Elena cocked an eyebrow. "Where's the proof?"

She was right. I didn't have any. It was simply a matter of my word.

"I think you're lying," Elena accused angrily.

I shot up from my seat. "What?"

"You heard me. I think you had some sort of vampy craving and wandered off in the middle of the night," Elena theorized. "But you bit off more than you could chew and got your ass kicked. And now you're trying to blame it on Lucas."

"How can you accuse me of that?" I asked in disbelief.

"He sent a swarm of Sprites to kill us," Toby pointed out.

"You don't know that," Elena countered. "From what you and the Goblin said about the interrogation of this creature—and might I add *illegal* interrogation—it would have said anything to save its life. It gave you Lucas' name and suddenly the same person snatches the Vampire out of her apartment?" She crossed her arms. "I find it a little hard to swallow."

"Ease up, Crusty," Karl said, charging across the table toward Elena. "Those friggin' Sprites did try to kill us! I was there." He stepped back and kicked the Sprite's jar for good measure. "And suckhead may be a cold-blooded killer, but she isn't a liar." The Goblin let his words die realizing he was defending me.

Spinning on his heels, he gave me the hairy eye. "Wait a minute. You hate me. Why the hell am I defending you? She's a liar and a bigot!"

"Shut up, Karl," I spat out of habit.

"All right," Maynard said, finally intervening. "I've heard enough. Knock it off," he looked to me and then to Elena, "*both of you.*"

I looked angrily at Maynard while pointing at the Witch. "What is *she* doing here anyway?"

"She's here to help," Maynard said with a grin. "And you should be grateful for that."

My mouth dropped open. "What?"

"She got your and Toby's suspensions dropped," Maynard explained.

Lifting my hands in surrender, I dropped back onto my couch. Apparently I had been taken from my reality and returned to Bizarro World. "I don't understand."

Maynard held up his hand and nodded. "Be patient." He reached into his pocket and produced two black billfolds. Flipping them open, he revealed our gold badges and Brimstone identification cards. Setting them on the coffee table, he slid them to us. "I sent her in to take a look at that Vampire nest. She confirmed your conclusion that a Cleaner Witch couldn't have created that magnitude of spell. She also found that the Vampire we have in lock up, Garrett Asp, was the former nest's Master. He corroborated the facts in exchange for a plea bargain."

I knew all of this. But beyond my conclusions about the nest's fate, I hadn't reported any of it to

Maynard. That was my bad. Now Elena was getting credit for my discovery. I looked to Toby who only shrugged. He knew what I was thinking and had probably already pleaded our case to Maynard. It was pointless to argue. Let the old Witch claim the credit. At least we weren't suspended anymore.

"Elena also learned someone was conducting experiments on the Vampires of the nest," Maynard added.

I sat forward. That was new. "What kind of experiments?"

"I don't know," Elena said, taking over the debriefing. "The Vampire Asp had never been personally subjected to the tests. He only heard about them secondhand from the Vampires in his brood."

"How do we know he isn't lying?" Toby asked.

"He was paid a great deal of money to look the other way and not report them to Brimstone," Elena explained. "We have the bank records to corroborate that claim."

"Who was paying him off?" I asked curiously.

"That," the witch paused, "I don't know. The deposits were from a company that doesn't seem to exist. It was listed as *Cantrix Unlimited* of Las Vegas. I think it was a front."

"Obviously," I concluded with a sharp snap. I was angry with Elena for getting further in my investigation than I had, but I was more preoccupied with chasing Demons in the middle of the Nevada desert. "Did Vlad—" I stopped and bit my tongue. No one else would know him by that name. "Did Asp say anything at all about the tests?"

"Just that once a week a different member of his brood would be taken and returned the next night," Elena answered. "That's it."

That was troubling information. I thought of the Vampire Luke I had Franked and what he said about being taken. Seems it wasn't the ramblings of the dead after all. I looked to Elena and swallowed my pride. "Thank you."

That was apparently the magic word the Witch had been waiting for. With a smug grin on her face like the cat that just swallowed the canary, she relaxed her posture slightly and leaned back into the cushy couch.

Maynard scooted forward, grabbed several colored folders on the coffee table, and tossed them to me. "Here's the kicker: this isn't an isolated event."

I eagerly snatched the folders up and began to leaf through the pages inside. They were all standard Seeker Incident Reports. As I scanned over them, a pattern started to develop. The Inhuman species being killed may have been different, but the outcome was always the same. "How many times has this happened?"

"Four times in the past six months," Maynard answered. "All in Vegas."

There was a slight air of guilt in Maynard's voice. I looked down at the bottom of each Incident Report and understood why. He had assigned each mission, and signed off on the reports.

"I didn't know," the Dendro said in defense.

"How could you?" I asked, hopefully placating him. "You take your orders just like everyone else. But who's giving those orders?" I looked back down at the reports. "Says a pack of Werewolves was killed." I flipped the page. "Another Vampire brood, and two Demon nests. You think these other nests were being used in the experiments, too?" I asked, trying to connect the dots.

"Obviously," Elena snapped, echoing my earlier assessment.

I nodded. I deserved that one. I set the folders on the table and looked squarely at Maynard. "What's the plan, Chief?"

"I want you, Toby, and Elena to get to the bottom of this," Maynard instructed.

I felt my heart sink at the Witch's inclusion. This was *our* case. I tried to hide the quick flush of anger.

"I'll put every resource I can at your disposal. But a word of warning," Maynard added ominously. "Keep this one quiet. Something odd is happening at Brimstone and I want to know what the hell it is." Standing, he paused and looked at us. "Daylight's burning, Seekers," he said finally. "And get that annoying Goblin out of my home." Turning, he started toward the stairs behind the atrium.

Karl started to retort, but I quickly grabbed him and slapped my hand over his mouth. "He *will* kill you," I warned him. "Do you understand?"

Karl, cradled in my arms like a baby, nodded. I kept my hand over his mouth for good measure, or at least until Maynard was out of earshot.

I looked from Karl, to Elena, and finally to Toby. "We have a lot of work ahead of us. We should probably get on it."

Elena stood and started toward the front door. "I have my own leads." She shot a nasty glance over her shoulder. "Try to stay out of my way." Marching out into the darkness, she slammed the door behind her.

Karl pulled my hand away. "What a crusty bitch."

Setting the Goblin on the couch next to me, I nodded. "You can say that again."

"What a crusty bitch," Karl repeated with a wide grin.

Dropping my head, I sighed. *Should've seen that coming.* I looked at Toby. "Did you happen to bring some spare clothes from my apartment?" I tugged on the t-shirt. "These aren't mine."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Toby confessed. "When Maynard brought you in, all I had were his clothes. I grabbed a suitcase today. It's in the guest room."

So it was Toby who saw me nearly naked. I would have to remember that. I returned my attention to the colored folders on the coffee table before me. "Theories?"

Toby thought for a moment. "This is just damned weird," the wolf admitted. "Someone is experimenting on Inhumans? Why?"

"That's a good question," I admitted.

"I think it's aliens," Karl stated seriously. "They're bored of abducting and butt probing humans, so now they've moved on to Inhumans." He paused, probably waiting for our applause. Instead, he found both Toby and I simply staring at him in awe. "What?" he said, lifting his arms. "Area 51 is just down the road! That's UFO central, baby. It makes sense to me!"

"Karl," I said exasperated. I couldn't even finish the scolding.

Toby scooted closer on the couch and patted me on the thigh. "What do you think, Rosy?"

"I think..." I ran my hand through my hair while I processed the details in my brain. A thought occurred to me. "I think we need to recover the Vampires' bodies from that nest."

Toby took a moment, but nodded in agreement. "Thinking fun with science?"

I smiled. "It's dissection time, kids."

"I don't want to cut open a dead suckhead. That's freakin' gross." Karl slid off the couch and started toward the bathroom. "I think I'm gonna hark."

Chapter 20

It was cool, yet unforgiving in its hardness. Making no false presumptions of its use, it simply stood quietly in the center of the room. Running my hands over the perfect silver surface of the examination table, I couldn't ease the feeling of dread that tugged at me. I wondered how many humans and Inhumans this table had supported with their bodies unceremoniously sliced open in the pursuit of justice. Certain the number was staggering, I stepped away.

The autopsy lab resided deep within the Brimstone building. Despite how well lit the room was it still seemed as if darkness clung to this place, like the very hand of death hovered just below the ceiling. The fluorescent bulbs above buzzed as they spilled their harsh green-hued light over the lab's sterile veneer. Mint green counters, matching the tile on the floor, occupied every flat surface. My gaze wandered the floor until it settled on a large, silver drain in the center. It was where they washed the blood and chunks of flesh that spilled on the floor. I wasn't entirely certain why this room unsettled me so. It was a room like any other, yet its purpose seemed undeniably macabre. Perhaps it was because this room's function was bound unbreakably to death.

As if fingers had snapped, an epiphany explained my fear. As a Vampire, I had been the cause of death more times than I wished to remember, but there was something different in facing my own mortality. I've never done so, nor would I hopefully have to anytime soon. Yet this room reminded me that all things must end. Even for me. Someday I would die. There was no escaping that.

I didn't want to think about it anymore.

Luckily, Dr. Yazgren walked through the double doors just in time to take my mind off it. Yazgren, known around the office as "Yaz," was a short, portly man with an obvious Asian pedigree. A traditionally trained Shaman, Yaz had also completed medical school making him one of the few Inhumans capable of treating both humans and Inhumans. A Sudis Demon, Yaz was basically human in

appearance, but capable of growing long, metal spikes anywhere on his body. Generally a peaceful species, Sudis use the spikes for defense like a porcupine. In the time I had spent with him, I had found Yaz to be brilliant, yet deeply spiritual. It was an uncommon amalgamation of higher thought and beliefs.

"Ms. Webb," Yaz greeted me as he moved to the cupboards directly behind the examination table. Opening the doors, he then started to remove the instruments of his trade. "I hear I have a Vampire for a patient tonight." He turned slightly and grinned. "It wouldn't happen to be you, would it?"

"No," I replied perhaps a little too quickly, not realizing he was teasing me. I probably had that sick puppy dog look on my face. "Toby should have your patient here in a moment."

Yaz laughed softly. Grabbing a box of rubber gloves, he set them on the mint counter and pulled two free. "How've you been?" he asked as he snapped the gloves on.

"I've had worse days," I stated, "but I can't recall when." I smiled politely hoping he wouldn't press the issue. "You?"

"Got to visit my daughter in Tulsa last week," he said with a broad smile. "She's grown into such an amazing person and so far, not a hint of Sudis."

I knew his ex-wife was human, but I didn't know he was hoping his daughter would be too. "How old is your daughter now?"

"Five," Yaz, the proud papa, answered. "Growing like a weed."

"When did you first display your," I paused trying to find the right word, "Sudis-ness?"

"When I was eleven months old." Yaz smiled. His eyes were soft, warm, and grandfatherly yet there was an ever-present glimmer of intelligence. "My parents found me spiked into my crib. Took a hacksaw to get me out." He laughed.

I nodded and started to pace around the exam table. Despite Yaz's presence, this room was still giving me the heebie-jeebies. "How do you work in here?"

Yaz turned and looked at me with a bone saw in his hand. "What do you mean?"

"This is all so," I said with a shiver, "grisly."

The doctor cocked an eyebrow. "*A Vampire* who's having trouble being in an autopsy lab? That seems a little odd, don't you think?" Setting the bone saw on the counter, he leaned back and studied me. "Your whole existence is based around death. You must embrace death to continue your existence. You cheat death in that you are, for all intents and purposes, immortal," he essayed. "*You are* death. Slip a dark cloak on, and slap a scythe in your hand, you could*be* the Grim Reaper."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, then let out with an uncomfortable laugh. He was right. I was obviously a psychologically damaged Vampire. Oddly enough, that didn't bother me so much. "Kind of like a pilot being afraid to fly."

Yaz considered my analogy for a moment and finally nodded. "That would qualify I suppose." He realized the question was making me uncomfortable and turned back to his tools. "Ever seen a Krylbrea Demon?"

"Can't say that I have," I said, relieved he'd changed the subject. "Don't think I've ever heard of that species either."

"Nasty buggers." Yaz laughed. "Black and armor plated. Built like tanks." He turned to me and pulled back the sleeve of the white frock he wore. "They have a bony protrusion on their forearm that a tentacle shoots out of." He pointed to his own wrist as a visual aid. "Can crush anything. Had to put four exam tables together just to get it in here," he said in amazement.

"Wow," I said, feigning interest. "Where did this beastie come from?"

"Reno of all places," Yaz said, then laughed. "Two Vampire Hunters tagged it."

Vampire Hunters... the words gave me a chill. I had almost forgotten they existed. Usually I was the hunter, not the hunted. Luckily I hadn't run into any. Yet.

"We were the closest Syndicate branch, so it fell to us to store it before the Mages could send it back to its own dimension," Yaz continued. "Since it was already dead, I took the opportunity to see what made it tick. Fascinating creature. Has five hearts."

"That's amazing," I said half-heartedly. *Where the hell is Toby?*

As if on cue, the double doors burst open and Toby strode in with a black body bag slung over his shoulder. "Hey, Yaz," he said cheerfully. "Where do you want our guest?"

"Hello, Toby." Yaz patted the silver examination table. "Here will be fine."

As Toby set the body bag on the table the doors opened again, but I didn't see anyone come in.

"Sure, just *slam* the door in my face, puppy."

Karl. Great. I specifically instructed Toby to take the Goblin home before he retrieved the Vampire body. The wolf and I were going to have a serious discussion soon.

Yaz chuckled. "Hello, Karl. How's the family?"

"Numerous and belligerent." The Goblin laughed.

I furrowed my brow. "How do you know Karl, Yaz?"

"We play poker Tuesday nights," Yaz replied.

I crossed my arms. *Seems like everyone is playing poker Tuesday nights. Where was this mythical game held, and why wasn't I invited?*

As Toby circled around the table to stand by me, Yaz unzipped the bag. I instantly recognized Luke's face. It seemed he was going to help me yet again. The holes in its neck I had created with the bolts were easily visible and a trickle of the purple concoction I poured in his mouth still clung to his chin. The stick I had used to stake him was still partially exposed in his chest.

"How long has this Vampire been dead?" Yaz asked as he looked over the body.

"About a week," I answered. "Is that a problem?"

"That's going to make this autopsy a bit more difficult," Yaz placed his fingers on Luke's face and started to examine the holes in his neck. "A Vampire's body breaks down very rapidly after death. We're lucky he's still in one piece."

"I can't see," Karl complained as he climbed up onto a plastic chair then onto a nearby countertop. Rolling onto his tippy toes, the Goblin tried to get a good look at Luke. "That's disgusting. Better start moisturizing, honey," he said to me, "or you'll look like that soon."

Putting my hand behind my back, I gave Karl the one finger salute.

"Hey!" the little Goblin yapped in protest. "That's not very polite."

With a giggle, I returned my attention to Luke's body on the exam table. With the bag fully removed, Yaz started to cut away the dead Vampire's clothes with a heavy pair of shears. Sometimes I wished Vampire deaths were more like in the movies where they burst into flames or turned into dust when staked. It would be a lot easier to clean up than a pile of bodies.

"I can tell you already this isn't a normal Vampire," Yaz said as he pulled Luke's shirt away. "Look here," he said, pointing to a decaying hole in the abdomen. The edges of the hole were blackened and peeling back revealing bone where there shouldn't have been any. Yaz tapped on the bone with his knuckle. "Seems this Vamp has internal armor."

"What?" I asked, stepping closer, trying to ignore the terrible stench of death.

"It's an exoskeleton." Yaz pulled the flesh back slightly to reveal more of the bone. "It's hinged to allow full range of motion. My Gods," he breathed, peering deeper inside, "the musculature has been completely transformed to accommodate the plates. He has new muscles and ligaments to control them. Incredible."

"This suckhead is more of a freak than you are, Rose," Karl said as he poked me in the back with a tongue depressor he had discovered.

Snatching the Goblin's new toy, I snapped it in two and tossed it in the corner. He stuck out his bottom lip sullenly and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

Toby pulled his hand away from his nose and mouth for a moment. "Is it possible this is a natural mutation?"

Yaz considered the question for a moment. "No, I don't think so. Vampirism takes hold in organisms a bit differently in each case, so no two Vampires are exactly alike," he explained, "but there has never been a documented case of a mutation this dramatic. Doesn't seem to offer much more protection though." He noted the stake I had driven into Luke's heart. "So I'm not certain what purpose the plates serve. They seem almost too thin to do any good." He pulled a penlight out of his breast pocket and clicked it on.

"What could cause this, Yaz?" I asked, staring at the exposed bony plate.

"I have no idea," he answered as he peered into the Vampire's mouth. "Fangs seem normal, I don't—"

He paused as he pulled Luke's upper lip back. "Hold the phone."

I took a step closer.

"This Vampire has no venom glands," Yaz said as he stared into its mouth. "At least none that I can see." He ran his finger over one of Luke's fangs. "Yeah, this one couldn't make Vampire venom. All Vampire fangs have hollow centers and tiny holes in the tips to inject their neurotoxin." He tapped Luke's fang. "This one's solid as a rock." He paused and looked at the mystery before him. "This one definitely isn't a stock model."

"I need to know how this was done to him, Yaz." I stepped back from the body. The smell was becoming overpowering.

Yaz nodded. "I would like to know the same thing. This is damned strange." He looked from the body back to me. "Give me until tomorrow night. That should give me enough time to complete the autopsy and toxicology screen."

"Thanks, Doctor," I said with a nod.

Turning away from the body, I started pushing Toby toward the doors. Once outside, I waved my hand before my nose to bring in clean air.

"Boy," Toby said with a sniff of his shirt, "that stuff really stays with you."

I could smell the odor on Toby as well. It was faint, but it was there. "You stink."

"You're no spring daisy either," Toby shot back.

"And I thought," Karl said, bursting through the double doors with his fingers pinching his nose shut, "they smelled bad on the outside."

I caught myself smirking at the Goblin's Han Solo reference. I laughed to myself at the thought of the little Goblin watching *Star Wars*. Dammit, I was starting to like him.

Toby cocked his head slightly trying to decipher what exactly I was laughing at. Seeming to let it go, he returned his attention to the mystery at hand. "What now, Rosy?"

"I want you and the little green thing to find out everything you can about that fake company that was paying off Vlad, Cantrix Unlimited," I instructed. "That seems to be our only lead."

"Little green thing?" Karl fumed. "That the best you got, suckhead? My grandmamma can sling better insults than that. And she's *dead!*"

Toby laughed and returned his attention to me. "What are you going to do, Rosy?"

"I want to visit the other nests that were wiped out," I answered. "Maybe I can find answers there."

"What about Overseer Sumner?" Toby asked. "Are we going follow up on the Ifrit's tip?"

I sighed. "I don't know what to do with that yet. We can't simply walk into Sumner's office and ask him if he's part of some kind of conspiracy. We need more information first."

"Okay." Toby understood. He placed his hand tenderly on my shoulder. "Be careful, Rosy. Apparently you're on someone's hit list."

I smiled. "I will." I squeezed his hand gently for reassurance.

Watching Toby and Karl walk down the hallway, I crossed my arms and leaned against the wall. I didn't like the way this investigation was shaping up. Someone was experimenting on Inhumans and then using Brimstone to clear the evidence.

Why were they experimenting on Inhumans in the first place? What was their goal? How was Lucas Nash involved? And how did the rebellion and Overseer Sumner Chithula spoke of about fit into the picture?

Too many questions ... But I was going to find out. And I needed help to do it.

Pushing away from the wall, I turned and walked briskly away from the autopsy lab.

Chapter 21

"I'm going to get annoyed with you really quickly," Crash warned me as he stepped out of my car. "I was watching my stories and you drag me out to this old house in the middle of bloody nowhere?"

Pulling my leather jacket out of the way, I slipped the holster onto the waistband of my jeans and ran my thumb over the cool metal of my weapon. It seemed somewhat comforting to have my Beretta back again. "You were sitting in your apartment watching soap operas." Closing the car door, I circled around to stand next to Crash. "Those things rot your brain."

"Yeah? Well I've got a whole DVR full of *Days of our Lives* that says differently." He smiled. "You'd like it I think. They did a bunch of episodes where Marlena was a Vampire. She's a hot blond, just like you."

I shot the Raze Demon a cross look, even though he was the first person to refer to me as hot in a long time. "Can we just do this?"

"It's your dime." Crash laughed. "This one isn't half as pretty as the last one you dragged me to though."

Crash was right. It looked like it used to belong to a rather nice neighborhood, but now the lawn and shrubs were dead, vagrants lived in nearby abandoned houses, while stray dogs wandered in and out of the house looking for their next meal. A pack of legal Werewolves once called this raised rambler home before it had been burned to the ground prior to Brimstone cleaning them out. Only a hint of the original stucco walls remained as the rest was blackened by fire. From my vantage point on the front walk, I could stare easily into the exposed basement through massive holes in the floor. However, it was an illusion. I could see the nearly hidden shimmering bands of color wash over it.

"The house is still there. I can see a couple of seams in the magic," Crash explained. "This spell isn't as complex as the one covering the Vampire's nest. Still don't think a Cleaner Witch pulled this one off," he stated. "Should have it down in a pinch."

"Do it," I breathed.

Shaking his hands like a safe cracker about to breach a vault, Crash revealed the red armor plating of his true form. Tugging on his trousers, he knelt down on the sidewalk and placed both of his hands flat on the concrete. Before us, the black husk of the house began to shimmer allowing a few scattered glimpses of its true form beneath. A wave of gold-hued energy rippled from Crash's hands and washed up the front of the house. As it reached the top, the wave folded back into itself and, with an audible *pop*, produced a shower of yellow sparks that rained around us. The illusion cracked and fell to the ground like shattered glass revealing the intact house beneath.

"Impressive," I said with a smile.

"Did that little fireworks show for you, love," Crash noted as he stood up. His hands were already disguised as human again. "Thought you might get a thrill out of it."

I couldn't help laugh at the charming criminal. "Thank you."

"I suppose you want me to go in with you again," Crash said without any reservation, "just in case."

I wasn't sure, but I think he was starting to enjoy working with me. Leaning close, I patted the Raze Demon on the shoulder. "I'd love the company, Crash."

"All right then," the Raze Demon started toward the house. "Let's quit mucking about on the front lawn and get inside."

"That's kind of odd," I paused and commented.

Crash stopped and looked back at me. "What?"

"That." I pointed up to the gable above the door. There, perched perfectly on the peak with its clawed fingers curling over the lip, was a large, black, grotesque, stone gargoyle. It peered down at us with horrible, wide eyes and its serpent tongue snaking from its mouth. "Don't usually see those in rural neighborhoods."

"Maybe the wolves thought it looked cool," Crash theorized. "And anyway, it's just a big rock," he said, turning back to the house. "Let's get this done."

I nodded but couldn't seem to take my stare from the statue. It was hauntingly beautiful and because of the three dimensional nature of it, it looked like it was watching me. Two sharp horns jutted straight up from its head while its batlike wings were folded neatly to its hunched back. The gargoyle's body was thin and wiry, but it seemed powerful nevertheless.

Finally pulling my attention away, I started up the front steps toward Crash. "At least this one isn't upside down," I noted as I unsnapped the safety loop on my holster.

With the masking spell gone, the scent of death hung heavily on the house. I wasn't certain if there were still bodies inside, or it was simply the lingering result of the Cleaners' work. Wrapping my hand around the door handle, I twisted slowly and carefully opened the door. I wasn't sure what to expect, but tried to be ready for anything. Werewolves were known for their extreme security measures to protect against intruders. An axe hinged to the roof behind a front door killed a Cleaner I knew. The booby trap was activated as soon as the Cleaner opened the door and it easily cleaved his skull in two. Peering up

through the crack in the door, I couldn't see any wires, hinges, or other devices that would spring a trap. Although that didn't mean there weren't any.

"Step back," I advised Crash as I pushed him out of the way with my arm.

"What's up, Seeker?" the Raze Demon asked curiously.

Standing out of the doorway, I pushed the door open. I heard a pop, and it was over before I even knew what happened. I stared at the heavy steel bar now embedded in the open door. It had been mounted to the right of the door, and somehow I triggered it.

"What the bloody hell is that?" Crashed asked, his mouth open in awe.

"Security measure," I answered. Ducking beneath the bar, I stepped inside the house.

"Can't they just buy an alarm like normal blokes?" Crash said, shaking his head as he followed me in.

The stench of death crashed into me like a tsunami. Decaying Werewolves were heaped in the front room while a nearly solid black cloud of flies buzzed angrily overhead. The tan carpet seemed to be undulating beneath my feet. Looking down, I realized it was a sheet of maggots. Clenching my teeth, I wrestled against the urge to retch.

"That's a lot of friggin' maggots," Crash stated soberly.

"Patrick," I gasped, pulling my hand away from my mouth just long enough to speak.

"Who?" Crash asked coolly, seemingly unaffected by the stench.

"Cleaner," I answered as professionally as I could. Captain Patrick Peterson's body was bent angrily backward over a dead Werewolf. A long, ornate stake that looked like it used to be a table leg was driven cleanly through his chest and out his back. His stern blue eyes were still wide with the final horror he saw. I thought of the raid he led on the Vampire nest that started all of this, then a thought occurred. "He shouldn't be here," I said, turning to Crash. "Patrick isn't dead. He signed off on the reports after this den was cleansed."

"Sounds like we've got a Patrick doppelganger running loose," Crash summarized.

That would certainly explain why he was acting so strangely that night. Over Crash's shoulder, I watched a pair of stony claws curl around the top of the doorframe. I didn't have time to mourn. I knew exactly what it was and sighed. "Crash," I said quietly, "you might want to armor up." I pointed behind him as I drew my Beretta.

"What the hell are you..." Crash stopped as he turned. Immediately his dark flesh melted away revealing the bony, red armor plates beneath.

The Gargoyle licked its toothy muzzle as it hung upside down in the doorway. Eyeing us with its horrible black and red eyes, it spread its wings and started to slowly crawl into the house. Saliva ran over its reptilian muzzle and dripped down into the maggots below. As the saliva hit, the maggots sizzled and died beneath the potent acid. If we moved, it would attack. If we didn't move, it would attack. Either way, we were boned.

Letting go of the roof, the Gargoyle snapped its head forward and let loose a bone-curdling screech. Flapping its massive wings, the stone creature righted itself and attacked with a swiftness that betrayed its weight. Hitting Crash dead center in the chest with its outstretched hind legs, both it and the Raze Demon hit the ground and rolled. Crash swung for the monster but missed. The Gargoyle screamed again as it lifted off Crash and caught me in its sights.

"Crap," I breathed.

Snapping my pistol up, I only had the chance to pull the trigger once before the Gargoyle hit me. Sparks flew off the monster's stony hide as the bullet ricocheted harmlessly away. We tumbled into a mass of maggots and dead Werewolves. I felt its talons dig into my chest as it pounced on me. Swinging hard, I felt my fist connect with a hollow *crunch*. Pain seared across my hand. As its head snapped back, I drew my broken hand back in pain. The Gargoyle looked down at me with pure evil in its eyes. Digging its talons in deeper, it lunged forward and clamped its muzzle onto my shoulder. As its teeth punctured, I could feel its acidic saliva burning my flesh. I screamed in agony as it started to shake its head like a dog with its favorite chew toy.

Amidst the screaming pain, I heard Crash's voice somewhere in the distance. "Rose!"

From above the Gargoyle, I saw Crash lunge at it like a Mexican wrestler off the top ropes. After landing on the monster's humped back, the Raze Demon grabbed its wings and held on. Crash closed his eyes and focused his Demon power, razing the monster's stony hide. The Gargoyle reared back and shrieked in pain as its wings were ripped away. Letting go of me, it snapped around and bucked ferociously trying to get Crash off its back. Crash began to pull chunks of the monster's hide and toss them away revealing the soft, green flesh beneath.

Crash hollered at the top of his lungs, "It's like the bloody rodeo, Rosy! Yee-haw!" He whooped with a faux Texan accent, "Giddy up, lil' doggie!"

Pain surged through my hand and shoulder. Scooping my gun off the floor, I shook the maggots free and stared at the Gargoyle with tears in my eyes and rage in my heart. "Hold him still, Crash."

Slipping around the Gargoyle, Crash threw his elbow into the monster's throat and pinned it to the wall. It snapped at the Raze Demon, but couldn't seem to get free.

Crash could have killed it, but this one was mine. Holding my wounded arm to my chest, every step seemed to hurt it. Lifting my Beretta, I aimed it directly at the Gargoyle's eye. The monster seemed to understand and screeched in defiance at me, but wouldn't turn away.

I pulled the trigger.

Green blood splattered out from the Gargoyle's eye as the bullet penetrated its brain. The stone shell, created to protect it, caused the bullet to ricochet inside of its skull. The Gargoyle whimpered as its brain was destroyed. Stepping back, Crash let it fall to the floor limp.

Turning and looking at my shoulder, I could hear the flesh still sizzling like frying bacon. It was gross and painful, but it wouldn't kill me. Holstering my pistol, I held my broken hand in front of me. Several of my knuckles were impacted causing my fingers to curl oddly. The flesh around them was already starting to swell. It was a classic boxer's fracture.

"Christ, Champ," Crash, again in human guise, commented. "You hit it hard enough?"

A laughed a little despite the overwhelming pain I was in. "I need to get back to Brimstone." I rolled my hand over and looked at my contorted fingers. "Hopefully the doctors can reset the bones."

Crash pointed at the dead Cleaner still lying in the corner. "What are you gonna do 'bout him?"

I turned and stared into Patrick's lifeless eyes. It was too late. "Leave him."

"What about the wolves?" Crash asked. "Isn't that what we came for?"

He was right. Glancing down at one of the dead Werewolves at my feet, I realized what I had to do. Kneeling down I grabbed the beast's massive wrist with my free hand and pulled the arm free. The sound of bones and tendons popping was disgusting, but it wasn't any worse than my still sizzling shoulder. "This should do," I said, tossing Crash the Werewolf's arm. "Let's go."

Crash looked at the dismembered arm in his hands and shook his head. "I hate it when she does that."

Walking down the stairs, I pulled my cell phone from my jacket pocket. Flipping it open, I scrolled through my contacts until I hit Toby's name. Pressing the send button, I pressed the slim, silver device to my ear. After three rings, I heard him answer. "It's Rose. Did you find anything on Cantrix?"

I frowned at his report.

"I'm headed back. Tell Yaz I have a new sample for him to start work on." I glanced down at my broken hand. "And you might want to have a medic standing by. I'm headed back."

Snapping the phone shut, I slipped it back into my pocket. Holding my hand to the door handle, I glanced at the den one last time. Didn't seem like a fitting resting place for Patrick. I would have to correct that. I know he would do the same for me.

"What do you want me to do with this?" Crash asked, holding up the Werewolf arm.

"Just toss it in the back," I said, sliding into the driver's seat. Pain raced up my arm making me cringe for a moment. Closing my eyes, I waited for the throbbing to pass. It wasn't passing. "Damn," I moaned.

Crash's face was worried as he slipped into the passenger seat and set the arm in back. "You going to be all right? You look like hell."

I gritted my teeth and nodded. "I'm taking you home then I have to get back to Brimstone." Black dots swarmed my vision. I fell forward and slammed my head against the horn.

Crash opened the door and ran around to my side. "How about I drive you to Brimstone and catch a cab home?"

"That's a much better plan," I said with my face against the steering wheel.

Crash wrapped his arm around my waist and carefully picked me up with a strength that astonished even me. Carrying me in his arms around the car, he gently put me in the passenger seat. I didn't even feel a twinge of pain as he moved me. Making sure I wasn't going to slip out, he shut the door and ran back around to the driver's side and jumped in.

Twisting the keys in the ignition, he turned to me and smiled. "That's two you owe me, Seeker."

Chapter 22

I yelped as Yaz reset my broken pinky with a solid crack. "What did you hit?" he asked with an amused look on his face. "A concrete wall?"

"Pretty close," I grunted.

I was already starting to feel a bit more like myself. The bones would knit thanks to my vampiric nature, but they had to be set to heal correctly. Didn't want to walk through the rest of my afterlife with terribly gnarled hands. And that's where the pain came in. Already having healed slightly during the trip from the wolves' den back to Brimstone, Yaz had to rebreak the bone and then set three of five metacarpals back into the proper position, which was difficult considering several of them had cleanly snapped in two.

Turning away for a moment, Yaz rummaged through a set of nearby drawers until he found a roll of heavy gauze. "I know there's no need to cast the break," he turned back to me, "but at least let me wrap it to give it a little more support." Without even waiting for my response, he started to roll the gauze around my hand and fingers.

I watched him roll the gauze around my hand with a confident ease from performing the task a hundred times before. "Any luck with the Vampire we brought in?"

"Beyond the mutations I found during my cursory inspection?" He paused. "No. I am still waiting for the toxicology to come back from the lab though. Should have the results tonight." He glanced at the Werewolf arm lying on a small, silver table. "I don't know if I'll be able to tell anything from the arm you recovered." Tearing a few pieces of tape from a nearby dispenser, Yaz finished my bandage. He looked up and started to peel away my leather jacket. "Now let me take a look at your shoulder."

Brushing his hand away, I scooted off the examination table. "I'm fine."

"You are not," Yaz countered. "You obviously have some severe tissue damage that even your Vampire physiology might not be able to repair."

I tried to ignore the pounding pain in my shoulder as he spoke. Of course he was right, but I didn't have time for that right now. "I appreciate the concern, Yaz, but I'll be okay."

He smiled. "Of that I have no doubt. Just let me take a look at it. I can tell by the way you're holding your body that you are in a great deal of pain."

Right again. I started toward the door and grabbed the handle. "Let me know if you find anything from the Werewolf arm."

"I can make it an order," Yaz warned me. "I have the right to revoke your Seeker status if I feel you are unfit for duty."

That was *exactly* what I didn't want to hear. Leaning my head against the wooden door for a moment, I let my hand slide off the handle. Slowly, I turned back to him. Yaz was right. It did hurt like hell. I was certain the Gargoyle had really torn me up. But if he looked and decided to take me off Seeker status, I

wouldn't have the resources to finish this case. I only had one option left. "Please," I asked softly, "don't do this."

Yaz's face was unrelenting as he stared at me, but in the silence, I think he and I came to an understanding. He wanted to know what was going on as much as I did, and I was getting closer to uncovering the truth. He finally relented. Turning away from me, he snapped off his latex gloves and started to wash his hands in a tiny sink that occupied the center of the counter.

Smiling, I carefully pulled on my leather jacket to mask the wound. Buttoning the coat up to hide the blood on my shirt, I grabbed the door handle. "Thank you."

He waved me out of the examination room without another word.

Medical, with an entire floor of the Brimstone building devoted to it, was quiet. Only the squeak of the nurse's shoes against the highly polished tile floor broke the silence. A circular, centralized nurse station occupied the center of the floor with wings heading off in three different directions. Each was a specialized section with its own staff, facilities, and usage. Medical was divided into general practice for common problems; a hospital for more traumatic conditions, and a laboratory wing constantly working to develop newer and better treatments for Inhumans.

Exiting the hospital wing, I nodded to the nurse station and headed for the bank of elevators on the far wall. My shoulder was throbbing angrily while my shirt and pants were torn and splattered with blood. I looked like hell. Holding my broken hand against my stomach I jabbed the elevator call button. Watching the red arrow above the door light, I stepped back and waited. Signaling their arrival with a tiny bell, the silver doors split open. Taking a step forward, my gaze settled on the lift's single occupant.

I stopped. "Elena." Her name escaped my lips before I realized I was speaking.

"In or out," the Witch growled.

I looked at her slightly confused, but realized what she was talking about. Pressing my good hand to block the closing door, I slid inside. I jabbed the button for my desired floor and pushed myself up against the wall opposite Elena. She stared unwavering at me, a glimmer of anger—or was it fear?—in her dark eyes. Hearing the lift chime, I felt the breaks release as we started to descend. I could've stayed quiet in our uncomfortable silence, but I didn't. Maybe somewhere in my warped brain, I thought she had changed. She had helped Toby and I, after all, and even provided Maynard with enough information to lift our suspensions. Maybe she was different.

I smiled as politely as I could. "How's the investigation?"

Elena remained quiet.

"Any leads?" I asked.

The Witch shot me a nasty glance.

"Listen, Elena," I breathed and took a step toward her. "I—"

The Witch yanked a wooden cross from the bag slung over her shoulder and stuffed it in my face. "Get back!" Elena roared.

With a sigh, I straightened my jacket. Pain pulsed through my shoulder, but I was angry enough to negate it. "Religious symbols don't repel me," I explained, bored with Vampire ignorance. Wrapping my fingers around the cross, I ripped it from her hand and broke it. "They just really piss me off."

She held her ground, but I could see the fear in her eyes. She had played her hand and lost, but that didn't mean she didn't have an ace up her sleeve.

I took a step back from her. "A Seeker would know that." Wait, she was one of Brimstone's top Seekers. *She did know that. Why did she pull a cross on me when she knew it wouldn't work? Why didn't she use her magic? Something wasn't right.*

My eyes wandered down to her throat where a white scarf was knotted tightly. With a movement too fast for her to react against, I slammed the Witch against the opposite side of the elevator and pinned her arms. She struggled against me but it was pointless. Grabbing the scarf, I pulled it away. My eyes changed to black as I stared at the flesh.

Nothing. Her throat was in perfect condition. No dark bruises or cuts from our fight, despite the fact it had been there earlier in the night. I looked up at the woman before me.

Elena screamed, "Get off of me!" She drew another breath into her lungs. "Help me! Anyone! Help!"

This wasn't Elena Ramirez.

My mind flashed back to Patrick Peterson's dead body at the Werewolf den. Someone was body-snatching Syndicate Operatives. *Why? What purpose did this replacement serve? Maybe Elena had gotten too close to the truth and she was eliminated?*

"Who are you?" I growled and flashed my fangs. "What did you do with the real Elena Ramirez?"

The elevator chimed and the doors slid open.

"Help!" Elena shrieked in terror again.

"Tell me!" I roared, clasp my hands around her throat. I felt a pop in my hand that Yaz had just set. I had broken the bone again but so much adrenaline coursed through my body I didn't feel any pain. "Tell me now!"

I felt a pair of arms snap around my midsection and another around my neck. The powerful arms ripped me away from Elena and out of the elevator. I felt my head snap forward and stars appear before my eyes as my skull hit the tile floor hard. Finally looking down, I saw the arms were muscular and covered with thick fur.

Werewolves. Crap.

One I had a chance against, but with two, I was in trouble. As easily as I had pinned Elena, they held me to the floor. I felt a massive, clawed paw wrap over my face and hold my mouth shut. Pushing with all of my strength, I couldn't loosen their grip. I felt the beasts roll me over and pull my arms behind my back. I felt the cold, hard slap of spelled handcuffs snap around my wrists. Pulling me up to my knees, I felt the wolf's hot breath on my face. Turning slightly, I stared into the massive muzzle and powerful yellow eyes.

"Take her to the detention area."

Snapping my head around, I focused on Maynard standing a few feet away. His face was contorted in anger.

I pulled my mouth free of the wolf's grip. "That isn't Elena," I protested. "Maynard, you have to listen to me. She's an imposter!"

Maynard turned his back on me. "Get her out of here."

"Maynard," I breathed his name in disbelief.

He dismissed the wolves with his hand. "Now."

I felt my heart sink as the wolves pulled me to my feet. *What the hell was going on here?* As the Werewolves started to escort me to the detention area, I turned and saw Elena being attended to by several workers. She wouldn't make eye contact with me.

I don't blame her. The next time I saw her, I would kill her.

Chapter 23

Everything was going awry. I had no idea where this investigation would take me, but I was fairly certain it wasn't a cell in the Brimstone Detention Area.

The keys on the guard's belt jingled loudly, echoing off the bare, drab, gray walls as he led me inside. A single, tall, check-in station stood in the center of the room with another guard manning it. Behind the check-in station, I could see my ultimate destination: the entrance to the cellblock.

"Name?" the guard asked. *Vampire*. I could almost see death's bony fingers wrapped around him as if ready to snatch him into its eternal embrace. He must be a fledgling. As time passes, I think death loses interest in most Vampires. It only clings to the new ones, waiting for them to make a mistake.

"Rose Webb," my escort answered, pulling my attention away from the Vampire. This guard was a Demon, but I couldn't put my finger on the species. The aroma of oak was strong on his flesh, very similar to Maynard. *Perhaps he was Dendro as well?*

The guard scanned down a notebook computer in his hands. Tapping his stylus on the screen twice, he nodded. "Ah, I have her here. Just added." He snickered ominously. "Interrogation room two." He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb to the cellblock.

Interrogation room? That seemed a little strange. If Maynard was following standard procedure, I should be taken directly to a holding cell while I was processed. At this point, multiple witnesses had seen what I'd done, as well as the director. There was no need for interrogation ... or so I thought.

"I'll buzz you in," the Vampire offered.

Walking past the station, the Demon guard waited for the cellblock door to be unlocked. As the alarm buzzed, he grabbed the door and propped it open. Shoving me inside, he wrapped his hand tightly around my arm as they were still cuffed behind my back and securely shut us in. I felt my heart sink as I

stared down the corridor at the glass doors that lined both sides. I had placed many Inhumans into these cages, but never once thought I would end up in one as well. As I was escorted through the cellblock, Inhumans inside leered at me behind the glass. If looks could kill, I would have been dead fifty times over by now.

Nearing the middle, I spotted Vlad standing just behind the glass with his hands clasped behind his back. A smarmy grin was spread across his pale lips. "Seeker," he greeted me almost pleasantly. "I hope they put you in a cell next to mine."

I tried not to, but couldn't help but cringe at the sheer toxicity of his tone. I dodged his glance and lowered my head like an animal being led to its death.

The Demon guard drew his nightstick and slammed it against the glass. "Shut it, leech."

Unflinching, Vlad continued to smile at me as I passed.

When we reached a door at the end of the hall, the guard unhooked the keys from his belt. Cycling through the color-coded keys with his thumb, he selected a bright red key, flipped it over in his hand, and then pushed it easily into the lock. Once he snapped the lock to the left, he pushed the door open and guided me through. Retrieving his keys, he returned them to his belt and shut the door, all while keeping a vice-like grip on my arm.

The rectangular room before us housed Brimstone's interrogation rooms. Two doors on each side led either to the interrogation room, or the observation booth. Personally, I thought the observation booth was the brainchild of screenwriters as a way of involving additional characters during a dramatic scene.

You know, when a detective is questioning a smooth criminal who may or may not have killed his wife/fiancée/sister. Unwilling to cooperate, the detective begins to beat the criminal with a phone book, supposedly so as to not create bruises, causing the other investigators watching through the one-way mirror to come rushing in and pull the detective kicking and screaming out of the room. It turns out, however, that the booths are becoming more and more common to ensure prisoners are being treated humanely.

Makes perfect sense ... to humans. They have more laws to protect criminals than to take care of the innocent.

Guiding me to the last door on the left, the guard opened it and pushed me inside. Behind the small, gray table and chairs bolted to the floor stood Maynard with his arms crossed. His gaze was decidedly hostile.

"Thank you," Maynard said to the guard. "I'll take it from here."

"Yes, sir." The guard nodded, backing up.

The guard closed the door and disappeared leaving me alone with Maynard. I wondered for a moment if there were additional investigators on the other side of the glass to ensure my safety.

Unfolding his arms, the Dendro pushed off the wall and walked around the table toward me. "Rosy," he said, digging into his pant pocket, "why do you do this to me?"

I cocked an eyebrow and stared at him. "Pardon?"

Pulling a single silver key from his pocket, he stepped behind me and grabbed my handcuffs. I heard the

ratcheting release sound and felt the pressure abate. After walking back around the table, Maynard dropped the cuffs and his key in a pile and sank down into one of the hard, metal chairs. He motioned for me to do the same. Warily rubbing my wrists, I swung my leg over the back of the chair and slipped in.

"You can't just attack people," Maynard growled, "especially other Seekers."

"That wasn't Elena," I countered. "It was an imposter, some kind of pod person."

"I know," Maynard replied coolly.

The next words clogged in my throat as my brain registered what had just been admitted. I hit rewind, pause, and began to actually listen instead of thinking of my next defense.

"Elena missed her check-in time this evening," Maynard explained. "That isn't like her at all. Unlike you, she's a by-the-book Seeker."

I let the not-so-veiled knock at me slip past without retort.

"Then she just shows up like nothing happened," Maynard continued, "but she's acting a little strange, not at all like herself. She even knocked over her altar candles."

My eyes widened. "The small ones on her desk she won't let anyone touch?" One of the cleaning personnel had accidentally tipped the candles once. When Elena found out who it was, they were promptly terminated.

Maynard nodded. "With all the weirdness, I posted heavily armed Cleaners at all exits and had two Seekers shadowing her."

"The Werewolves?" I asked, painfully remembering the beasts that yanked me out of the elevator.

Maynard nodded. "I was going to tell you but you found her before I could," he paused, "and overreacted."

"*Overreacted?*" I echoed angrily. "She pulled a cross on me in the elevator!"

"Oh," Maynard replied. He looked up at the mirror behind us and waved. "What tipped you that it wasn't really Elena?"

"That she pulled a cross on me in the elevator," I repeated. "The real Elena would've known that doesn't work. I also saw her throat," I added, pointing to my own. "No bruises."

Maynard understood. "From your little scuffle with her."

"Right." I nodded.

The door pushed open revealing Toby and Karl. They had apparently been the ones in the observation booth.

Toby patted me on the back as he moved past. "You really hate that Witch, don't you?" He leaned against the back wall with a laugh.

Karl skittered in behind the Werewolf and tugged on his jeans like a toddler. "Up."

"Oh," Toby recognized the command, "sorry." Snatching the Goblin carefully from the floor, he deposited Karl on the table.

"That's better," Karl said with satisfaction. "Way to go Mike Tyson on the Witch's ass." The Goblin laughed.

"That wasn't really Elena," I defended myself.

"They know," Maynard said quickly.

Karl beamed and nodded. Toby just shrugged.

"The *Goblin* knows?" I scoffed. "How am I out of the loop?"

"Because they check in like they're supposed to," Maynard snapped.

I crossed my arms in a huff and sank down into the chair. "She's not the only one," I added. "I found Patrick Peterson's body."

"The Cleaner who shot me?" Toby asked.

I nodded.

Maynard pinched his brow. "His body? I saw Patrick earlier tonight. How did he die?"

"Stake through the heart, oddly enough," I answered. "But by his body's level of decay, it looked like it happened a couple of weeks ago. The same night the Werewolves were killed."

"So Patrick is one of these..." Toby struggled for the name and finally turned to me. "What did you call them, Rosy?"

"Pod person," I answered. "From *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*."

"Pod person," Toby repeated, savoring the words. "So Patrick is a pod person too?"

"That's my guess." I frowned.

Maynard exhaled slowly allowing this new information to sink in. "I haven't noticed anything strange about Patrick."

"Yeah, you skin tubes are all alike," Karl commented. "I can't tell one of you from the others."

I shot the little Goblin a snide glance. He was just being a pain in the ass for no good reason, other than he was Karl. "The night of the raid," I said, "he didn't seem like himself. He disobeyed a direct order. The Patrick I knew would never do that."

"That would also explain why he brought charges against you." Maynard exhaled as the implications of this new information hit him. "What the hell is going on?"

"I wish I knew," I answered. "We have Inhumans being experimented on and now Seekers are being body snatched? This is a pretty disturbing revelation."

"Maybe they meant to do the same thing to you," Toby said.

I turned and looked at my partner. "What?"

"When Lucas took you," Toby answered. "Maybe they were going to replace you with a pod person but you managed to escape."

"Makes sense," Maynard concluded.

I felt a shiver run down my spine. The idea that there was a copy of me out there somewhere didn't sit well with me. I knew what I was capable of.

"So," Maynard said slowly, "is it possible Lucas Nash is responsible?"

"I don't know," I answered. "When I injured Lucas during my escape, I really felt like someone, or something, recovered him. I don't think he's acting alone," I summarized. "He's a Warlock, not a scientist. Lucas just doesn't strike me as bright enough for the pod people *and* the experiments."

"Maybe that's what he's experimenting on," Toby theorized. "Maybe Lucas is learning how to make pod people."

I studied the Werewolf for a moment. He was on to something. "But what about the mutations Yaz found in the Vampire you recovered?"

"You know, you can actually see the little hamsters in their training wheels spinning behind her eyes when she thinks," Karl laughed.

Reaching over, I flicked the Goblin off the table. I heard him smack the floor with satisfaction.

With a sigh, Toby reached down and scooped Karl off the floor and set him back on the table. The Goblin was holding his head. "That really hurts, suckhead."

"Good," I said. "Hush and it won't happen again."

Karl pressed his lips tightly together and motioned as if he were locking them and tossing away the key.

Maynard wiped his hand across his brow then down his face. "I don't like where this is going."

I took a moment then turned to Toby. "What did you two find out about Cantrix Unlimited?"

"We couldn't find anything on it," Toby answered. "It simply doesn't exist. There was no paper trail. We couldn't even track the deposits paid to Vlad."

I frowned. "So it's a dead end?"

"Not exactly," Toby smiled. "Karl did some research on the name."

The little Goblin smiled broadly.

"Turns out 'Cantrix' is short for Praecantrix," Toby explained. "It's Latin for Witch." He paused. "Or *Warlock*."

The connection seemed to be made. "So it is Lucas," I breathed. Adding up the facts in my mind, I shook my head. "But what about Overseer Sumner? Where does he fit into this?"

"The tip from Chithula," Toby reaffirmed. "I don't really know. I don't see how he's involved."

"Sumner's a Witch," Maynard said after a moment.

I didn't know that. "So Cantrix could be referring to him?" I considered. "That could be where your orders are coming from, boss."

Maynard nodded.

"He could be using his position to order the experiments," Toby theorized, "then have Brimstone Seekers clean up his mess."

"Stands to reason," I summed up.

"Good work," Maynard complimented. He thought for a moment. "I'll assign a Seeker to follow Elena and Patrick. Meanwhile, Rose, I want you, Toby, and Karl to find out where these pod people came from."

Karl beamed. That was the first time Maynard referred to him by his name.

"I want to know what the hell is going on out there and who is and isn't a pod person," Maynard concluded.

"Tall order." I nodded. "What about Lucas and Sumner?"

"My guess is when you find out what's going on, you'll find them," Maynard replied. He grabbed his handcuffs on the table and scooted them toward my partner. "Toby, cuff Rose."

My eyes widened. "What? You're leaving me in detention?"

"Sorry, Rosy." Toby walked around me and lifted me easily out of the chair to my feet. After he pulled my arms behind my back, I felt the click of cold steel as the cuffs were replaced.

"You can't just walk out of here unescorted," Maynard explained. "You attacked a Seeker—pod person or not—and I can only release you into Toby's custody. There are procedures to be followed," he added with a wry smile. Once he stood, he headed for the door. "I want answers. You three are the only ones I can trust." He eyed us warily, I think deciding if he actually believed the statement in light of these new developments. "Get me those answers." He opened the door and vanished.

Toby patted me on the shoulder again. "You heard the man. Move, prisoner."

I glanced over my shoulder at the wolf. "You're gonna pay for that."

Toby nodded with a grin. "I'm sure I will. Any idea what we're doing?"

A devious thought occurred to me then. I smiled as Toby led me toward the door. "I have a plan."

Chapter 24

"Are you sure this is the place?" Toby asked from the passenger seat.

As I slid my hand around the door handle, I smiled at the Werewolf. "Trust me."

"What a dump," Karl commented from the back seat.

Popping the car door, I stepped out into the cool air. Opening my arms I tried to stretch my tired body, but crumbled into myself as the pain receptors in my shoulder lit up like a Christmas tree. It was healing, but not fast enough. Slipping my hand beneath the coat, I held it over the bloody wound and realized it probably wasn't best to run around looking like this. Carefully peeling off my leather jacket, I folded it over my arm and walked around to the rear. I popped the trunk and looked inside. Moving the various bits of garbage out of the way, I spotted my spare bag of clothes pushed toward the back. I felt my shoulder ache again and I leaned in and reached for the bag.

"What are you doing, Rosy?" Toby asked as he walked around the car. He must've spotted my shoulder as he stopped short. "What the hell happened?"

I stood straight and looked at the massive bloodstains over my shoulder and down the front of my once white blouse. The shoulder was completely torn open revealing flesh that looked more like raw hamburger than anything else. I had even been forced to jettison my bra because the straps had been destroyed. I was a mess. In retrospect, I probably should have let Yaz take a look at it.

"Looks like you got in a fight with a lawn mower," Karl surmised as he stepped around Toby, "and lost."

Pulling my attention away from the shirt, I readdressed Toby, "Gargoyle." I unzipped the dark duffel bag and started to root through it.

"Gargoyle?" Toby grabbed my arm and pulled me up to face him, not realizing he had hurt me. I hid the pain surging down my chest and arm. "And when were you going to tell me?" He paused and looked into my eyes. "You weren't going to tell me."

"It's not a big deal," I said uncomfortably, not sure if it was his line of questioning or the searing pain in my shoulder that caused it. "I'll heal."

"It's not that," Toby said, shaking his head. "I'm your partner. You are supposed to tell me things like this."

I pulled away. "I didn't want you to worry. I'm fine. Not let it drop."

The argument wasn't going anywhere. I understood Toby's point, but we didn't have time for this. Diving back into the duffel bag, I snatched a thin, black sweater and pulled it free. Shoving my keys into my pant pocket, I tossed my jacket into the trunk and turned back to Toby. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I really am. Now turn around."

With a sigh, my partner turned his back on me.

I waited a moment for the Goblin to follow suit. "You too, Karl."

Karl kicked at the ground with his tiny boots muttering something under his breath. Begrudgingly, he turned away.

I quickly unbuttoned my blouse and pulled it off. The cool air felt good on my naked flesh for a moment. Looking down, I inspected where the Gargoyle's talons had torn into my chest and shoulder. I didn't realize how torn up I actually was. Tossing the bloody, torn shirt into the trunk, I carefully slipped the v-neck sweater over my head and pulled it on. It was a little more form-fitting than I usually liked to wear, but it was either this or the stained shirt. Nothing said 'crazed serial killer' quite like big blood splatters down the front of a person's shirt. Leaning against the bumper, I waited for the dull throbbing to stop. Standing up, I closed the trunk. "Okay," I breathed, "let's go."

"Where exactly are we going?" Toby asked as he turned back to me and followed me around the car.

"To meet the Maker." I smiled. "Grab the Sprite, Toby."

"The Maker?" Toby stopped and pulled open the car door. Reaching down to the floor, he then lifted the Sprite's bottle and tucked it under his arm.

"Hey," the Sprite protested as the movement woke it, "careful, meat bag!"

"Stuff it, firebug." Toby quickened his pace to catch up with me. "Rose?"

We were way out of town. And it was only here that he could get away with this debacle of good taste and design. Sitting amidst a lot of dirt, sagebrush, and long-since abandoned cars, was a long, rectangular, singlewide, mobile home. The tan and brown paint on the siding had started to chip off revealing the silver tin beneath. Weeds and sagebrush were overtaking the yard and house that looked like it had once been fervently maintained. Numerous colored pinwheels lined the sidewalk spinning and sparkling slowly in the morning's calm, while various stone lawn gnomes were scattered amidst the weeds still trying to go about their lives. A four-foot chainlink fence once surrounded the home, but several of the posts were now missing and the one closest to the adjacent driveway was dented and bent so badly it looked as if it had been hit on a daily basis. Karl was right. It was a dump.

"Does anyone else hear banjo music?" Toby asked under his breath.

I smacked Toby on the shoulder. "This isn't *Deliverance*."

"No." Karl laughed in amazement. "But this place is cracker-tastic! I haven't seen this many gnomes in one place since my visit to Santa's Workshop!"

I shook my head. I really needed to start leaving these two back at the office. Running my hand down my face, I steadied myself. *Had to do this*. "Come on," I said finally. "Let's go."

Once I made my way up the weed-covered sidewalk, I walked lightly up the rickety wooden staircase. The entire structure wobbled beneath me. Tapping on the flimsy trailer door with my knuckles, I waited. Listening to the faint rustling inside, I knew the Maker was home, although I wasn't sure he would be happy to see us at this hour of the morning. I knocked again.

"Just a damned minute," I heard a gruff voice announce from within. The door was flung open revealing a gruff man in a battered blue robe that had seen better days. "What the hell do you want?"

"Hi." I smiled.

The Maker's angry, unshaven face instantly softened. "Rosy!" He reached out and patted me warmly on the shoulder. I tried not to fall down crying as pain arced through me. "How the hell are you?"

I gritted my teeth, the pain nearing the point of unbearable. "Good."

"What brings you to the neighborhood?" he asked, his blue eyes sparkling.

"Business," I answered. If he didn't let go soon, I think I was going to pass out.

The Maker looked from me to my two companions and finally stepped out of the way. "Where are my manners? Please, come in, come in."

Nodding with a forced smile, I was able to think again as he finally let go of me. Stepping over the threshold, I had the sudden urge to turn back around and leave. The inside was very similar to the outside of the house. The smell of animals hung in the air, and it seemed every surface that wasn't occupied by a dirty plate or stain was covered with pet hair. There was no actual furniture in the living room; it was filled with masses of wire, bits of steel, plastic, and glass he had salvaged, and several archaic-looking devices that were probably his current projects. The kitchen, separated by a waist-high bar, heaped high with dirty plates, pots and pans, had a single table on the far side that seemed to be his workspace. Tools of every shape and size occupied the surface of it while three powerful lamps oversaw them. Moving inside to let Toby and Karl enter, I tried to stand out of the way hoping nothing would reach out of the piles and grab me. Toby shot me a look of disgust, while Karl was pinching his nose closed.

As the Maker closed the door, he smiled at me again, and quickly made for the kitchen. "Would any of you three like coffee?" He pushed a stack of plates away from the hidden coffee pot and snapped it on. Several of the plates and silverware crashed to the floor in protest. Ignoring them, he crunched over the broken pieces as he returned to us. "Coffee?"

"No thanks," I said with a horizontal wave.

The Maker, so dubbed because of his uncanny ability to make just about anything, was a perfect match for his home. Scruffy and dirty, he was a slightly overweight Inhuman who looked to be in his forties. His white tank top was stained with sweat, food, and numerous other substances I couldn't identify, while his black boxers seemed relatively clean. His thick robe looked as if the seams were about to give way and fall apart. Holes, rips, and tears were scattered over it, certainly negating any warmth it could offer. His balding head was lined with fine, nearly white hair while his facial hair still clung to a bit of the red coloring it once had. Or maybe it was barbeque sauce. I wasn't sure.

No one was really sure *what* the Maker actually was. He wasn't human, that was certain, but no one had ever gotten a good read on him and he wasn't telling. Some in the Syndicate claimed he was a Gremlin from the old world due to his uncanny understanding of design and construction, while others were certain he was one of the rare Shaitan Jinn and even more powerful than Chithula. Of course, none of these claims were ever substantiated, and the Maker certainly wasn't offering to give a blood sample so we could find out. It was enough that he helped the Syndicate when he could.

I scanned over the floor. "Where's Brutus?"

The Maker cocked his head. "You know, I don't know." He turned. "Brutus?"

I heard the yap of a dog somewhere in the back of the mobile home and the skittering tap of dog claws on linoleum. Emerging from the kitchen was a small, yellow Pomeranian. The tiny dog stopped next to the Maker and sat expectantly.

I knelt down and put out my hands. "Hi, Brutus!"

The little dog turned, stared at me, and somewhere in his tiny brain recognized me. He rushed across the floor to me with his pink tongue hanging crooked out of his mouth. Snatching him up, I held the Pom in my arm and gently stroked his well-groomed hair. He smiled and panted in approval. Vampires and dogs didn't usually agree. Brutus was the exception.

"Cute dog," Toby said, reaching for the Pom.

The little dog bared his teeth and growled at my partner.

Toby retracted his hand quickly with an odd look. Usually very good with animals, this was a strange experience for him.

I eyed Toby warily.

"Sorry. He's picky," the Maker explained. "Brutus is very selective about the people he lets touch him."

"Looks like a cotton ball," Karl commented.

"He's bigger than you," I noted quickly.

The Maker laughed. "What can I do for you, Rosy?"

"I need a favor," I replied.

"Anything for you." He smiled.

Nearly eight years ago, I had rescued Brutus from a clan of Szyss Demons who were collecting dogs to eat. It was one of my first cases for the Syndicate, and had left the Maker in my debt. His hygiene and personal habits made him somewhat unacceptable in social circles and Brutus was his only true friend. He was one of those brilliant people who had a hard time relating to people. Of course, his special aptitude for building things made him invaluable to the Syndicate, thus explaining why a Seeker was charged with finding a lost dog. I didn't mind. I liked Brutus. The little dog looked up and licked my chin affectionately, and he liked me. I visited as much as I could to keep the Maker company and to see Brutus.

"Karl, would you mind taking the Sprite into the back bedroom?" I asked, pointing to the hallway at the back of the kitchen.

Toby handed the Goblin the Sprite's jar.

"Yeah," Karl answered, "sure." Accepting the jar, he cradled it in his little green hands. "It's just you and me now," the Goblin warned, although it seemed to lack any real threat thanks to his falsetto.

"Bite me, green bean," the Sprite shot back.

"You two play nice," I warned. "Or I'll make Brutus come supervise."

"We're just gonna go talk," Karl assured me as he started toward the back of the mobile home. As he disappeared into the hallway, I could hear him giggling and shaking the bottle.

I shook my head and slowly returned my attention to the Maker. "Sorry about the hour," I apologized.

"No worries." The Maker laughed. "I was up anyway. They're showing a *Battlestar Galactica* marathon on TV."

"Old or new, re-imagined one?" Toby asked.

"Please," the Maker dismissed Toby's question quickly as if insulted. "Of course the *original*. Starbuck is a dude, not a chick."

"Ah." Toby laughed. "I thought the old show from '79 was kind of hokey. I mean, angels and the Devil fighting for control of the ragtag fleet? That's just silly. The new one is very dark and gritty. Much better show."

"That's one Werewolf's opinion," the Maker shot back. "It's not right, but it's your opinion. The Colonials were escaping religious persecution. The show was rife with religious overtones," he looked Toby squarely in the eye, "if the viewer was intelligent enough to see them."

I looked at the two as if they were having a conversation in an alien language.

Toby shrugged. "I like the new one. It has an actual plot that makes sense."

The Maker started to retort, but I intervened. I couldn't take anymore of the sci-fi geek talk. "I need you to build me something."

Eyeing Toby with a hint of anger in his blue eyes, I knew he could continue this argument the rest of the night. He slowly pulled his attention back to me. "What do you need, Rosy?"

"Some way to track a Sprite," I answered.

"Oh," the Maker breathed. Crossing his arms, he ran his fingers over his beard stubble thoughtfully. "That could be a tough build. Good thing it's already done." He turned and started inspecting piles of inventions scattered throughout his living room.

I raised an eyebrow. "You already built what I need?"

"Yes, yes." The Maker waved off my concern. "Seems we had a similar problem. A swarm of Sprites took up residence in the swamp cooler on the top of my house and were sneaking in through the vents to steal my beer."

Toby looked at me with an odd expression perfectly capturing the absurdity of the moment.

I shook my head with a soft smile. The Maker really was good at what he did. He was just a bit ... insane, that's all.

"I couldn't catch the little monsters on camera, so I invented a tracking system," the Maker continued. "I flooded the swamp cooler with an ionized compound that attached to the Sprite's flesh so I could trace and capture them. Kind of the same principal behind the Sprite repellent I made for you, Rose."

"Which worked very well," I added.

"What's the compound composed of?" Toby asked.

"Trade secret," the Maker replied, pulling an unmarked silver aerosol can from one of the bigger piles of inventions. Turning, he handed it to me. "I wouldn't necessarily want to get a mouthful of this stuff though. Might prevent you from ever having children." He paused and thought for a moment. "Or continuing to live."

I quickly passed the can to Toby. "Thanks for the heads up."

Toby eyed the can warily.

Slipping his hand into his robe pocket, the Maker retrieved a small white palm pilot. Sliding out the stylus, he activated the device and tapped the screen several times. "I designed a program that tracks the compound and had to modify this PDA to use it. It's almost like Spock's Tricorder now."

Oh, Lord ... more sci-fi babble.

"Cool," Toby said with a twinkle of delight in his eyes. Moving past me, he stopped next to the Maker and peered over his shoulder. "How does it work?"

"There are sensors built into the device now," the Maker said, pointing to the rectangular, translucent piece of plastic on the top. "When used in conjunction with this program I designed," he tapped the screen again, "it creates a pretty powerful tracking system."

Toby studied the PDA. "What's the red dot on the screen?"

"The aerosol can," the Maker replied.

Toby nodded. Moving the aerosol can with his outstretched arm, he watched in delight as the red dot on the screen matched his movements. "What's the range?"

"You know," the Maker clicked off the PDA and handed it to Toby, "I don't know." He pointed up to the swamp cooler vent in the ceiling. "I didn't need to track the buggers more than ten feet. I'm not sure how far it will go. Best stay close to your target," he advised.

"What happened with your beer-stealing Sprites?" I asked, although I regretted it as soon as the question left my lips.

"They go down good with a little barbecue sauce." The Maker smiled devilishly.

I wasn't sure if he was kidding or not. I don't think I really wanted to know. "Karl?" I shouted into the back hallway. "Can you bring the Sprite?"

I watched the little green Goblin wander into the kitchen with the Sprite's ersatz prison in his hands. The

inside and outside of the bottle was wet and Karl was grinning broadly.

"What did you do?" I sighed.

"The little bastard tried to drown me!" the Sprite shrieked.

"Nothing." Karl set the jar on the kitchen table. "Just wanted to see if little mouthy Sprites could swim."

I closed my eyes for a moment trying my hardest not to laugh or yell at the Goblin. Dragging my hand over my face, I regained my composure. I turned to Toby. "Would you do the honors?"

Toby smirked. "With pleasure."

Shaking the can, Toby walked into the kitchen and snatched the Sprite's jar off the table. Unscrewing the top of the Sprite's prison, he held his hand over the top. Tilting the aerosol can beneath his meaty paw, he depressed the nozzle. The quick blast covered the Sprite and filled the jar with a glittering, golden substance. The Sprite fell to the bottom of the jar gasping and choking.

"Too much?" Toby asked the Maker.

The Maker shrugged. "Probably."

"Okay, T," I said as I watched the Sprite recover. "Now take it outside and let it go."

"You're letting it go?" Karl asked in horror. "After what I did to it?" He took a deep breath and leaned against the kitchen table leg with a long face. "I'm boned."

Toby eyed me warily. "Seriously?"

I nodded.

"Okay," Toby exhaled. Walking past me, he opened the front door and stopped. Looking at the Sprite one final time, he pulled his hand away from the top.

Flittering out, the Sprite turned and gave us the finger. "Just wait until I find a new swarm," he warned us, "you three are dead! Dead!" Turning, it glowed brightly and flitted off.

Toby set the jar down and handed me the PDA. "I hope you know what you're doing." He looked at the glittering gold spot on his hand the spray had created.

I forced a smile. "Me too." Activating the PDA, I watched a red dot moving around the screen. It looked as if the Sprite was drunk. "Seems to be working," I nodded to the Maker. "I'll bring it back when we're finished."

The Maker dismissed the idea with his hand. "No worries. I can make more." He turned his attention to Toby. "You might want to wash your hands, big guy."

Toby's eyes widened. "Why?"

The Maker smiled. "No reason." He rubbed his beard stubble again. "Might want to hurry though."

With a sigh of disgust, Toby charged into the kitchen and noisily began moving dishes out of the way to get to the sink. Cranking on the hot water full blast, he submerged his hands in it.

I handed Brutus back to the Maker. "Thank you."

Cradling the Pomeranian in his arms like a baby, he scratched the dog's belly. "No problem. Be safe, Rose."

"We will." I smiled. "Come on, guys," I said as I turned to the door.

Toby searched for something, anything, to dry his hands on. Finally giving up, he shook his head and wiped them on his pants. Without another word to the Maker, the Werewolf walked past me and out the door.

Karl hung his head and marched toward the door like a condemned prisoner heading to his execution. Stuffing his hands in his pocket, he stopped and looked up at me. "I knew you would get me killed." Dropping his head again, he stepped outside and jumped off the steps.

Turning back to the Maker, I shook my head. "Partners. They're such a pain in the ass." As he laughed, I closed the door and headed for the car.

Chapter 25

"I always liked Scooby-Doo," Toby remarked as he reached into the bag and pulled out a handful of curly fries left on the bottom from our fast food stop.

The conversation had gradually shifted from our current situation to favorite television shows as we passed the time. The Sprite's red dot on the Maker's PDA was holding steady within a nearby building. We weren't exactly in a position to go charging in, so we decided to surveil the building. So far ... nothing. This place did seem familiar, though. I wasn't sure why.

"Come on," I shot back, "it was so predictable. In every episode, Velma finds that one clue that ties everything together perfectly, and then they capture and unmask the villain. And they *always* say..." I pointed to Karl.

"I would've gotten away with it if it weren't for you meddling kids," Karl imitated, lowering his helium filled voice to sound a bit gruffer, "and your pesky dog."

"That's what made it good." Toby laughed. "It had the perfect ending. Everything was neatly wrapped up and you knew the world was safe until the next episode."

"But life isn't like that," I objected.

"Exactly," Toby pointed at me with a fry, "it isn't real life. It's television. Viewers don't want to be left hanging. They want a nice, tidy bow at the end of the episode."

I looked at Toby curiously. "Why are you eating fast food?"

"What?" Toby asked as he stuffed another handful of fries in his mouth.

"Fast food," I repeated. "You always told me you could smell the chemicals on it and that's why you didn't eat it."

Toby stared at me for a long moment. "I was really hungry," he defended himself.

The answer didn't sit well with me. Maybe my senses were on high alert because of the pod people. I wasn't sure who I could trust anymore.

"I always liked *The X-Files*," Karl continued the conversation, ignoring my remarks. "They never really had a conclusion for the episodes. Sure, sometimes they captured the villain or the monster of the week, but mostly the agents were left with no proof and a dramatic music sting. Creepy stuff."

"That show was hokey," Toby argued. "By the fifth season, it was so wrapped up in its own confusing mythology that there was no way the show could ever resolve itself. It was like a snake eating its own tail." He threw another fry into his mouth. "Agent Scully was hot though."

"An oroboros," I corrected him.

Toby raised an eyebrow. "A what?"

"A snake eating its own tail," I explained. "It's called an oroboros."

"Ah, good to know," Toby said with a sarcastic smirk.

"I've never really enjoyed television shows," I admitted.

Toby grinned. "It's because you're older than TV, right?"

Karl giggled in the back seat.

"I am not," I shot back. Stopping, I thought about the statement for a second. "Wait, I guess I am."

"Back in your day," Karl was doing his best old geezer impression, "we didn't have your fancy televisions with two hundred and forty billion channels. We had two sticks, a ball of twine, and a rock to keep us entertained, and we had to walk uphill, barefoot, in the snow to the store to get 'em. And we liked it that way!"

Toby snorted as he tried to laugh and swallow his mouthful of fries at the same time.

I shook my head. "Shut up, Karl."

Setting my hands on the steering wheel, I stared out through the windshield. There weren't many working streetlamps in this section of town, and the moon overhead was waxing toward new making tonight especially dark. The squat buildings surrounding us had seen better days, and I didn't think there was a single intact window in this entire district. It suddenly clicked and I recognized the building. This looked like where I had escaped from Lucas. Made sense though. No neighbors to bother him, and big, rent-free buildings to conduct his nefarious plans in. I started to really wish the city would tear these old buildings down and start over.

Toby crumbled the fast food sack into a ball and tossed it over his shoulder at Karl. "How long are we

going to sit out here?"

"That's a good question," Karl said, pushing the trash onto the floor and crossing his legs. "I had too much soda. I have to tinkle."

"That's the last time I buy you a large Coke. Just get out and go," Toby instructed him.

I glanced out the passenger window past Toby as the Goblin opened the door and slid out. The eastern sky was starting to steadily brighten. "I'm either going to have to go home," I nodded to the sunrise, "or get in the trunk soon."

"You think the Sprite is waiting us out?" Toby considered.

"If it even knows we're here," I countered. "We might be giving that little monster too much credit." I paused and raised my eyebrows certain I could hear music. "Is Karl singing a Counting Crows song?"

Toby and I fell silent. Amidst the sounds of the night and liquid hitting the car tire, we could indeed hear the Goblin singing about Mr. Jones as he relieved himself. Covering my mouth, I snickered.

"Stop listening to me pee!" Karl shouted as he became aware of our silence. "Perverts!"

Toby threw his head back and laughed out loud.

I heard my cell phone ring. Digging into my pocket, I pulled it free and flipped it open. "Webb," I answered. I don't know, it just sounds more professional when you curtly say your last name.

"Rose, it's Doctor Yazgren." He paused. "I have those test results you've been waiting for."

"Excellent." I smiled, even though concern gripped me. Toby looked anxiously at me. I held up my finger to tell him to wait a minute. "What did you find?"

"The Vampire you brought in," Yaz started, "well, it really isn't a Vampire. It may look like a duck, and quack like a duck, but it isn't a duck—"

"I get it," I said quickly. "So, what is he?"

"As far as I can tell," Yaz breathed, "it's a genetically-altered Maryut."

I felt my eyebrows rise. "A Maryut?"

"A Demon," Yaz answered, "but that's about all I can tell you. The Syndicate had a genetic sample on record, but no accompanying data. The match from the pseudo Vampire was almost ninety-five percent. Having never personally seen a Maryut, I can't tell you what they are, or even what they look like. The only reference I could find was that the Maryut looked like wax people. It was a really, really old source," Yaz apologized.

"So what does this mean?" I asked.

"It's a Maryut genetically manipulated to look like a Vampire. The Werewolf arm you supplied showed similar signs," Yaz replied.

I pressed the phone a bit tighter to my ear and lowered my voice. "So it's a clone?"

"No," Yaz breathed, "the resemblance to Vampires and Werewolves is only cosmetic. They may look, act, and have all of the organs of other Inhumans, but they are still Maryut. They aren't clones, and the exoskeleton structure isn't a mutation."

That could explain the mistakes they're making. They are just acting like the operatives they're replacing. "Thanks, Yaz."

"You're welcome," Yaz replied.

Snapping the phone closed, I slipped it back into my pocket. I leaned back into the seat and tried to process all the information I had just been handed.

"Well?" Toby asked impatiently. "What did he say?"

A purple glow caught my attention. Looking down at the Werewolf's t-shirt, I could see his amulet glowing behind it. I glanced down at my own amulet shining around my throat. Another Seeker had activated theirs meaning they needed help. Throwing open the door, I jumped out. Toby, seeing my haste and his amulet shimmering, did the same.

"I'm not done!" Karl shouted in embarrassment as he tried to move further around the car to hide.

"No time," I barked.

Toby peeled off his shirt and shoes and threw his head back. When he balled his fists, I saw his rib cage snap and begin to contort beneath his flesh. Grunting, he dropped down to his knees and hunched over. He was changing.

With no need to wait, I ran out of the alley and skittered around a corner. I could feel the amulet around my neck pulling me toward its source, feeding me directions. All Seekers wore a similar mystically-endowed amulet. When invoked by crushing the purple stone in the center, the signal webbed out and activated every Seeker's amulet in a diameter of roughly three kilometers. The brighter the amulet glowed, the closer you were. Pumping my legs hard, I pushed my body as fast as I could.

Hitting the side of the building, I spun and pressed my back to the wall. Constructed of concrete and steel, this seemed to be one of the more sturdy warehouses in the industrial district. I drew my weapon and the tracking PDA. Thumbing the power switch, I moved slowly along the wall while staring at the screen. The Sprite's red dot was holding steady inside. The whispers from my amulet were drawing me to the same general area. I clicked off the safety on my Beretta.

I watched a dark flash of teeth, claws, and fur whip across the street, up the side of the building, and disappear onto the roof. Apparently Toby was taking the direct approach. I had to get inside. Coming around the corner, I spotted an empty loading dock. Pushing the PDA into my back pocket, I used both hands to cradle my pistol. I moved lightly, almost silently, up the stairs to the rectangular block of concrete that stretched out before the large loading doors. Pools of dark chemicals sat in front of the dock, glimmering in the morning light. I could smell the acrid bite of oil and transmission fluid. This dock had been used recently. This warehouse was still in use.

Moving past the heavy metal doors, I saw a regular entrance on the far side of the dock. Glancing quickly through the reinforced window, I couldn't see anything but boxes and wooden crates. Laying my

fingers gently on the cool, metal handle, I paused. Certainly there was an alarm. I scanned over the dock. There were no other doors or windows on this side of the building. This was my only choice.

"Wait up, Rose!"

I turned and glared at Karl who was huffing as he trotted up the stairs. Holding my finger up to my lips, I tried to tell him to stay quiet.

"You and puppy just left me with my dingle waving in the breeze."

Which, it seemed, the Goblin didn't understand. "Karl," I whispered, "shut up."

He paused, cocked his head slightly, and suddenly seemed to understand. I think I could almost see the light bulb blink on above his head. "Oh," he breathed, "I get it!"

"We need to get inside," I informed him, "but I don't know if there's an alarm system. I was thinking..."

I watched the green Goblin zip past me toward the door without listening to a word I said. Leaping straight up, he caught the door handle with his tiny hands. Planting his feet against the door for leverage, he twisted the knob.

"Karl." I started toward him. "Don't do that!"

Pushing off against the frame, I watched the door creak open. Karl let go and dropped to the ground. Pulling the door open, he motioned for me to enter.

Circling around cautiously, I scanned inside the warehouse. "No alarm?"

Karl shook his head.

I craned my head in and peeked around the dock. "How did you know?"

He pointed to himself. "Goblin. I can sense these things."

"Glad you're on our side," I admitted.

Holding my pistol down, I moved carefully inside. The smell of sulfur was heavy in the darkness and I could hear the rhythmic thrum of machinery. Tasting the air, I could detect the scent of Vampires, various Demons, Werewolves, and something more that I couldn't quite identify. Wrapping my fingers around my necklace, I snapped the amulet off and quickly deposited it in my pocket, as the glow would easily give me away. Glancing back, I saw that Karl was sticking close to my heels, his beady eyes scanning the darkness warily.

The loading dock was roughly rectangular. Stretching off for some distance into the warehouse, boxes and crates were piled high to the ceiling. I could see an exit on the right wall, and an open arch to the rear. The amulet, still feeding me directions through a magical link, was pulling me toward the back.

Weaving through the maze of boxes, I heard a couple of rats scamper into the darkness, their claws scraping against the smooth concrete floor. My pulse—if I had one—would probably be racing at this point. Making me feel a bit better, I could hear Karl's tiny heart hammering in his chest. Reaching the back of the loading dock, I spun and pressed my back to the unfinished wall. I could clearly hear voices beyond the doorway, but couldn't make out how many or what they were saying. I caught their scent on

the recirculated air...

Trolls.

They are vile, rank, ugly, and basically stupid Inhumans. Their saving graces include being unnaturally strong, and prolific breeders. This made them perfect for the role of protection. Like lemmings, they would follow an order to their death if required, and would throw every bit of themselves at it in the process. A little shorter than the average humanoid, their bodies were covered with a thick blue skin notoriously hard to cut. Long, pointed ears were slung back from their thick skulls, while two massive tusklike teeth jutted up from their lower jaws and out of their mouths. All Trolls secrete a pungent pheromone that others of the species use for identification and mating practices, while their faces look like someone took a human's face, melted it, then hot glued it back on the beast. Still threatening when alone, they become the most dangerous when in packs. Trolls had a tendency to swarm and rip their prey limb from limb. I hate Trolls.

"Karl," I whispered, "we need an alternate route."

The Goblin nodded and pointed to the top of a nearby stack of crates. Understanding, I snapped on the safety and stuffed my Beretta temporarily in the waistband of my pants. Lifting Karl up, on a silent count of three, I tossed the tiny Inhuman up the side of the crates. Catching the edge with his hand, he swung wide but finally managed to control his body and get a more solid hold. Skittering up the side, he disappeared from sight.

Pushing back to the wall, I could still hear the Troll's voices. They were getting closer, but I wasn't sure they had detected me yet. Moving on my toes, I circled around the crates and stuffed myself in between two of the larger ones. This wasn't a place I really wanted to be. If the Trolls attacked, I didn't have anyplace to go. I had to get above them. Snapping my claws from my fingertips, I dug into the wood and pulled myself up. My shoulder thumped in agony and my hand felt like it was on fire as I pulled. Boosting myself on top, I dropped to my belly as the first Troll walked into the warehouse.

Cursing under my breath, I drew my pistol and held my finger against the side of the trigger guard. Two more followed the first inside with their distinctive hunched posture and shuffling steps. On patrol, but apparently bored with the assignment, they lackadaisically scanned the area. I could hear them muttering to each other about poor working conditions with their gruff, monosyllabic tones. Each was clothed in a piecemeal mixture of iron armor, leather, and some kind of animal fur. The first Troll had several gold piercings in both of his ears, the largest tusks of the three, and sported a neon green shock of hair that terminated in a thick ponytail. The other two, slightly smaller, had black hair, and no piercings.

"Lock door?" Green Hair grunted at the other two while pointing at the door Karl and I had entered from.

The second Troll nodded with a growl. "It locked."

"You check?" Green Hair asked.

The second Troll pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "Gar lock."

I didn't think they really talked like that. Amused, I had to stifle a laugh.

Green Hair pushed the second Troll forcefully out of his way and towered over the third. "Gar, check door?"

Gar thought for a moment and scratched his head with his thick, blue fingers. "Door locked," he replied sternly.

Green Hair slammed his forearm into Gar's chest knocking him aside. "Out me way," the Troll growled.

Gar snarled, but acquiesced. As Green Hair sauntered out of the warehouse, the two remaining Trolls growled at each other, surely for some form of dominance. Gar punched the second Troll hard in the chest knocking the wind out of him. As the second Troll gasped for air, Gar took his position behind Green Hair. Apparently, I had just witnessed a coup, and Gar had promoted himself.

"Rose," I heard Karl's voice say.

Looking up, I spotted the Goblin hanging out of an opened air vent.

"You've gotta see this," Karl said, his eyes wide. He disappeared back into the shaft.

Holding my hand on my shoulder, I gritted my teeth and fought through the pain. Climbing up over the crates and boxes, I glanced down at the warehouse one more time to make sure the Trolls hadn't spotted me. Clicking the safety on, I pushed my Beretta back into its holster and snapped the safety strap over it.

I peered into the shaft and saw Karl moving quickly away from me. Placing my hands on the edge, I pulled myself inside.

Chapter 26

"Oh my God," I breathed.

Wrapping my fingers around the slits in the ventilation grate, I pulled myself as close as I could. I stared down in horror at the black heart of the warehouse as a mass of machinery moved autonomously about its nefarious work. Deep bronze with silver and black highlights, it seemed to stretch on endlessly.

Chugging, cranking, and undulating, it created a primal cacophony that was almost musical.

Hundreds of clear tubes, filled with featureless, white, seemingly proto-humanoids with black, sclera-less eyes, were plucked one by one from the roof by gigantic, robotic arms and inserted into the machinery.

As they descended, the clear fluid in the tubes was drained and replaced by a thicker, mint green substance that caused the proto-humanoids to painfully convulse. Further down the machine, a bright blue pulse electrified the green fluid, creating the sulfurous smell I detected earlier. As it became transparent again and the humanoid's spasms stopped, the tubes were replaced on the conveyor belt in the ceiling.

Were these the pod people? Could they be the Maryut Yaz told me about?

"See?" Karl said anxiously. "I told you it was aliens!"

"Those aren't aliens," I corrected him. Although, I wasn't entirely sure *what* they were. They certainly looked like the gray aliens from abduction lore.

Scanning across the sprawling machine, I spotted several purple Seeker amulets scattered on the floor. Each was glowing brightly as mine still was. That wasn't a good sign. Pulling the Maker's PDA from my

pocket, I poked the power switch and watched the screen light up. The Sprite, according to the software, was directly below us. Looking down through the grate, I spied its glowing body darting back and forth over the machinery. I tapped Karl's shoulder and pointed down through the grate, but he was already ahead of me. Eyeing the Sprite warily, I'm sure he was planning to tear its wings off or some other equally graphic torture.

Shouting on the far side of the warehouse caught my attention. Adjusting my view, I spotted two Trolls escorting a prisoner toward the machine. I couldn't make out who the leggy blond prisoner was but I did recognize the glowing purple amulet around her throat. She was a Seeker. The Trolls were laughing and grunting as they pushed her protesting toward the machine. Out the corner of my eye, I saw a great, dark form shoot down from the rafters sending the Trolls spilling to the floor. With a throaty roar, it was on the Trolls clawing, ripping, and biting.

"Toby." I sighed. *Why hadn't he stayed with me in the first place?* No, he had to act all macho and play the hero. He was going to get himself killed in the process, though. Pushing the vent out with a crack of metal, I grabbed Karl and slipped my legs through the hole.

"What the hell are you doing, suckhead?" Karl protested.

"Sorry," I apologized as I shimmied through. Grabbing Karl, I pushed off with my free arm. "Time to go."

We sailed into the space between the machine and the tubes. Immediately wishing I had rethought my attack plan, I glanced off one of the tubes and landed hard on the machine's chain-driven conveyor belt. My shoulder screamed in protest, but I couldn't let it slow me down. Rolling to the right, I barely avoided the powerful metal clamps that latched onto the tubes as they dropped into position. As the clamps snapped closed with a loud clang, I tossed Karl down to the floor. The tiny Goblin hit with a thump and skittered to his feet. Ducking beneath a robotic arm, I pushed off the conveyor belt and dropped down. Landing on the balls of my feet, I drew my weapon and charged toward Toby and the Trolls. I couldn't see the blond Seeker. She had probably fled after Toby knocked down her captors. She could've stayed and helped us, but the point was moot. I had to get to Toby.

An undulating ball of gray fur and blue skin rolled along the floor and finally smashed into the side of the machine. The force of the impact knocked several of the robotic arms out of position. The sound of bending metal and grinding steel began to fill the air as a shower of glowing, golden embers erupted like a geyser and rained down over us. Further down the warehouse, I saw several more Trolls charging angrily toward Toby's position.

Reinforcements. Crud.

The Werewolf stood to full height with one of the Trolls in his massive paws. Tossing his head back with a howl, Toby ripped the Troll in two and tossed the pieces to the floor. The second Troll, apparently unhappy his buddy had just become half the man he used to be, leapt onto Toby's back and wrapped his powerful arms around the wolf's throat. Toby clawed at the Troll with all of his strength, but the Inhuman's hide was too thick. The Troll repositioned his hands as Toby bucked and writhed. The wolf howled in agony. He was trying to break Toby's neck.

I felt my eyes glaze over black. Leaping straight ahead, I caught one of the Troll's tusks with my broken hand and swung it onto its back. The Troll snorted and tried to bite me, but loosened its grip on Toby. Pressing the barrel of my Beretta into the side of the Troll's fat head, I pulled the trigger. The muzzle flash sizzled its flesh and singed its purple hair, but I didn't see any blood. Cursing under my breath, I fired

again and again and again.

Toby slammed the three of us into the solid concrete wall behind us. I felt the Werewolf and Troll's weight pin me. "Toby," I gasped as my chest cavity started to compress. "New plan!"

The Troll, enjoying the fight, took the opportunity to throw several vicious elbows into my side. Cackling with glee, the Troll bit down onto the back of Toby's neck with his tusks. I saw the wolf's crimson blood spurt onto his gray and white fur. Letting loose a sound that was a mixture of a squeal, roar, and howl, Toby bucked wildly forward sending me sailing off the Troll's back and hard into the side of the machine.

Drawing myself up, I noted three more Trolls were almost upon us. This was a fight we weren't going to win.

One of the massive robotic arms swung out from the machine and hit the Troll solidly in the head. As the creature squealed in protest, the arm's powerful hydraulic fingers clamped around it and lifted it easily from Toby. As Toby collapsed to the floor the arm suddenly surged forward and mashed the Troll into the wall. I could hear the motors whining in protest as it crushed the Troll. Bones began to snap and crackle as the Troll slowly stopped fighting and became little more than a blue smear on the wall.

I looked up to find Karl straddling the arm with several wires and controls wrapped around his hands. "I can feel the power between my legs!"

"Get down from there!" I shouted. Turning to look at Toby, I stopped and spun back to Karl. "No, wait."

Karl stopped climbing and looked at me curiously.

"I have a better idea." I pointed down to the new Trolls. "Get 'em."

Mounting the arm again, Karl wrapped the wires around his tiny hands. He cackled in delight.

Rushing to Toby's side, I dropped down and ran my hand softly over his head. Toby looked up at me and whimpered. A glistening patch of blood on the back of his neck had completely matted down his fur. "We're not done yet," I breathed. "You have to get up."

With a growl and a high-pitched whine, Toby started to lift himself from the floor. Snapping his head toward the oncoming Trolls, his lips peeled back into a snarl exposing his perfectly white fangs.

Rearing back on the wires, Karl pulled the robotic arm from the wall and swung it hard to the right knocking the first Troll to the floor. The second, carrying a jet black AK-47, skidded to a stop, turned, and pulled the trigger. The weapon's high-pitched rat-a-tat-tat echoed angrily off the concrete and machinery. Tubes from the arm's hydraulic system broke free spraying a white cloud of compressed air wildly like a beheaded snake. One of the tubes snapped back and whipped Karl in the face. With a shrill grunt, the Goblin tumbled free of his perch.

"Karl!" I watched the Goblin fall back into the innards of the machine

Toby snapped forward and knocked the AK-47 from the Troll's hands and clamped down on the creature's throat with his powerful muzzle. A fountain of bluish blood erupted from the Troll's neck. Shaking hard, Toby ripped a massive chunk of the Troll's flesh free and spit it away. The blue-skinned Inhuman stumbled back with its hands clamped over the wound then collapsed.

Stuffing my Beretta into my waistband, I rolled forward, snatched the AK-47 from the ground and leveled it at the remaining three Trolls. Holding the trigger down, I fought the weapon's urge to kick and kept a steady stream of lead into the Trolls. As the weapon chugged, the first Troll hit the ground hard, but the remaining two were still coming fast. I felt the weapon sputter and click.

Jammed.

Tossing it aside, I drew my .45 and suddenly felt like I was holding a peashooter after using the AK-47. Snapping my attention up, I saw one of the tubes cycling toward the conveyor directly above us. Rolling onto my back, I lifted my pistol and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the glass and punched a hole in it. As the clear fluid sprayed out, I took aim again. Steadying my arm, I squeezed the trigger again. This time the bullet hit where I intended.

The release clamps snapped open as the control wires were severed sending the tube screaming toward the ground. Rolling onto the balls of my feet, I sprang forward and knocked Toby out of the way just as the Trolls and tube arrived. One of the Trolls was crushed beneath the weight of the tube. As it shattered and exploded open, the clear fluid washed over everything. The proto-humanoid inside hit the concrete floor with a wet splat. Its tiny mouth snapped open and wailed in terror. Convulsing on the floor, the last remaining Troll vainly tried to scoop it up and save it. Cupping handfuls of the gooey fluid in its blue hand, the Troll repeatedly tossed the substance onto the proto as he held it in his arms.

As Toby and I stood out of the goo, I felt a cold, hard piece of metal in my temple.

"Don't move a muscle."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the dark shape of a pistol pressed against my face, and the blond Seeker behind it. She held out her arm with Karl dangling limply from her hand. Despite her warning, I turned toward her.

I can't really explain the emotions that washed over me in that moment, but I looked into a face I hadn't seen in a hundred and fifteen years:

Mine.

Chapter 27

It was a trap, and we fell for it. Knowing we were outside, they used our Seeker amulets and my doppelganger to flush us out.

Now it had become a stalemate. The Rose copy stood leering with her gun to my head and holding an unconscious Karl in the other hand. Panting heavily, Toby was on his knees below me, a massive, bloody wound on the back of his neck, while the only remaining living Troll tried to save the pod person I brought down.

I was fast enough to attack my copy, but I had to consider the possibility that she was just as quick. I might be able to take the gun away, but not before she killed Karl. But if I attacked and missed, she could shoot me, then Toby, and kill Karl. Anyway I cut it, someone would die, and probably not the person I wanted to. I frowned as five more blue-skinned Trolls armed with AK-47s charged out from

behind the machinery, and surrounded us. The Trolls separated allowing a black-clad figure to walk to the front. In that moment, all of my theories were confirmed.

"Captain," I greeted him through clenched teeth.

The Captain Patrick Peterson copy smiled at me with satisfaction. His icy blue eyes snapped to me like lasers. "Hello, Rose." He held his P90 to his chest. "I see you brought your puppy again."

"I don't go anywhere without him." I smiled.

Peterson aimed his weapon at Toby. "When are you going to learn?"

Toby's lips pulled back into an evil sneer.

"Knock it off," the Rose copy warned Peterson. "He wants them alive."

Peterson stood unwavering. I watched his finger slide inside the trigger guard. Toby growled menacingly. I knew Peterson might get a shot off before Toby could attack, but it would be the last thing he ever did. Of course, the five Trolls with automatic weapons would make it the last thing Toby ever did as well.

The Rose copy reiterated, "I said knock it off!"

Finally stepping back, Peterson let his hand off the trigger with a grunt.

"Good to see you can still take orders, Captain," I said snidely.

The Rose copy jammed the barrel harder into my head. "Shut up." She paused, waiting to see if there were any further outbursts. "Captain," my doppelganger said finally, "the syringe."

Peterson dug into the breast pocket of his uniform and produced a needle. He grinned as he tossed it to me.

I stared at the amber-colored liquid inside while holding it in my broken, bandaged hand. Motioning with her pistol, she pointed down at Toby. "Inject the Werewolf, or I kill the Goblin." She slipped several fingers around Karl's throat.

"What is this?" I asked, although I already had a pretty good idea.

"TS-1138. Let's call it insurance," my copy replied.

I understood. Known simply by its catalogue designation, TS-1138 had been developed by the Syndicate as a sedative, but had the side effect of inhibiting a Werewolf's transformation. Because of this, Seekers pioneered the use of it when hunting Werewolves. Its effects weren't permanent, but one dose could cause a Werewolf to revert to human form long enough to be captured and processed. I had used it on several missions and knew the effects well. It was indeed a powerful drug.

I looked back to my copy. Her finger was firmly around the trigger. I knew it wouldn't kill me, but it would certainly give her, or Peterson, a chance to. Kneeling next to Toby, I gently placed my hand on his head. Scratching behind his ear, he looked at me with sad, yellow eyes. "Sorry, T," I whispered. "No choice."

I think he understood.

Holding a patch of hair aside, I exposed his pink flesh beneath. I had no idea if he had ever experienced the effects of TS-1138 before. He wasn't in for a treat. Slipping the syringe between my first two fingers, I held my thumb gently on the plunger. Looking up one more time at my sneering copy, I returned my attention to Toby and plunged the needle into his flesh. He let out a soft whine as I injected the amber-colored drug.

Toby growled and arched his back. I have been told that the drug feels like fire raging just beneath their skin. His body shivered and started to convulse. Falling forward onto the concrete, he pulled his knees up to his chest and whimpered loudly. He started to scratch at his hair. I watched him pull away several chunks of gray and white fur as the scratching turned aggressively into digging. Snapping onto his back, his torso contorted wildly as his Werewolf physiology was forced back to human. I heard bones cracking and resetting as a giant tear ripped down the front of his body exposing his human chest. His grunts and growls quickly became more human sounding as his muzzle flattened to his face. Tears of pain streaked down his cheeks as he stared at me. Pulling more and more of the hair away, I watched his human body appear beneath as if the Werewolf was merely a shell around him. As the last of the hair fell away, Toby lay naked and shivering on the cold concrete floor.

My copy motioned toward him with her weapon. "Pick him up and put him in holding."

Peterson moved toward Toby to follow the order. "With pleasure."

"Don't touch him!" I roared and knocked Peterson aside. Sliding my arm around Toby's chest, I pulled him up to me. "I'll take him."

Quickly regaining his footing, Peterson lifted his weapon again and stared at me with yellow eyes. "Do it again, Vampire," he sneered. "I dare you."

"Okay." The Rose copy sighed in frustration. "Fine. Whatever. Can we just cut the macho crap and get this show on the road?"

Helping Toby to his feet, I slid his arm over my shoulders and wrapped mine around his chest. I was more than capable of carrying him, but I wanted him to walk under his own power in a show of contempt to our captors. We would bend, but *wewould not* break. Two of the Trolls took the lead, while the other three walked behind us with their weapons at the ready. They started us away from the scene of our battle and down the corridor toward a row of wooden doors that looked like they used to be offices.

The Sprite, who had been overseeing everything from a safe distance, finally swooped down and perched on my bad shoulder. Most of the tracking substance Toby had sprayed it with was gone, but a large patch still lingered on its back between its wings. "So," the Sprite chirped, its voice even higher than Karl's, "I totally screwed you."

I ignored the bug, which was difficult since he was right next to my ear.

"I led you right into a trap," the Sprite admitted with pride. "Your stupid little tracking idea kind of backfired, didn't it?"

He was gloating, waiting for me to admit he had beaten us. He wouldn't get the satisfaction.

"That's what you get, Seeker," it said, poking me in the neck with its Pixie Stick, "for putting me in the

friggin' blender!" The Sprite's wings clacked as it lifted off.

Before it could get very high, I snatched it with one quick motion. Holding the angry Sprite in my hand, I waited to see if any of the Trolls or my doppelganger had seen the move. Satisfied, I lifted it to my face. "This isn't over." My voice was a harsh whisper. "I will find you again, and when I do, I'm going to put you in the blender for real." I squeezed the little monster until he started gasping for breath. "Do you understand?"

Coughing, the Sprite nodded.

"Good." I smiled, showing it my fangs. Whipping it to the side, I watched it hit the side of the machine and flutter to the ground. I could hear a tiny moan as we walked away.

"Stop," my copy commanded as we neared the doors. "Put the Vampire and Werewolf in separate rooms."

A Troll moved in and grabbed Toby from my arms. I spun around angrily and started for him but four AK-47s and a P90 in my face stopped me cold. There wasn't anything I could do. I watched the Troll maneuver Toby toward the second door and disappear inside. I turned my attention back to my copy.

She was holding Karl up and studying him. "What do you think Goblins taste like?"

I felt my eyes glaze over black. I didn't care anymore. She could try and stop me, but I was going to kill her right here and right now. Knocking one of the Trolls out of the way, I snatched the second one's rifle and knocked him down before he had a chance to react. Using the butt to hit the third Troll in the head right between his eyes, I flipped it over in my hand and leveled it at my doppelganger.

My copy smiled. "I don't think so." She pressed her pistol to Karl's head. "One shot, and there's Goblin brains everywhere." She waited for a moment. "I said stand down."

I looked from the doppelganger to Karl then back again. Pressing my finger firmly against the trigger, I was ready to shoot. Karl would understand. *This was a war!* There were always casualties. I gritted my teeth as Karl's voice rang in my head. I remembered him commenting about raising a family ... he had a family. I felt my eyes revert as the anger subsided.

"Damn." I couldn't take that from Karl the way it had been taken from me. Not even if the fate of the world depended on it. Clicking the safety, I grabbed the AK's stock and handed it back to the Troll I had taken it from.

As soon as the weapon was gone, Peterson stepped in and delivered a vicious blow to the back of my head with the butt of his rifle. I crumbled to my knees as stars sparkled before my eyes.

"Good girl," the doppelganger praised as if I were a pet doing tricks on command. "Now, we aren't going to have any more unpleasantness, are we?"

I shook my head in defeat.

"Very good." Her words dripped with satisfaction. "Captain Peterson," she commanded, "take Ms. Webb inside and make sure she's comfortable."

Peterson smiled at their order. I'm sure that "comfortable" was code for "beat her until she's nearly

dead."

Crap.

Watching Toby disappear into the next door, I was dragged inside.

Chapter 28

A ray of sunlight sliced across the wall to the left of me. This room, which I think used to be an office, had a large window in the back wall. As the morning sun rose, the light would become more direct. If something didn't give soon, I would be a whole lot crispier.

I assumed this room had been used for this very purpose before. It was empty save for a chair solidly bolted into the concrete floor. Constructed of steel, every joint was double and triple welded to ensure I wouldn't be able to break it apart. My arms were slipped uncomfortably through two wide slats in the back and double handcuffed to the bracing bars between the legs. A thick iron chain wrapped tightly around my ankles with padlocks placed securely through it. I felt that at any moment, Harry Houdini would walk into the room, assess my bindings, and then shrug helplessly. Even he wouldn't be able to get out of this.

I could still hear the machine chugging outside. Apparently their Seeker Replacement Program was planned on a grander scale than any of us realized. But there was one question that still didn't have an answer, and it chewed on me relentlessly: *why?* I simply couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer that fit the facts. Someone, or someones, had gone through a lot of trouble to set this warehouse up, experiment and learn how to copy Inhumans, create a viable method to do so, and then start replacing Syndicate operatives.

And now they had a copy of me.

A Rose pod person ... the thought sent shivers down my spine. It was only the context of my experiences that made me who I am now, and without that, I would be little more than a raging monster.

I hadn't seen her since the Trolls apprehended me. She could be out there right now and there was nothing I could do about it. I could only hope she would make a mistake like the Elena copy did. And Maynard knew me well enough to see it.

The click of the door startled me. As it swung open, I watched Peterson and another black-suited human push a cart with a devilish-looking device on it inside. Behind them a figure swept in wearing a thick black robe that completely shadowed its face. Its movements were so silky and smooth that it appeared to be hovering. The robed figure moved behind me with no sound and disappeared from my field of vision.

The human with Peterson, dressed in a black suit, crisp white dress shirt, and smoky sunglasses, scooted the cart next to me. As he went about preparing it, flipping dials, attaching cables, and checking settings, Peterson stood before me grinning. Roughly rectangular, the device was the same shade of bronze as the machine outside. Thick, gaunt, black symbols were carved down the exterior that resembled a type of early cuneiform. Swinging an arm away from the device, I watched them snap on what looked like a tiny drill bit along with two other tubelike instruments.

Staring the triad of implements, I swallowed hard and looked up at the Trolls. "Can we talk about this?"

With a satisfied grunt, the man in black activated the device and stepped back. The device began to flicker with tiny lights, while a deep, powerful rumble emanated somewhere within, rolled off, and vibrated my chair.

"Don't worry," Peterson soothed as he slammed the door shut, "this will hurt—a lot."

"That's very comforting." I frowned.

Peterson and the man in black took guard positions on either side of the closed door. They kept their eyes focused directly on me, as if ready for a show.

The cloaked being swept forward and placed both of his hands on the device. Gray, slender, and hairless, with long, black fingernails, they seemed almost more dangerous than the device. Looking up into the being's face, an intense wave of fear welled up somewhere deep in my brain and began to quickly cascade down my body. As I stared at the featureless head, I couldn't tear my gaze away from the black, almond-shaped eyes. They were like a doll's eyes, glossy, and seemingly lifeless.

Dear Lord, Karlwasright.

I watched what I was certain was an alien smoothly operating the controls on the device. Looking just like the beings in the tubes in the warehouse, I knew this must also be a Maryut. I could certainly understand where the "wax people" reference came from. "So," I breathed, "mutilate any cattle lately?" I was talking out of sheer terror.

The Maryut said nothing, but continued to work.

I set my jaw. "You're gong to probe me, aren't you?"

I wasn't sure, but I think the Maryut smiled at me.

Lifting a silver, oval-shaped object from the table, the Maryut moved around in front of me and grabbed my jaw with a strength that surprised me. I tried to struggle, but its spindly fingers felt like steel clamps on my head. Forcefully opening my mouth, it then placed the silver oval on my lips. As the cold metal touched my flesh I smelled a quick stab of ozone then several lightning strikes of pain in my upper and lower jaws. Two more strikes hit my tongue, then something slick slithered down my throat. The urge to gag gripped my body like a fist, but I couldn't. Feeling an involuntary tear run down my cheek, I found I couldn't close my mouth, nor could I speak. The Maryut bobbed its head like a bird as it watched me. Emotionlessly ignoring my searing pain, it moved back to the device.

Sliding a clear tube from the rear of the device, it snapped a silver tip on it and moved toward me. Pushing my head forward, there was a pinch at the base of my skull then the sound of air being forced out of the tube. Suddenly the pain receptors in my head lit up like a Christmas tree. It felt as if my flesh were on fire. Glancing to the right, I could see my blood being sucked down the tube into the device. Darkness began to encroach on the corners of my vision.

I heard Peterson snicker in delight.

Moving back to the device, the Maryut monitored it for a moment, and apparently pleased, moved on to phase two. Swinging the arm with the triad of instruments around to my head, the Maryut pressed a button on the back of the arm. Two cylindrical instruments next to the drill bit snapped open and their

shells fell away. A robotic arm, with three-fingered claws, very similar to the ones on the machine outside, undulated and snapped angrily. The second instrument looked like a thick, silver needle almost the same diameter as the drill bit. The arm extended and grabbed the side of my face. As its claws dug into my flesh, a red targeting laser activated just below the bit.

The world around me was growing darker and darker. But I had to fight. I would fight ... it couldn't end this way.

Aligning the laser with my temple, I could hear a motor kick on. The drill bit began to spin slowly at first, but quickly picked up speed. The arm flexed and pulled the bit closer and closer to my flesh. I wanted to cry out, I wanted to scream, but the only sound was the whirring motor. I felt the bit hit my temple and dig into my flesh. Pain—indescribable pain—coursed through my head as I heard the crunch of bone and squishy slurp of brain matter. Blood spurted wildly as it continued deeper into my head. I struggled to stay conscious.

At that same moment the door was blown open, smashing against the human standing guard behind it. Three figures, clad completely from head to foot in black military garb, with the exception of a solid red stripe that ran down their facemasks and terminated just above their Kevlar chest armor, stormed into the room with their weapons at the ready. Armed what looked like slightly modified P90s, the commandoes mowed down the other human and turned their attention to Peterson and the Maryut.

Without hesitation, the Maryut defended itself. Springing over the device and me, it tore into the first commando with a ferocity I had only witnessed in raging Werewolves. Using its black fingernails like weapons, the Maryut shredded the commando. Shrieking from its tiny mouth, I could hear several more of the beings answering the call somewhere outside the room.

The remaining commandos leveled their weapons and brought the Maryut down in a hail of bullets. It fell to the ground convulsing, its body melting beneath a thick, fluorescent green slime that oozed out of the bullet holes.

Peterson backed away from the melee and lifted his P90. Spinning around me, he pressed the barrel into my head. "Move and I shoot," he threatened.

The two commandos paused, but not for long.

I heard a click on their weapons before each pulled the trigger. The muzzles flashed and a single bullet from each hit Peterson. With a grunt, his head snapped back and he tumbled to the concrete floor. Charging around me, one of the commandos clicked his weapon back to automatic and squeezed off three quick bursts into the copy. Peterson was dead.

The other commando moved to the device and somehow deactivated it. As the thrum of the machine faded, I felt the suction behind my eyes ease and finally stop. As the commando pulled the tubes and needles from me, my head fell forward limply. As he kicked the machine into the corner with his booted foot, the commando fired, destroying it.

The first commando moved back around and knelt down in front of me. With his black-gloved hand, he lifted my chin and looked at my face. "Christ," he muttered.

"What?" the remaining commando asked as he circled around to the open door. Pressing his shoulder against the doorframe, he leveled his P90 and watched for reinforcements.

"Look at what this damned thing did to her," the commando in front of me replied. "It's holding her mouth open and tongue in place with thin spikes."

That would explain the serious pain I was in.

"And something's running down her throat," the commando added on further inspection. "Savages," he muttered angrily. "Hold on," he addressed me, "this is going to suck."

He ran his finger around the edge of the silver oval on my mouth. I heard a small click and a sudden release from the pain. As the commando pulled the oval free, I felt him removing the tube from my throat. Pain surged up my throat as he pulled more and more of the yellowish tube free. It seemed to continue endlessly. Finally, feeling the end catch at the back of my throat, the commando pulled it free and tossed it away. My head fell forward again as I retched. I felt the darkness drawing me in further and further as I stared at the red mess I had just created on my shirt, pants, and the floor in front of me.

Pulling a pair of bolt cutters from a bag strapped to his back, the commando set about freeing me as his partner fired into the warehouse. "We have company," he advised as he pulled the trigger again.

"Shit," the commando replied. He started to work faster.

"Toby," I breathed, "and Karl."

The commando didn't reply.

"My friends," I stammered wearily, "help them. Please..."

As the cuffs were cut, my body fell forward and spilled out of the chair. I hit the concrete with a smack sending reverberations of pain down my entire body. Swinging around the chair, the commando dropped down and scooped me into his arms. He slung me over his shoulder with ease; I hung limp, unable to complain.

"Time to go!" the commando shouted.

Pulling a grenade from his belt, his partner nodded. Yanking the pin, he rolled it underhand like a bowler and stood behind the doorframe. The commando carrying me did the same. Lifting my head, I watched another alien just make it to the door as the explosion hit. A fireball ripped through the door incinerating the shrieking alien and the Troll right behind it.

Not waiting for the smoke to clear, the commandos charged out of the door and into the warehouse. I could hear the compressed sound of their P90s firing, but it sounded distant, as if I were listening at the end of a tunnel. My body was jostled as they avoided more attackers on their escape route. A stream of blood was seeping from the holes in my temple and the back of my neck. As it ran down over my face, I watched it creating a nearly solid trail of crimson behind us.

I couldn't hold on any longer. I closed my eyes.

Chapter 29

I opened my eyes but found only darkness, yet I felt better. The pain in my hand and shoulder was

almost completely gone, while only a dull ache remained in my head and neck. I had slept, but for how long and where, was a mystery. Reaching up, I found my hands blocked slightly above my chest. Running them over the ceiling, my fingers slid across the ruffled, silky interior. I could feel the end just beyond my toes, and the soft pillow behind my head. I knew exactly where I was:

A coffin.

Relaxing my body, I closed my eyes again. It had been some time since I spent a night in a coffin's claustrophobic confine. It wasn't all together unpleasant. There was something about being completely enclosed in a soft, warm place that was almost like being a fetus in the womb again. Odd that a normal human's life span began and ended with this similar sensation. Except, of course, most didn't get to actually experience the luxury of their coffin. Their dead vessels were merely stuffed inside and lowered into the ground. The comfort of the coffin was only a final illusion that our dearly departed was safe and secure. They were meant to bring more comfort to the living than the dead.

I heard the squeak of the hinges and slowly opened my eyes. It didn't take long for my eyes to adjust to the low light in the room. Tall, flickering, candelabras occupied just about every empty surface. The room's brick walls were painted black and covered with heavy, purple, velvet drapes. Another coffin, with a glossy black finish and red satin interior, sat on the opposite side of the room. Two beautiful love seats, almost the same deep purple as the drapes, sat facing each other in the center of the room while a large, black marble fireplace occupied most of the front wall. I think Dracula's personal interior decorator wandered into this room and vomited.

"Are you all right, Rose?"

Recognizing the voice, I slowly turned to find him standing behind the coffin, his arm elegantly draped over the open lid. Catching his unearthly blue eyes, I dropped my gaze slightly so I was staring at his nose. I wasn't going to let him put the Whammy on me again. Not this time. "Jared," I greeted him coolly.

He wore only a beautiful black silk robe. His hair was a little more ruffled than usual, but still nearly perfect. His muscular, nearly porcelain-colored chest was peeking through the v-neck the robe created.

"I trust you slept well?"

Sitting up in the coffin, I again ran my fingers down the silky lining. "I haven't slept in a coffin in a long time," I admitted. "Not since I was a newborn vampire."

"Why did you stop using them?" Jared asked.

"Choice," I admitted. "Trying to maintain the illusion of humanity is difficult when you have a coffin in your home."

"Why bother maintaining an illusion?" Jared asked, almost pointedly. Turning away, he didn't give me time to answer the question. "Your friends are safe."

I hopped out of the coffin, my ears perked. "Toby and Karl?"

Jared nodded as he moved toward the love seats in the center of the room. "They are recuperating as well, and are protected from my brood." Sinking down into one of the posh seats, he crossed his legs and adjusted his robe. He motioned gracefully for me to join him.

After I moved slowly across the room, I warily sat down on the opposite loveseat and waited.

Lifting a cell phone from his robe pocket, Jared then flipped it open and activated the walkie-talkie function. Three quick beeps signaled the channel was open. "Luther," he said expectantly.

"Yes?" Came the reply.

"Breakfast," he instructed the man and let the channel close. Quickly pressing the talk button again, he smiled at me. "For two."

Once he snapped the phone shut, he slipped it back into his pocket, then folded his hands neatly on his lap. "You have been betrayed."

The words slapped me across the face, and the casualness with which he spoke them made the attack all the more jarring. I placed my arm on the couch as I felt like I was reeling. I wasn't ready for that. I didn't even have a cup of coffee in me yet.

"You have been played for the fool," Jared continued, "but I saw through his plans and sent in my soldiers to save you."

It made sense that Jared had his own commando unit. Perfectly reasonable, in fact ... in the Bizarro Universe I was apparently still in. I sat forward on the couch expectantly. "Who betrayed me?"

"Ah," Jared said, looking up. "Breakfast is served."

Luther, a stubby man with a penciled-on mustache and goatee, wore a completely black suit with an ivory white tie. Reddish fang marks on his throat, just above his perfectly pressed collar, told me that even the help wasn't above being fed on. I assumed he was Jared's personal attendant, and snack when the occasion called for it. Luther was a Ghoul, a human in the service of a Vampire for the promise of being turned. Holding a tray with two cups and a coffee warmer, he quietly went about setting them on the table before us.

I pulled my gaze away from Luther and back to the Master Vampire across from me. "Who betrayed me, Jared?"

Jared wagged his finger disdainfully in front of his face. "We do not speak in front of the servants. They are not worthy of our conversation."

But Luther was worthy enough to feed from? I hated all this aristocratic Vampire bullshit. I simply had no use for it. Sitting back in the couch in a huff, I waited for Luther to pour two mugs of thick, crimson blood, and be dismissed by Jared. Lifting the mug, Jared recrossed his legs and sipped the blood as if it were his morning coffee.

"I apologize for having to discipline you in front of Luther," he said slowly, "but in time, you will learn your place."

"My place?" I angrily sat forward. "I don't belong to you, Jared. Never have, never will."

Jared's eyes flashed black for a moment as anger gripped him. He didn't like hearing the word "no." Still very intent on me joining his brood, he knew, someday, if he wore me down enough, I would give in. This was his plan: persistence.

Of course, threatening a Master Vampire in the heart of his lair probably wasn't the wisest idea I've ever had. "I apologize," I acquiesced. "I am a guest in your home, and I spoke out of turn." I was just so tired of being jerked around. I knew that no matter how much he wanted me, it wouldn't stop him from killing me right here on the spot. I had to mind my manners.

Jared swallowed his anger and dismissed my apology with a wave. "Don't give it another thought," he said politely.

Apparently he wasn't going to come right out and say who betrayed me. I had to take the long way around. "Jared," I said carefully, "why did you bring me here? Why did you rescue me?"

"It seemed the chivalrous thing to do," the Master Vampire replied, then let out with a gentle laugh. "You were the damsel in distress. It was my duty to rescue you."

I, like every girl, had visions of a white knight galloping in to save me, but rarely did he wear full riot gear and pack an automatic weapon. "But how did you know I was there?"

"I maintain a vast network of..." He paused and tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Let's call them information brokers."

"Spies?"

"That would be another name," Jared confirmed.

I shook my head in disbelief. I had no idea the lengths he would go to. "You were spying on me?"

"Keeping tabs," he corrected me as he took another sip of the blood. "Sounds less nefarious that way." Jared cocked his head slightly. "Is your beverage not to your liking?"

I looked down at the mug of warm blood and realized I had been too wrapped up in the conversation to even acknowledge it. After what he just told me, I wasn't sure I wanted it anyway. Probably laced with a knock out drug or something of the like. I placed my fingers on the mug and spun it gently. "Just not very hungry."

"Ah," Jared said with a nod. "Too bad. Good vintage this morning. Twenty-five year old Filipino girl. Very smooth."

His comment made me shiver. *He kept humans like wine now?* I could only imagine what his collection looked like. I wiped my hand over my eyes. Sometimes it felt like Jared and I were from completely different species. Although probably, in reality, he reminded me of the Vampire I used to be. Maybe that's why I hated him. It was like seeing a reflection of who I once was, and completely capable of becoming again.

"I can sense that something's making you uncomfortable," Jared soothed me. "Perhaps we can continue this discussion later?"

"No," I said a little too quickly and paused. "I'm fine," I assured him. "Please, let's continue."

Jared forced a smile. "If you wish." He took the final drink of blood and set the empty mug back on the coffee table. "Someone is trying to subvert the Brimstone Syndicate."

I heard his words eerily echo Chithula's. "Why do you care?"

"I do not," Jared stated clearly. "I care about you. This ill-advised loyalty to the Syndicate, I see..." He ran his finger over his lips. "I see that this is important to you. So it has become important to me."

"All right." I took his words carefully. Not everything here was as it seemed, but his explanation made more sense than others I had heard. "Who is trying to subvert Brimstone?"

"Operatives within the government," Jared answered.

I felt the tale take a big turn toward *The X-Files*. "You mean *the* United States Government?"

Jared nodded. "They want control of the Syndicate. For too long, Brimstone has been acting like a shadow government for Inhumans. The United States Government simply wants what it feels should be rightfully theirs, and they are in the beginning stages of a full coup."

It didn't make sense. "Why?"

"The whole coup can be boiled down to one of the oldest motives in the book." Jared frowned. "Control. The government has been working for decades to control every action, every *thought* of the population. This had been in the works for a long, long while, and only now is the time correct."

I stared in amazement. "How do you know all of this?"

"I observe, my dear," the Master Vampire answered. "I have been watching this country since before it actually became one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

"That would make you over two hundred and thirty years old." I calculated quickly, but I was certain he was actually much older.

Jared nodded. "I have seen it decay from a government by the people, for the people, to a corrupt organization of greed, ambition, and racism. They have slowly become aware of the Syndicate's worldwide operation, and now they want it all."

I shook my head. "But the Maryut in the warehouse, how do they fit in?"

"They are merely kin to Chithula," Jared replied.

"They're Jinn?" I asked.

"Yes," Jared replied. "Somehow, there has been some kind of partnership between the Jinn and the government. Details are sketchy," he apologized. "But we can trace their involvement back to at least the 1950s."

My mouth fell agape. "So the Maryut are really the aliens of abduction mythology?"

"Most likely." Jared nodded.

I sat back in the cushy love seat and considered his words. As frightening as it was, it did seem to make sense. I looked back up at Jared. "But why now?"

"It's very simple. They are on a very specific timetable," Jared answered, "laid out in great detail by its architect."

I cocked an eyebrow. It was the question I was waiting to ask: "Who?"

Jared lifted his mug to his lips and took a long, deep drink of the blood. Pulling it away from his mouth, his gaze settled uneasily on me. "Chithula."

I felt my heart sink.

The Master Vampire studied my reaction, and seemed somehow satisfied. "Chithula gave you a name, did he not?"

"Overseer Matthew Sumner," I answered.

Jared nodded. "Has your investigation uncovered any evidence that Overseer Sumner is involved?"

I thought for a moment. "Not directly. But there is the question of where Maynard's orders to eliminate the nests were coming from. That would seem to implicate Overseer Sumner as he is the only soul who gives marching instructions to North American offices."

"So it would seem," Jared agreed. "Or is that what Chithula wanted you to believe?"

I wasn't sure how to respond.

"The Ifrit has been manipulating you," Jared accused, "pointing you toward clues that supported his agenda."

A horrible ball of worry began churning in my belly. "And what is his agenda?"

"Ask yourself this," Jared started calmly. "Why would one of the most powerful beings known to the Syndicate live in the desert outside of Las Vegas?"

"He said he was fulfilling his destiny," I replied.

"His agenda," Jared corrected me. "He made a deal with the devil, as it were. He's working with the government, and once you eliminated Sumner, he would be installed as the new North American Overseer. Merely a figurehead position as the government would run the Syndicate through him, but it would give him unlimited scope to basically do whatever he wanted. He could seek all the power and glory he wanted right under the government's nose."

I ran the information in my head. That's why Chithula was testing me when we spoke. He wasn't trying to find out if I fit in some sort of prophecy; he was looking for a patriot to do his bidding. I was loyal to the Syndicate and didn't want to see it falter. I took the bait hook, line, and sinker. I was his patsy, his Lee Harvey Oswald. Carefully controlling every step of my investigation, even showing me pieces of the larger government conspiracy, he wanted me to come to the inevitable conclusion that Overseer Sumner was the villain of the piece and take him down. That way he could ascend to the position of Overseer and have me safely at his side.

"And the copying operation?" I asked.

"A two-pronged purpose," Jared replied. "The first is simply as you would imagine, to replace Syndicate operatives with clones who will be loyal to the new order. That would ease the transition and ensure the government maintains control. This operation is in its beginning stages, but has already spread to every major urban center in the country. The second purpose," he said slowly and deliberately, "is a bit more wicked."

I leaned forward. "How so?"

"Some Inhumans have amazing abilities," Jared stated. "They have built-in biological weapons, such as the power to bend light around them and become invisible, or create thick, nearly impenetrable armor that can look like regular clothing, highly advanced regeneration capabilities, immortality," he added with a nod to me. "The list goes on. The government wants this biotechnology for itself."

"The experiments," I breathed.

Jared nodded. "They are using the cloning operation as a cover to abduct and experiment on Inhumans. And we have no rights in their eyes; we are merely wild animals to be captured and studied. There is nothing we can do."

"We can stop this," I said, shaking my head.

Jared smiled. "Indeed."

It seemed to make sense, but could I really trust Jared? Was he telling me the truth, or just trying to bend me to his will? "I need some kind of proof," I said, readdressing Jared. "Something more than just your word."

Jared nodded. "I understand. And if it were I in your position, I would ask the same." He again retrieved his cell phone. "Luther? Please see that my other guest is ready for visitors. Ms. Webb and I will be down shortly." He paused. "And have the Werewolf and Goblin meet us there."

I cocked my head. "Other guest?"

Snapping the phone shut, Jared smiled politely. "It's a surprise."

Chapter 30

After excusing himself for a few minutes to throw on a pair of overly expensive leather pants, a white dress shirt fashionably untucked and unbuttoned nearly halfway, and to run a comb through his hair, the

Master Vampire had personally escorted me through his lair. It was massive. Never having seen it before, inside or out, I had no idea he lived in such luxury. Far removed from the overt gothicness of his personal chamber, the rest of the compound was beautifully, and more importantly, tastefully decorated. Nothing seemed to be out of place as everything had a purpose. It was feng shui in its purest, and most exquisite form.

Oddly, or perhaps I shouldn't think it so odd after all, there were no windows or mirrors in the compound. The mirrors were a given as they became useless decorations in a Vampire's home, but the lack of windows surprised even me. This place was as far removed from the rest of the world as possible. With no sense of day or night, it was a completely enclosed space. I imagined it felt like living

on the moon. There was no need to go outside, or to meddle in the affairs of mankind, as everything they wanted was here. That was how Jared kept himself and his brood off the Syndicate's radar. But certainly it must be a slow, and painful death sentence. As Vampires age, their insanity grows. To be locked up in one place for the rest of eternity, despite how lavish it is, must be maddening.

Vampires of all styles and heritages were represented in his brood, but they all had one thing in common: they were utterly beautiful. Every creature seemed powerful, elegant, and a perfect representation of Hollywood vampirism. Swathed in expensive suits, lavish gowns, and sipping blood from champagne glasses, these monsters seemed eternally ready for the ball. This was Vampire high society. These weren't the gutter rats I was routinely forced to clean out of abandoned houses or dirty back alleys, these were cultured and sophisticated reflecting Jared's image.

And it was grotesque.

There was something horrible about them, something just a bit off. They seemed less like individuals and more like an extension of Jared's vast collection. Almost stale, they were nothing more than decorations and everyone had their place. It was a mockery of life, as if Jared had sought to simulate it but hadn't quite hit the mark. The atmosphere held a heavy air of mustiness that could easily be coming from the compound, or the Vampires themselves.

Moving past the beautiful decorations and gorgeous, lifeless Vampires, Jared led me through two double doors and down into a wide stairwell. Nothing like the rest of his compound, the walls were composed of stark, cold, gray cement with ceiling-mounted light fixtures doing their best to fight back the encroaching shadows. Once we hit a midway landing, we turned left and continued to circle further down. I had no idea how far underground we were at this point, or if we were underground at all. The lack of windows throughout the compound threw me off. I had no clue where we were.

After we arrived at the bottom, we moved into a bare, square room. This place felt cold as the darkness worked hard to swallow it. Large, metal grates occupied the center of the floor and I could hear the constant buzz of powerful electric generators like swarms of bees below. The concrete had large cracks running through it from age and stress, while walls were stained from damaged water pipes. Puddles were accumulating in corners as well. Hallways stretched off in three directions with the same general design as the stairwell. It seemed old, as if designed in the 1940's or '50's by government contractors. The idea didn't surprise me that much. Jared was easily two hundred and thirty years old. The idea that he lived in the same compound for at least fifty years didn't seem that far-fetched.

"Where are we?" I asked, my voice echoing off the hard walls.

"My basement," Jared replied as he started toward the center hallway.

Thanks, Captain Obvious, was the first thing that came to mind. "I mean, what is this place?"

"My basement," Jared reiterated with the same tone and inflection as before.

I would have slapped him if I didn't think he would turn around and tear my head off. Following him down the hallway, I ran my fingers over the heavy metal doors that were recessed into the walls every six feet. A simple black number was painted near the top of each door, starting at thirty-five and counting up, but that was all the decoration to be found. The doors had no windows, and only a simple, round, silver handle. Listening to the sound of my shoes echo as we moved briskly, we turned the corner at the end of the hall and I spotted several familiar faces. Pushing past Jared, I charged down the hall and skidded to a stop right before them. With a smile, I threw my arms around Toby and patted Karl on the

head. Not even minding that some of Karl's excess hair gel stuck to my palm, I wiped off my hand on my shirt with a laugh. Luther was standing silently behind them with his hands clasped patiently behind his back. I nodded to him to acknowledge his presence.

I looked into Toby's eyes. They seemed tired and weak, but happy to see me. "Are you okay?" I asked, noticing the edges of the thick, white bandage that ran down the back of his neck and disappeared into his shirt collar.

Toby nodded. "I'm okay. Jared's medics insisted on the bandage."

"Can't have someone with an open wound walking among Vampires," Jared commented as he stopped behind me.

I understood and turned back to my partner. "And the TS-1138?" I asked apologetically, remembering how I had injected him back at the warehouse.

"Feel kind of icky," Toby admitted. "Still pretty groggy from the drug."

"And what am I?" Karl asked spitefully, "Chopped liver? That Rose pod person nearly popped my head like a pimple."

"Gross," I commented, then snickered. Crouching down, I looked the Goblin in the eyes. "Karl, are you okay?"

Karl shrugged. "I'm fine."

I waited for a moment, hoping there would be more after the point he made to be asked. When nothing came, I stood up and shook my head. I turned back to our host, who seemed to have, surprisingly, treated all three of us rather well. "What now?"

"Now," Jared said, drawing out the word, "we meet our mystery guest."

Why did I suddenly feel like I was on a game show?

Jared looked past me and nodded to Luther. Politely squeezing through, Luther moved to the gray door labeled seventy-six before us. Flattening his tie out of habit, he reached for the silver handle, pushed the door open, and stepped aside. Without hesitation, Jared swept through the open door and vanished from my sight. Luther motioned with his hand for us to follow his master. I took a tentative step toward the door, still not entirely at ease with this place, or our host. This could easily be another trap, and I was getting kind of tired of rushing headlong into them without a second thought. Glancing back hesitantly to Toby, I turned and walked into the room.

But stopped two steps in.

The mystery guest was bolted to the wall with heavy iron restraints around his chest, wrists, legs, and ankles. Each of the iron straps had four heavy bolts in them and seemed to smolder faintly green indicating they had been magically imbued. Multiple glowing amulets hung around his neck and seemed to weigh him down. They, and the restraints, were draining his power, ensuring that he could not escape or injure anyone. His heavy robes gone, he looked beaten and abused; the jagged bite wounds in his neck still easily visible. Angry wounds sliced across his bare chest as if he had been whipped repeatedly for information. His red eyes looked tired and weak. I knew he had given up. He had tried to fight the

interrogation, and from the look of his face and body had taken it for quite some time, yet he had finally broken.

"Lucas Nash," I breathed. I turned to Jared who was leaning casually against the far wall. "How?"

"When he abducted you," Jared said. "I took him after you attacked. I keep a Warlock handy for just such an occasion."

I remembered the unnatural cloud that rolled into Lucas' lair and scooped him up. I thought at the time it was his cohorts retrieving him, but why did he hit me with lightning during Lucas' capture? I stared warily at Jared. It occurred to me that Lucas didn't appear so much as if he had been interrogated, but rather *punished*. The little hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I hate it when they do that.

"What did you do to him?" Toby asked as he stepped around me.

"Only what was necessary," Jared answered.

"Wow, tenderized Warlock on aisle seven," Karl joked uncomfortably.

I couldn't stop staring at the battered form of Lucas on the wall. "How does he fit in to all of this?"

"He is one of Chithula's lieutenants," Jared answered.

Toby wrapped his hand gently around my arm and whispered into my ear. "My spider sense is tingling."

Not exactly sure why, but I nodded in agreement. I walked slowly across the concrete floor toward the Warlock.

"Don't get too close," Jared warned me. "Be careful."

I glanced oddly at the Master Vampire. "If he's properly restrained," I pointed to the amulets, "why do I have to be careful?"

Jared crossed his arms and scowled at me. "Caution," he said finally, "is all I'm advising. Caged animals are often the most dangerous."

Something was wrong. I looked at the broken Warlock. I wasn't sure why, but I felt a deep sense of pity for him. I had almost killed him, but now I was concerned if he lived or died.

Lucas painfully lifted his head and stared at me. His eyes were weary, yet there was a spark there. Of what, I wasn't sure, but something in his eyes couldn't be broken by Jared. A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead. As I realized he was focusing his power, I heard his voice echo in my mind. "*Help me.*"

I fought hard to contain my surprise. Taking a slow step back, I turned to Jared. I couldn't let on that Lucas had been able to overcome his magical bonds. In any case, I wasn't exactly sure what to do.

"What information did you recover from him?"

"Everything I told you before," Jared replied. "The conspiracy, about Chithula, your part in this, he is the source of that information."

I had to test his knowledge. "What about Cantrix Unlimited?"

"I am unfamiliar with that term," Jared said, shaking his head. "He didn't say anything about that."

That seemed a little strange. "What about the Sprites sent to kill us?" I asked. "Why would he do that if he needed us for the cloning operation?"

"Plans change," Jared almost spit the words at me. "Perhaps you were to be eliminated, then Chithula changed his mind? I don't know. I was concerned with the bigger picture, not insignificant details."

"That insignificant detail almost killed us," Toby corrected Jared. "Doesn't seem *soinsignificant* to us."

A shadow passed over Jared's face, apparently unappreciative of our line of questioning. I think he wanted to be the hero of the piece and win my undying gratitude, but my instincts were starting to tell me otherwise.

"I want Lucas released into my custody," I commanded. "He is wanted by the Brimstone Syndicate for his crimes."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Rose," Jared answered matter-of-factly. "You have no authority here."

"You have no choice in the matter," I argued. "You are impeding an official investigation and I will be forced to act accordingly."

Jared's eyes washed over black as he chewed on my threat.

I started to bite my lip. This wasn't a good tactical situation. We were in a small, concrete room with a Master Vampire, his servant, and only one exit. The odds that a Goblin, a Werewolf unable to transform, and I could take Jared weren't that spectacular. And if we were somehow able to miraculously take down Jared, there was still the matter of the nearly fifty Vampires waiting upstairs for us. I had to choose diplomacy over raw violence. "You said you wanted to help me, right?"

The Master Vampire stared at me angrily with his eerie black eyes. He remained silent.

"This is how you can help me," I stated. "Release Lucas to me, and I'll see to it that he's processed at Brimstone." I waited. As I searched his face for any sign he was buying my story, I felt something heavy materialize on the waistband of my pants. Reaching back, I felt the familiar cold, hard grip of my Beretta. I glanced to Lucas. Sweat was pouring off his face. He was indeed powerful. I returned my attention to Jared while motioning for Toby to move behind me and take the weapon. "This is the right thing to do."

"Do you think me a fool?" Jared asked angrily.

Master Vampires were the only beings who still used the word "fool." I don't know, it just sounds dated and cheesy. "That's not what I'm saying, Jared," I retorted as Toby's fingers brushed against the skin on the small of my back. As he took the pistol, I moved strategically between Jared and Toby to hide it. Our odds had just improved slightly. "There are laws to be followed. He's a wanted criminal and I have a job to do."

Jared took a step toward me.

"Please, let me do my job," I urged. "Don't make me kill you."

That was the exact wrong thing to say.

Jared charged.

As I dropped down, Toby lifted the pistol and fired, hitting the Master Vampire solidly in the chest.

"Karl," I barked, "free Lucas."

As Jared stumbled back, I leapt and tackled him. After spilling to the ground, he slapped me hard across the face and dug his claws into my side. Grunting in pain, I lunged for his throat. The wound in his chest was already starting to heal. I felt my heart sink. This was a battle we weren't going to win.

He caught my head only inches from his throat. My mouth wide and fangs bared, I strained with every ounce of my strength. I heard the crack of my pistol again and saw Luther fall into a dead heap next to us. While I was distracted, Jared brought his leg up and kicked me off. I hit the concrete wall with a thump and crumbled to the floor.

Looking up, I watched Jared leap to his feet as Toby carefully aimed the pistol. Toby's face was cool and calm as he took his time. Toby pulled the trigger again, and the Master Vampire's head snapped angrily back as a bullet ripped into his skull. Toby fired again, and again.

Jared finally fell.

I heard something clatter to the ground at my feet. Turning my head, I saw Lucas slide off the wall and yank the amulets around his neck free. Karl stood warily before him, several bolts from the restraints still in his hands.

Cracking his knuckles as if ready to play the piano, the Warlock snatched Jared from the floor with an unseen tendril of power. Holding the Master Vampire in the air, Lucas gritted his teeth. Swinging Jared across the room, Lucas slammed him against the same wall he had just been pinned to. When he snapped his fingers, the restraints on the floor disappeared and reappeared around Jared's arms and legs.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, Lucas turned to me. "Take my hand," he said, his low, gravelly voice oozing with raw, undiluted rage. "All of you! Take my hand now!"

Standing slowly, I watched Jared struggling against the restraints. The concrete around the bolts was beginning to crack. I looked to Lucas' outstretched hand. I wasn't sure what to do. When, and it was just a matter of time, Jared freed himself, he would kill me, yet Lucas could easily do the same.

It was a leap of faith.

Had to make the decision right now. Snatching Karl from the ground, I grabbed Toby and took Lucas' hand. The Warlock turned and grinned eerily at me. I had a sudden sinking feeling as the pungent odor of sulfur hit my nose.

Everything melted away.

My senses reeled as we teleported.

I could feel my body hurtling and spinning through space. I could see Toby and Lucas next to me, while Karl, still in my arms, stared aghast into the emptiness. There was nothing but blackness. With nothing to key off, I had no way to tell if we were moving up, down, left, or right. Only the air pressure on my face confirmed we were moving at all. The world around us slowly began to reappear from the void. I became aware of walls and floor beneath my feet. Colors seemed to spill down through the darkness like wet paint over an empty canvas. As it hardened and dried, filling in the lines and creating a cohesive image, I finally felt the spinning stop. I crumbled to my knees like someone who had been on the tilt-o-whirl too many times.

Karl looked up at me with bleary eyes. "I think I'm gonna spew."

Setting the Goblin on the floor, I turned him away, just in case, and patted him gently on the back. Standing slowly, I looked around. The now familiar writhing ball of snakes again appeared in my guts as my gaze settled on the tubes hanging from the ceiling and the gray, motionless bodies within. Lucas had brought us back to the cloning warehouse.

Toby was standing to my left with an almost vacant expression. My Beretta was hanging loosely in his hand as he wobbled slightly. "What a rush." Toby looked at me with a crooked smile. "Stop the world." He forced a chuckle. "I want to get off."

I think that was his first experience teleporting. Placing my hand gently on his shoulder, I patted him on the back as I took my pistol and cradled it in my fingers. "Just breathe, T. It'll wear off in a minute."

I glanced around the warehouse nervously. Moving past the Werewolf, my gaze settled on Lucas. With his eyes closed, he was breathing in slowly from his nose and exhaling through his mouth. It seemed even he was waiting for the effects to wear off.

"All right," I started, "I saved you. Now tell me what the hell is going on." Direct and right to the point.
Sounded forceful, right?

"I believe without me," Lucas oozed, "you three would still be in Jared's compound."

"We'll call it a team effort," I offered.

"I'll agree to that," Lucas conceded.

Toby looked over the warehouse. "Why did you bring us here?"

"I jumped blindly," Lucas replied. "I did not have a destination in mind. It seems some force greater than myself drew us here."

"Don't give me that fate or higher power crap," I barked. I used my forearm to slam Lucas into the machinery. Holding him there, I felt my eyes shift to black. "There's a reason you brought us here. Now," I pushed my Beretta into the fleshy spot between his chin and throat, "we're going to play a game. I ask questions and you answer. If you refuse," I forcefully reminded him of the weapon, "you die."

Jared held very still. The odds were good that he wouldn't be able to act before I could pull the trigger. He was powerful, but still human after all. One bullet was all I needed.

"Why?" It was blunt, but it was the answer I wanted most.

"One way or another, there's going to be a new world order," the Warlock replied, "and I would rather rule in Hell than serve in Heaven."

That, at least, was the truth. "You used to be one of the good guys," I said, remorsefully remembering what Elena told me about how he used to work side-by-side with the Syndicate.

"I still am," Lucas countered. "While you were bumbling about on your pointless investigation, I was saving lives!"

I pushed the barrel harder into his flesh. "Like the Seekers you and Chithula killed to make the clones? How did you save their lives, Lucas?"

"They're still alive," Lucas croaked.

His answer stunned me for a moment. *Was there still a possibility the other Seekers were alive? Was he lying, or merely trying to save his own ass?*

"We needed to keep them alive," Lucas explained. "In case a clone was lost, we could make another using the original. I kept them alive."

Made sense. "Where are they?"

Lucas' eyes nervously darted away from me. He was searching for something, but I wasn't sure for what. *Could he have been motioning toward the captive Seekers, or checking if reinforcements were on the way?*

Couldn't take the chance. Had to know for sure. I jammed my Beretta hard enough into his chin it almost broke skin. "I said, where are they? Answer me, Lucas!"

"They will kill me," Lucas said through gritted teeth. "Do you understand that? If I help you, Chithula will kill me!"

"I don't think you understand," I explained with a devilish grin. "I will kill you right now unless you help me immediately. Does that make more sense?" I might just kill him anyway. He was starting to piss me off.

And apparently I was getting on his nerves as well. "That's it. I'm done," Lucas breathed.

I cocked my eyebrow in surprise. "Beg pardon?"

"I've played long enough. I'm bored of this game," he said with a sigh.

I felt a blast of energy kick into my chest and knock me back. I hit the concrete wall with a thump and crumbled. Spilling to the floor, I rolled onto my back, took aim, and pulled the trigger.

Click.

I snapped the safety on, then off, and pulled the trigger. The Beretta clicked in my hand as if it were empty. Thumbing the release, I pulled the clip free and stared at the full load inside. Jamming the clip

back in, I manually chambered another round and pulled the trigger again. Still nothing. Lifting myself into a sitting position, I stared at the Warlock and shook my head. "Crap."

Lucas smiled. Raising his hand, Lucas then waved it over his chest healing all of his wounds. A dark red substance, almost resembling blood, oozed from his flesh and slithered over his body. It moved with intelligence, pooling around his neck, wrists, and just above his ankles. As it did, the basic shape of a robe began to emerge. Holding out his hand, a pair of smoky black sunglasses materialized in his palm.

Slipping them over his crimson eyes, he folded his arms across his chest and drew his hands into the sleeves. He again looked like the Warlock who had abducted me rather than the nearly broken husk of a man strapped to Jared's wall.

I drew my knees up to my chest and rested my arms on them. He had been toying with me, knowing he was in full control of the situation. He used us to escape, and now we had outlived our usefulness. I should've known.

Lucas rubbed below his chin. "That really hurt. Let's play a new game," he suggested. "Let's see how long you can survive before I kill you. Toby," Lucas sneered, "would you be so kind as to restrain Rose?"

My eyes widened in disbelief.

Without hesitation, Toby reached down and lifted me easily off the floor. Spinning me around, he slammed me against the wall and pinned my arms behind my back. "Don't struggle, Rosy," the Werewolf breathed, "I don't want to have to hurt you."

I was too dumbfounded to speak. *Was Toby one of Chithula's clones now, or was Toby simply a traitor?* I couldn't believe that. No, I would not believe that.

"Hey, puppy!" Karl's shrill voice hit my ears. "What the hell are you doing?"

I looked down to see Karl kicking Toby in the shin. Unfortunately, our situation was not improving.

Karl kicked Toby hard again. "Let Rose go before I kick your furry ass!"

"Karl!" I shouted. "Get out of here!"

"I think we've had enough of you." Lucas laughed at the Goblin. Pointing his finger at Karl, I watched the Goblin lift off the ground and spin helplessly into the air. A yellowish bubble of energy encircled Karl. The Warlock let the ball bounce to the floor. Karl was tossed angrily about inside.

"I'm a freakin' soccer ball!" Karl yelled in dismay, though his voice was muffled inside.

Lucas laughed out loud. "I hadn't thought of that! You do look like a soccer ball." Grabbing his robe, he took three steps and punted Karl. I heard my little green friend screaming as he ricocheted off the wall and sailed off into the warehouse.

"You bastard!" I scolded.

Toby twisted my arm harder. "Shut up!"

Lucas walked around Toby. Leaning against the wall next to me, he chuckled. "You see, Rose," he

smiled broadly, "I was merely giving you the illusion of control." He paused. "Do you know how difficult it was to bioengineer the Maryut to look like other Inhumans, or set up Cantrix Unlimited to pay off that whining Master Vampire Asp?" He stared at me. "Or how much work I had to do to hide the experiments? That kind of magic isn't easy, you know. You've become a serious pain in the ass, Rose Webb. I'm glad the order has finally come down to terminate you."

I stared at the Warlock. "Chithula wants me dead?"

Lucas nodded. "And it's about time. Do you know how much that bite you gave me hurts?" He pointed to the still apparent wound on his throat. It was the one thing he couldn't heal.

"Maybe as much as a Gargoyle bite?" I asked.

"You met my Gargoyle?" Lucas snickered. "Isn't he cute?"

"As a button." I grimaced.

"You want to know the best part?" Lucas asked with a smirk.

I nodded. "What?"

Leaning close, Lucas placed his hand gently on my face. "Jared was right about everything."

Shivers ran down my back as his lips brushed against my ear. I gritted my teeth. That's what I was waiting to hear.

Throwing my head back, I crushed the bridge of Toby's nose. With a yelp, the Werewolf stumbled back, releasing me. Grabbing Lucas, I flipped the Warlock around and slid my arm around his throat. I had to act quickly in order to remove his chance to retaliate.

Pressing my hands to the sides of his head, I ripped my arms away and broke his neck. The Warlock stood wavering for a moment with an odd air of numbness, then crumbled to the ground. Lucas Nash was dead.

Standing over the Warlock's body, I saw several Trolls appear at the end of the machinery. With a war whoop, they started toward me. *Great.*

Before I could react, I felt Toby's hands grab me and slam me again into the wall. He was powerful and extremely strong, but I had one advantage. He couldn't wolf out due to the TS-1138 still in his system. We were on equal footing.

Once I wedged my foot against the wall, I kicked hard and sent both of us crashing into the machinery. As we hit, Toby twisted my arm angrily behind my back. I swallowed a scream as I felt muscles and tendons tearing. I threw my head back again hitting nearly the same spot on his nose. I felt his warm blood splatter on my neck and shoulders. Snaking my free hand down his body, I then grabbed hard between his legs ... and twisted. Toby howled in agony.

As his grip loosened, I pulled my other arm free and spun to face him. Blood was splattered across his face and running freely over his mouth from his broken nose. His eyes shifted to bright yellow.

Oh crud.

I took an uneasy step back. This wasn't my Toby. It was a pod person and he didn't have any TS-1138 in his system, and I just knew he would shred me. When Jared's commandos had rescued us, they had taken the clone instead of the real Toby. No, it was well before that. The syringe my clone had given me hadn't been TS-1138; it was probably just a mild sedative. I remembered the gold cross dangling from his throat that first appeared the night of the raid on the Vampire nest. He had been replaced then.

How did I not see it? I had been betrayed from the very beginning. Toby's behavior had changed drastically, but I hadn't seen it. They shot him on purpose during the raid to gain my sympathy. Lucas hadn't abducted me out of my apartment; Toby had given me to him. For every step forward I made in the investigation, he had somehow taken us two steps back. Toby was Chithula's inside man. The whole time, this whole investigation, my partner, the one person I trusted, was a copy.

He lurched toward me as the transformation took him. His hands became massive weapons with three inch claws while his mouth altered into a muzzle full of razor-sharp teeth. Hitting me full force, we fell back to the floor. He snapped at my throat barely missing as I held him back. Pulling away, his lips drew into a terrible sneer as he let out a guttural growl.

I threw a nearly ineffective punch into his nose, but realized the transformation had healed the break. Snapping my own claws out, I jabbed my hand into the soft flesh of his belly and pulled as hard as I could. Hot blood spilled onto me as I tore him open. As his flesh and muscles ripped, my claws hit the bony Maryut exoskeleton beneath. Toby snapped his mouth around my arm in retaliation and bit hard. I felt my skin and muscles tear and rip under the force as his teeth hit bone. Yelping, I slapped my opposite hand to his face and dug my claw into his eye. Puncturing the organ, I watched yellowish goo mixed with blood burst free.

The Werewolf roared and reared back with his hand over his eye. Rolling forward, I dropped my shoulder and shot up like a piston. The force of the blow knocked Toby backwards onto the floor and brought me to my feet.

Trolls surrounded us, but kept their distance. I think they were more interested in watching a Vampire and Werewolf battle than stopping us. Hooting and cheering, they wanted a fight to the death. And that's apparently what they were going to get. Toby wasn't interested in capturing me anymore. He was going to kill me.

Ignoring the newly gathered crowd, I turned and spotted my weapon. I hoped with Lucas dead, it would work again. There was only one way to find out. I charged for it, but the Werewolf hit me squarely in the back just as my fingers brushed the metal. I felt bits of concrete explode around us as we impacted, then his teeth digging into my back. He shook me hard while his claws tore into my sides. Pushing off the floor with every ounce of strength I had left, I then spun and slammed Toby repeatedly into the concrete. I heard bones crack under the force, but it simply wasn't enough. If a Vampire is built like a sports car for speed and power, then a Werewolf is a tank. As his teeth cracked several of my ribs, I stumbled forward.

I was going to die.

Then I saw him.

Atop the machinery like a samurai warrior, Karl the Goblin was ready for battle. The ball Lucas had contained him in had apparently burst when I killed the Warlock. He stood with a long rod of metal in his hand that I hoped to God was silver. Holding it like a bo staff, he spun it around his body in a display of

speed and grace I didn't know he was capable of.

I felt another rib crack and Toby dig his teeth deeper into my back. My knees suddenly turned into pudding and I crumpled with the wolf on my back. My face smacked the concrete hard, bloodying my nose. I saw stars twinkle in my eyes and pure pain raged along my body. Toby was digging for my heart...

Then there was a howl and release.

I felt his claws retract and suddenly the pressure on my back was gone. Summoning every last ounce of my strength, I wrenched myself forward as the gaping wound in my back screamed in pain. Blood pooled around me quickly, but I could tell by the scent it wasn't all mine. Grabbing my pistol off the ground, I rolled onto my back and couldn't believe my eyes.

Karl stood proudly with his staff buried deep in Toby's back. Once again in human form, Toby lay twitching on the ground, dying. Apparently the staff was, or had, silver in it. Toby tried to reach for the Goblin's weapon, but didn't have the strength. Dark blue veins appeared in his flesh as the anaphylaxis spread.

Leaping off the Werewolf's back, Karl roared and charged toward the Trolls. To my amazement, they stumbled back in fear, then turned and ran. "That's right," Karl shouted after them, "call me Green Thunder!"

Turning back, Karl skittered to my side. "Get up, Rosy. Please don't die on me." He was nearly begging. "Don't die."

"Karl," I breathed as he helped me into a sitting position. I felt blood gurgle deep in my lungs. "How did you find the silver?"

The Goblin smiled and tapped his nose. "A Goblin can smell precious metals. Come on, we need to get you out of here."

"No." I held my hand to the wall for support and slowly stood.

"No?" Karl shook his head. "What do you mean?"

My body felt like it was about to fail at any moment. I couldn't remember hurting this much ever before. Every pain sensor throughout my entire body was turned on full blast. Every movement caused the wound in my back to ripple pain over my body. Holding my face against the cool concrete, I whimpered. It was nearly too much. Pulling my damaged arm to my side, I staggered toward Toby.

My stare settled on the twitching body. Death by silver must be a truly horrific way for a Werewolf to die. Basically a violent allergic reaction, the wolf's body goes into anaphylactic shock. As blood pressure drops and tissue begins to swell, his lungs were shutting down. I wasn't sure why, but I felt a deep sense of pity for him. I knew it wasn't my Toby, but it still looked like him. Raising my Beretta, I stared into his open eyes. "Sorry, T."

I pulled the trigger. A single bullet ripped into his skull. He twitched one last time, then fell quiet. Toby was dead.

Biting my lip, I fought a sob trying to break free. Wiping a single tear from my eye, I turned back to

Karl. "Come on. We have unfinished business," I grunted. "Have to find the other Seekers."

Chapter 32

With Karl doing his best to support me, I staggered ahead. I was a bloody wreck of a vampire and fading fast. I didn't know if I would make it to the end of this investigation, but I had to keep on trying anyway. Scraping against the wall as I stumbled, I saw a crimson smear on the concrete behind me. I was bleeding to death. The Toby pod person had inflicted too much damage. I didn't know how much time I had left.

A single Troll appeared at the end of the walkway. Lifting his axe with an angry growl, he charged toward us. With just enough strength to lift my Beretta, I tried to stop shaking long enough to take aim. As the Troll drew closer, I felt Karl's grip tighten on my leg. I squeezed the trigger and the Troll crumbled to the ground, his axe clattering to my feet.

Karl's grip slowly loosened. "That was cool! Just like Indiana Jones!"

I let my arm fall to my side, unable to hold up the weapon any longer. "I'm too old for this shit."

"That was a different movie." Karl shook his head. "Didn't Danny Glover say that in *Lethal Weapon ...*" His words trailed off as he looked up at me. His face was long and drawn.

Barely able to hold myself up, I closed my eyes. Blood was still gushing from my nose down my chin, painting my pale flesh a deep red. My arm felt like a shish kabob that had the middle chewed out exposing the skewer inside. I didn't know what my back looked like, but I was certain it was much, much worse. I couldn't think of any Seekers who had ever survived a Werewolf mauling, and I don't think I was about to buck the trend. "I'm just so tired," I admitted. I started to slide down the wall. "I just need to rest for a minute."

"No!" Karl skittered up the wall like a gecko and grabbed onto the collar of my shirt. Somehow holding me in place, he stared into my eyes. "Don't do this, Rose! You can't die!"

"I'm not going to die," I assured almost drunkenly, "I just need some rest." I'm not even sure I believed that myself.

"I need you, Rose," Karl argued. He paused. "Toby needs you."

Toby...

"Do you need blood?" Karl asked with a quiver in his voice.

"Blood," I repeated, enjoying the oddness of the word as it rolled off my tongue and snapped at the end with a hard consonant. As shock set in, I was starting to lose cohesion in my thoughts.

"You can take some of mine," Karl offered bravely. "If it will help, take it."

I opened my eyes and looked at the Goblin with a snicker. "You're like a little green hors d'oeuvre." I laughed.

Karl laughed uncomfortably, but I'm certain he was secretly relieved I didn't want to feed off him.

"Come on." He tugged on my collar. "We need to keep going. We need to save Toby."

Toby. His name hit me hard and somehow made me focus. Thinking about the dead pod person behind me, I saw the bullet hole in his forehead and the blue veins chewing through his flesh. I would not let that happen *to my* Toby. I fought against the pain and darkness settling over my brain. I took one step, then another. I had to keep going.

Coming slowly around the end of the machinery, I spotted the door that had been blown open by Jared's commandos. Black scorch marks were heavy on the walls and floor, but the debris had at least been removed. Peering inside, I saw the chair I had been chained to. Bits of the device they used on me were still scattered on the floor, as was the body of one of the Maryuts.

The captive Seekers had to be here. It made sense they would keep the original genetic material on site in case of emergency. As I turned away, my vision blurred. Slapping my hand to the wall for support, I did my best to remain upright.

Sliding along the wall, I limped past similar doors. I could hear the clamor of activity ahead of us. The troops were mobilizing. I knew we were in a bad place. Out in the open and severely wounded, it wouldn't require much to take me down. Holding my damaged arm across my body, I moved as quickly as I could toward an adjoining hallway. Each step brought another shock of pain through my body. Stepping inside I realized it simply wasn't possible to hide. The trail of blood was pretty much a dead giveaway. Stealth was no use here. I had to stop them now.

It was the endgame.

I could hear the heavy footfalls of Trolls. They were getting closer, and there were a lot of them. Hitting the first door, I grabbed the handle and rested my forehead against the cool metal surface. I shook the handle but it was locked. Despair started to set in. All I wanted to do was curl up in a ball on the floor and cry. I could hear the buzz of electricity behind the heavy door, and something more. Life. I could feel Toby. I had found him by accident. "Karl," I moaned.

I felt his hand on the side of my face trying to comfort me. "Come on, Rose. Keep going. We're almost there."

"We are there," I corrected him. "Unlock this door."

Karl understood. "On it." He moved down the wall and perched just above the handle. Working his tiny hands over it, I watched him snap a single, slender claw from his index finger and slide it into the lock like a pick. "Give me a minute," he grunted.

An angry roar turned my head toward the mouth of the hall. "We don't have a minute," I urged him as four Trolls stared me down.

Shielding Karl behind me, I turned and lifted my Beretta. I fired, hitting one of the Trolls, but couldn't control the recoil. As the barrel lifted, my second shot hit the concrete above their heads. The Trolls, trailed by the one I had apparently hit in the stomach, charged. Each was carrying a melee weapon ranging from axes to heavy broadswords.

I somehow managed to dodge the first Troll's attack, but caught the brunt of the second one, knocking the pistol out of my hand. Grabbing the nearest Troll's jutting teeth, I swung him into the others. The

momentum carried me forward, and in my weakened state, I almost fell.

But then something curious happened. I can't recall ever feeling this way before, and it's difficult to fully describe the emotions bubbling inside of me. It felt as if something primal woke inside of me. The pain assaulting my brain seemed to melt away as pure aggression gripped me. It was almost like I was a dormant volcano and something deep within the caldera changed. I erupted. I wasn't Rose anymore. I became a raw engine of destruction. I moved without thinking, without consideration of my actions; I simply acted and reacted.

Plowing into the Trolls, my arm shot out and latched around the nearest blue-skinned monster's throat. With an angry twist, I snapped his neck. Using the dead Troll as a shield, I spun him around my body to intercept one of the broadswords.

Tossing the dead Troll away, I felt my claws rip from my fingertips. I spun into the Troll carrying the battle axe and slashed his chest open. As he fell back, I snatched his weapon and buried it deep in the skull of the next Troll. With little more than a whimper, the Troll's eyes rolled back in his head and he fell.

Once I slid my foot under the hilt of one of the discarded broadswords, I kicked it up and snatched it out of the air. The final Troll, the one with the gunshot in his stomach, took an uneasy step back as my black gaze settled on him. He had just seen me dispatch his three companions in a matter of seconds. He turned to run.

Coward.

But it was too late to escape. I'd had enough.

Bringing the heavy sword above my shoulder like a javelin, I unleashed it with every ounce of my aggression. The blade screamed through the air and sliced into the Troll perfectly between his shoulder blades and erupted from his chest, burying it up to the pommel. The force of the blow carried him out of the hallway and into the machinery. As the blade and Troll hit, a shower of sparks was ejected into the air.

"I nearly have it, Rose," Karl assured me.

Turning back to the door, I snatched Karl into my arms. Gritting my teeth, I felt a roar of anger clawing up my throat. Unleashing it, I kicked the door hard. The metal door exploded amidst a shower of splinters from the doorframe.

Stepping in, I felt my anger deepen.

Dozens of gray sacks, appearing like cocoons, were attached to the ceiling via a network of cables, hooks, and some kind of organic material. Inside them, the bodies of the copied Seekers were completely naked and in the fetal position. Though the skin of the pods was mostly opaque, I could see cables running into the top of them and down around and into the bodies. The roughly rectangular room was filled with sophisticated equipment designed to monitor and maintain the pods above.

The two Maryut working the devices keeping the Seekers in stasis, turned and shrieked at me. Keeping their backs to the controls, they snapped open their black claws like switchblades. They weren't going to let me in without a fight. I grinned. That was fine with me.

"Stand down." I saw my clone emerge from the rear of the room and stop before the Maryut. "Hello,

Rose.” She cocked her head slightly and lifted the AK-47 she had slung over her shoulder. “You look like hell.”

I just smiled. I felt Karl climb out of my arms and down my leg. I knew what he had in mind. All he needed was a distraction. I was it.

Without a single word, I attacked. Before my pod person or the Maryut could react, I was on them. Grabbing my clone by the throat, I could see the sheer surprise on her face. I think she was expecting to engage in some sort of witty banter, like the villains in the movies who always had to explain their plans to the hero before killing them. I just wasn't in the mood for it.

Spinning her around, I kicked her in the kneecap, shattering it. As she wailed, I slipped my arm around her neck and restrained her. I wasn't done with her yet, but I had her friends to deal with. Snatching her AK-47 with my free hand, I spun and unleashed it on the Maryut. The demon screamed and flailed wildly against the very consoles it was trying to protect. I felt the second Maryut's claws slash down my cheek. Without flinching, I brought the rifle up to the Maryut's head and emptied the rest of the clip.

Alarms began to blare inside the room as the light shifted to red. Looking up, I spotted Karl aggressively ripping wires out of the junction box in the center of the pods.

Satisfied, I turned my attention back to my doppelganger. After lifting her to her feet, I held her by the throat and sank my claws into her gut hitting the bony armor just beneath her skin. It didn't really matter. I wasn't going to stake her. I had other plans. Her eyes were open wide as I dove toward her neck.

I sank my fangs into her.

A warm fount of blood gushed into my mouth as I tore her flesh open. Pulling my fangs free, I then bit repeatedly widening the gash and finally cracking her exoskeleton. Refusing to inject my neurotoxin, I wanted her to struggle and feel every bit of pain. Running my tongue over the wound, I enjoyed the tactile sensation of the rough, jagged edge. Ripping my claws from her belly, I proceeded to grab my doppelganger's arm and twist it angrily behind her. She writhed in agony as I reached deep inside her and sucked as much of her blood as I could take. I could feel her veins and arteries beginning to collapse under the immense stress. Clamping down on her neck, I tore a massive chunk of flesh free and spit it away.

As her blood flowed into me, I felt my body begin to recover. With each mouthful, each gulp, I started to feel more powerful.

I became aware of the pods beginning to lower around us. Mirroring their descent, I sank down to the floor with the Rose copy in my arms. Her screams had become little more than whimpers as her life faded. Crossing my legs, I slid her gently into my lap and pulled my mouth away. Her wounds wouldn't bleed anymore. There was nothing left to give. I stared into her eyes, which seemed sunken and distant. Her flesh was almost perfectly white and made her blond hair look gold by comparison. She was on the brink of death.

"Rose," I said, caressing her face. "Can you hear me?"

Her eyes tried to focus on me, but seemed unable.

"I can't let you live," I explained. "You understand that, right?"

Her lips moved, but she was too weak to speak.

"I know what I'm capable of." I brushed an errant lock of hair from her forehead almost lovingly. "It's only the experiences in my life that make me who I am, and help me keep the monster at bay. You don't have those. But if it means anything," I watched her eyelids close one final time, "I am sorry."

I held her while she died.

Gently lifting her off my lap, I set my doppelganger on the floor and crossed her arms over her chest. Running my hand down her thigh, I felt a familiar shape in her pocket. Digging it out, I examined the cell phone then quickly stuffed it into my own pocket. Standing up, I expected the familiar surge of pain through my body, but to my amazement, it was gone. Glancing to my arm, I saw that the flesh had almost healed. Heavy bruises and several depressions remained, but at least I couldn't see the bone anymore.

"Rosy?"

I looked up into Karl's green eyes with a half smile. That was the first time he called me "Rosy."

"I found Toby, Elena." Karl paused. "And a few others in the pods. They need medical attention right now."

"Good work, Karl," I replied.

"Um, Rose," Karl said sheepishly, "how are we going to get them out of here with all the Trolls?"

I cocked my head to the right. "What Trolls?"

The Goblin pointed past me.

Turning, I saw a mass of blue muscle standing in the smashed doorway with a mixture of confusion and anger on their ugly faces. There were easily twenty to twenty-five visible, but how many were beyond the door? I had no idea. "Ah," I replied, "*those* Trolls."

I took a step toward the door and held my hands out to show that I was unarmed. "Lucas Nash is dead," I said loudly. Above all else, Trolls were mercenaries. They may sell their services to the highest bidder, but when the contract expired, that was it. I hoped.

I started to bite my lip as I waited for a reaction.

The clatter of weapons hitting the floor started in the back of the crowd, but quickly spread. As they started to turn away, I heard mumbles of anger and dismay. I never really thought about the Trolls in this situation. They were little more than workers. I had no idea if this was a good job or not. I wonder what kind of benefits Trolls asked for. *Do they have accidental death and dismemberment life insurance?* After what I did to the four outside, I certainly hoped so.

One of the Trolls stepped in. "Before you kill Master," he rubbed his nose, "he mention anything about final paycheck?"

I looked down at Karl with a glimmer of bemusement in my eyes. With a shrug, I turned back to the Troll. "No, I'm sorry."

"Crap," the Troll muttered. "Me mate not going to like this. She get angry." Shaking his head, he turned and marched sullenly out of the room.

"That was utterly bizarre," Karl commented.

Nodding, I couldn't help but agree. I turned back to the pods. "Come on. We need to get the other Seekers out."

Running my hand over the gray surface, I couldn't believe how much it felt like clammy skin. I could feel bumps and even tiny hairs along it. I started to search for seams or openings. Moving my fingers to the top, I brushed the tubes and wires out of the way and found a small hole. Digging my fingers into the opening, I ripped a piece of the pod away. Surprised at the ease with which it tore, I wrapped my hand around the edge and peeled down the side. A thick, gooey substance spilled out of the pod and sloshed onto the floor revealing the being within.

"Toby," I breathed. Reaching in, I carefully placed my hands on his shoulders and maneuvered him out of the pod. His body seemed healthy save for the various tubes inserted into him. I wasn't sure there was a way to remove them here without damaging or killing him. I couldn't risk it.

Retrieving the copy's cell phone from my pocket, I tapped in a number and hit send. I heard the Brimstone operator's reply on the other end. "I have several Seekers who need immediate medical evacuation." I listened for a moment. "Yes, track this phone. Hurry."

"I have Elena," Karl, dripping with goo, announced.

Setting the cell phone on the floor, I cradled Toby in my lap in nearly the same manner I had my copy. A thick black tube was protruding from his lips surrounded by medical tape to hold it in place. Working the tape free, I started to remove the tube. Toby involuntarily gagged as it slid up his throat. As he coughed, I rolled him onto his side and gently patted his back. Wiping the gelatinous substance from his nose and mouth, I heard raspy signs of breathing. I turned back to Karl. "See who else you can get out."

I ran my fingers gently over Toby's face. "It's going to be all right, T. It's all over now."

Chapter 33

Pushing open the door, I let Karl inside. Sunlight was spilling in through the large windows over his bed and his growing collection of flowers and get well cards. As the little Goblin skittered across the room, I leaned lazily against the doorway waiting for him to pull the shades.

I hated it when the nursing staff left the blinds open. This was a Brimstone facility with Vampires on staff after all. It's not like they didn't know Vampires were here. Can you imagine if a doctor, who happened to be a Vampire, was summoned to a patient's room during an emergency and they had left the shades open? Poof! No more doctor. Then they'd have two emergencies on their hands, wouldn't they?

I adjusted the duffel bag on my shoulder containing Toby's clothes and shoes. My injuries were mostly healed, but I still had a bit of discomfort where the Gargoyle bit me, and the wound the Werewolf had created. Yaz told me they would never perfectly heal, but hopefully wouldn't bother me too much.

I couldn't help but smile as my gaze settled on Toby. Lying on his side, his legs and arms were twitching

slightly as he slept. I wondered if he was having a dream about chasing bunnies. He was a wolf after all. I could only imagine him prancing through a meadow as a Werewolf, picking up bunnies, and bopping them on the head.

The monitors and tubes in the room that first night had already been removed. The mess of wires, tubes, and sensors they had on him then looked worse than the mess he was attached to in the cloning pod. Still draped in the pale green gown all patients wore, he had two pillows stuffed behind his head and the sheets pulled tightly across his chest. It was a far cry from the cell the doctors had placed him in last time. Of course, he had been an injured Werewolf at the time. Within a twelve hour period, they had upgraded his status from "serious" to "*please-take-puppy-home*" due to his Werewolf physiology, and because he was being a pain to the nursing staff.

Watching the curtain shut, I turned to see Karl dangling from the pull string. Shaking my head, the Goblin let go and dropped down into the cushy seat of a nearby chair. Vaulting out, he skittered across the floor and up the side of Toby's bed. Carefully avoiding the few remaining slices of sunlight the curtains let through, I did the same. Standing at the foot of his bed, I reached down and gently shook Toby's exposed foot.

"Nurse Nancy?" he asked, still half-asleep.

"Guess again, dirt bag." I laughed.

One of Toby's eyes popped open and settled on me. With a crooked smile, he slowly rolled onto his back and stretched his arms. "Morning, Rosy."

Karl rushed up to the bed and perched on Toby's chest. "Hi, puppy!"

"Hi, Karl." Toby laughed. "Get off me."

Snatching the Goblin, I placed him at the foot of the bed. I turned my gaze back to my partner. "How are you feeling, T?"

"Good," Toby said as he stretched again. "Really rested. How are the others?"

"Recovering," I answered. "You were one of the lucky ones. Because of your enhanced metabolism and the short amount of time you spent in the pod, you recovered quickly. Several of the other Seekers, including Elena, are still in serious condition. There were a few who didn't make it," I stated solemnly.

"There wasn't enough left to save," Karl added.

Toby furrowed his brow, probably realizing for the first time the danger he had actually been in.

"The goo in those pods was bonding with the Seekers," I explained. "And in doing so, changed their body chemistry. If left inside long enough, the body begins to break down." I looked into Toby's eyes. "Well, you get the idea. I'm just glad you're all right."

Toby nodded. "I had the strangest dreams inside of that thing. I had the overwhelming sensation of being made into stew. Really odd."

"I bet," I agreed.

"Now I just want a bowl of stew," Toby said, then chuckled.

"Even I think that's disgusting," Karl commented. "You know, the Psych Ward is just down one floor. I can make arrangements—"

"Hush," I scolded.

"And the warehouse?" Toby asked. "What about the cloning operation?"

"When Maynard, Karl and I returned today, there wasn't much left," I replied. "Most of the machinery and Maryut were gone. Seems they collected their toys and ran away. But just in case," I smiled, "we completely razed the building. Maynard paid Crash to wipe it all the way down to the foundation."

"Now there isn't *anything* left," Karl said with smug satisfaction.

"Which reminds me." Tapping Karl on the head, I pointed to Toby. "Show him."

Karl smiled broadly and reached into the pocket of his tiny leather jacket. Removing a black billfold, he held it up and flipped it open. "Karl Vigratsky," he said, flashing his new badge and identification card, "Brimstone Seeker."

"In training," I added.

Toby tossed his head back and laughed. "That's awesome!"

Karl turned the billfold and ran his fingers gently over the badge's gold finish, "Maynard made me a Seeker."

"For actions above and beyond the call of duty," I said with more than a hint of pride in my voice.

It was hard to believe that a few days ago I wanted to squish that little, nasty, green bugger, but now I wouldn't think of working without him. He had proven himself again and again during this investigation, even if he was a pain in the ass. Of all of us, he had changed the most. Karl had come a long way. I was proud of him.

"I don't have to live in the basement of the Brimstone building anymore," Karl added. "I get paid every two weeks now!"

Toby nodded approvingly. "Where you going to live now?"

"The basement of the Brimstone building," Karl answered without missing a beat. "Have you seen how expensive rent is out there?"

My laugh mutated into a snort. Pressing my hand to my mouth, I tried to stop giggling, even though it felt good. It had been a while since I was really happy and relaxed. I kept trying to remind myself to enjoy the moment. They pass too quickly.

"You deserve it." Toby smiled. "Congratulations." He turned back to me. "Well, whodunit?"

I kept forgetting that it wasn't really Toby with me during the investigation, but a copy. He had no idea what happened. "Get dressed and I'll show you," I answered.

Toby cocked his head slightly. I wasn't sure he was ready to leave yet. He seemed to be enjoying a little rest and relaxation. With a sigh and one last look over his comfortable bed, he adjusted his gown beneath the covers and swung his legs over the edge. He glanced over at the call button one more time. "Can I just see if Nurse Nancy is available to give me one more sponge bath?" He looked at me sheepishly. "I really enjoyed that."

"No." I glared at my partner. "Pervert."

Chapter 34

Chithula's mission seemed oddly cold for being in the middle of the Southern Nevada desert. And more importantly, it was completely empty. The gates, the guards, even the parking lot of used cars in front were all gone. The heavy wooden doors on the front hung open exposing the rotting woodwork inside.

Toby, Karl, and I walked right up to the front steps with no problem.

Chithula had packed up and disappeared.

Which confirmed what Jared told me. Chithula's plan had failed and the Demon had hightailed it out of here before we could call him on it. Although, as I had a lot of time in the trunk on the ride up due to the sun rising, I wasn't certain how we would arrest an Ifrit. I'm certain we could have found a way, but it would have been challenging to say the least.

Karl had spent the majority of the ride filling Toby in on Jared's theory, and how Lucas had confirmed it before he died. I felt empty listening to the story from the trunk. We knew who the true villain was, and what his plan was, but we had only succeeded in shutting a small portion of it down. We had identified the last Brimstone operatives who had been copied, and rounded them up. We had even shut down the cloning operation and dispatched Chithula's lieutenant. But this wasn't exactly the ending I, or any of us for that matter, was hoping for. Many questions remained unanswered, and Chithula was gone. This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

"What now?" Toby asked. "Can't Chithula just go somewhere else and start again?"

Sitting down on the stone stairs, I stared up into the crisp night air. The stars were shining brightly and I could see the bridge of them that made up the edge of the Milky Way. It was beautiful. I nodded without taking my eyes from the sky. "I guess he could."

Toby waited, but that's all I had to offer. "That's it?"

"I don't think there's anything to be done." I finally let my gaze fall down to Toby.

Toby was easily the most dissatisfied with the conclusion. "But what if he shows up again?"

"Then we'll stop him again," Karl answered, "and kick his flaming ass!"

"That sounded very superhero-*ish*," I said, then laughed.

Karl shrugged. "I stay with the classics."

Once I got to my feet, I walked down the stairs and wrapped my arm around Toby's waist. "You going to be okay?"

Toby looked into my eyes with a soft smile. "I think so."

Running my hand up, I patted my partner on the back. "Come on. Let's get out of here. How about I buy you two a beer?"

"I'm in." Karl laughed.

"I have a better idea." Toby spun and backpedaled from Karl and me. There was a glimmer in his eye I didn't like. "How about I cook you guys dinner? I make a mean spaghetti and meatballs."

"Pass," Karl grumbled.

I lifted an eyebrow questioningly. "You know I don't eat food, right?"

"Not a problem." Toby smiled. "I can make blood sausage for you."

I groaned as I popped the car door and slid inside.

"Karl?" Toby looked down at his little, green friend. "Come on. I'm a good cook!"

Karl jumped into the back seat and crossed his arms. "I want a beer."

As Toby sank into the passenger seat, I started the engine. I knew I would have to listen to him the whole way home. I suddenly wished I were back in the trunk. "Wait." I paused. "Isn't it Tuesday night?"

Toby nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"Poker night," Karl exclaimed from the backseat.

I poked Toby in the shoulder. "Feeling up to it?"

"I'm always up to it." Toby grinned slyly.

Karl climbed onto the seat and popped Toby on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper he must've found on the floor. "Bad puppy," Karl chided, "shouldn't lie."

With a grin, Toby knocked the Goblin back into his seat. He turned back to me. "I always win."

"That's because you've never played me before." I laughed. Kicking the car into gear, we headed back to Las Vegas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terence West is the author of ten novels including the best sellers *Fallen Angels*, *Darkness*, and *Crusade*. A Gen X refugee, he fears the day his generation will rule the world. West is currently stockpiling goods and supplies in Twin Falls, Idaho with his three dogs. Growing up near the small skiing

town of Steamboat Springs, Colorado gave him a lot of time to work on his writing because of the weather. A very artistic student, his goal in life was to be an illustrator. In his spare time he hunched over a makeshift-drafting table working on his own comic books. He would write and draw all of his stories. It was then that he learned he enjoyed writing the stories more than drawing them. He credits a lot of his talent as a writer to his mother and father. They never pressured him to follow in his father's footsteps, rather to find his own path in life. Check out his official website: TerenceWest.com! There you can also read his personal blog, download free goodies, and read his new supernatural themed short story "Within" free!

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