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DEAD GIRLS DON'T DANCE

from CRAVINGS Anthology

By

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DEAD GIRLS DON'T DANCE

MaryJanice Davidson

For my children,

Christina and William,

who share me without complaint.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Cindy Hwang and Ethan Ellenberg, who help make my dreams come true.

Thanks also to all the Betsy fans out there who have written me, wondering what the queen has been up to... this one's for you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novella takes place just after the events of *Undead and Unwed* (Berkley, March 2004), and just before the events of *Undead and Unemployed* (Berkley, August 2004).

Also, there's no such thing as vampires. Or so the United Shoe Cooperative would have you believe.

Death cannot stop true love. It can only delay it for a while.

Westley, *The Princess Bride*

Nor bird nor beast

Could make me wish for anything this day,

Being old, but that the old alone might die,

And that would be against God's Providence.

Let the young wish.

W. B. Yeats

Prologue

^ »

SHE stood on the shore of Lake Michigan and looked out at the black water. At her back, Chicago rocked and reeled; it was Saturday night, and all the colleges were back in session.

It wasn't the first shore she'd stood on, nor the first body of water she'd stared at. It certainly wasn't the first evening she'd spent pacing the beach after a meal, nor the first big city she'd visited. Always a visitor, never a resident.

One thing remained the same, of course: it was dark. Dawn was coming—she could feel the sun, her enemy, slipping up over the horizon. She would have to leave soon.

She hadn't felt anything but artificial light on her face in a long, long time.

And now, of course, if she ever did feel the sun, it would be the last thing she felt.

Like that was a bad thing.

There were nights when it was tempting to stay on the beach, watch the sun come up, die in fire and light and blazing agony, be done, be over, be still.

Be dead... for real.

At her feet, her supper gasped and thrashed and finally passed out. He was big and dark and strong—had been strong—but she'd had no trouble taking him. His kind went easy. They never thought the rabbit would turn into a fox; certainly not before their very eyes. And even a fox didn't have teeth as long and as sharp as hers.

She preferred to take men. She especially preferred men who bullied women. Cut him from the herd, take him, and quiet that thirst inside her, that constant, never-ending, hellish, unbeatable thirst.

Still, it was time to go. Her supper would recover and go home and not remember a thing. She would find another meal tomorrow. At least she wasn't such a mindless, insatiable newborn anymore. At least she could remember something beyond the thirst.

Yes, time to go.

But still she lingered, and wept dry tears, and stared out at the water, and wished she were dead. For real, this time.

Chapter 1

« ^ »

ANDREA sat up and coughed out a lungful of sand. The man crouched beside her scrambled up and away, as if she had—imagine it!—come to life.

"Holy shit!" he cried. "I thought you were a corpse!"

She coughed out more sand, cursing herself. She'd been so moody last night, instead of finding a decent alley to skulk in or a flophouse to cower in, she'd just burrowed into the beach sand like a big old worm, and waited for sunset.

Except this idiot found her before she could rise.

"Did—" Cough, hack. "—you call—" Hack-hack. "—anybody?"

"Well, yeah," he said, sounding weirdly apologetic. "I mean, I was running down the beach here—I've just gotta get down to two-twenty-five, y'know, and lay off the Cheez E Brats—anyway, I was running and tripped over something, and I thought it was a piece of driftwood but it was your foot, so I started to unbury you and then I couldn't find a pulse so I called the cops on my cell phone. You didn't look, y'know, grody or anything. In fact, for a corpse, you looked pretty good."

He's an idiot. Perfect. She finished coughing. It was amazing—even if you didn't have to breathe, sand got everywhere. Every time she moved, more of it trickled into her underpants. "How long ago did you call?"

"Uh... coupla minutes... look, are you sure you're all right? The sun's just about down, and it's getting kinda chilly, even for June—"

"The sun set," she said, wiping her mouth with her forearm, then grimacing at the way the sand stuck to her lips—worse than ChapStick!—"at seven fifty-six p.m. It's technically dark."

"Well, uh, okay, but—"

"So I have time for a snack before the authorities arrive."

"Okay. Like, um, you want an Orange Julius or something? My treat."

"I know." She leaned toward him—easy enough, he was hovering over her like a—heh, heh—grave robber—and grabbed him. He was wearing a tan t-shirt and green swimming trunks and beach shoes; the t-shirt shredded under her preternatural strength, the beach shoes went flying, and then she sank her fangs into his jugular.

"Ow! Hey!" Outraged, his big hands came up to push her away. "That's—are you fucking biting me? That's so weird! And kinky! Now cut it out! Ahhhh. No, I mean it... stop. Don't! Don't stop!" He grabbed her head, she hung on like a leech, and they grappled in the sand for a few seconds. She could feel his throat working beneath her lips as he babbled. "Seriously, this is so bogus! I save a dead chick—sort of—and she chews on me? You just wait 'til the cops get here, chickie, they'll, like, commit you or something. Ha!"

She broke away—something she had never done before; in fact, as early as a year ago, she wouldn't have been able to break off until her thirst had been satisfied—and said, trying not to whine, "Are you going to talk through this whole thing?"

"What, I'm supposed to sit here and think about England?"

"They usually start screaming about now, and then they faint."

"Well, forget it." He jerked a thumb at himself. "Daniel Harris don't faint,

baby. No matter how much you chew on him!"

She stared at him. "Daniel Harris?"

"Yup. And I don't scream, either, except for that one time I saw a really grody spider fall into the toilet when I was taking a whiz, talk about a shocker! I didn't know pee could—y'know—crawl back up if you were surprised, but I'm here to tell you—"

"Daniel Harris, St. Olaf college?"

"Uh... yeah." He peered at her. "Do I know you, Weird Babe?"

She sighed. "I'm Andrea Mercer."

"Andrea... Andrea..."

"From Carleton College. Right across the river from St. Olaf. I transferred to Olaf my sophomore year. We were in Calc II, Psychology, and Sociology I together."

"Andrea..."

"You copied off my notes most of our senior year in college."

"Ohhhh! Andrea!"

"And," she continued, "you told me if I shaved my armpits I'd be, like, almost pretty 'n' stuff."

He snapped his fingers. "Right! Andrea! Got it!"

"Swell," she said dully. Unburied by Daniel "Big Cock" Harris, who of course didn't remember Andrea-the-Mouse. She'd chomped on him, drank his blood, and she was still only a minor annoyance in his life.

She was surprised she hadn't recognized him earlier—it had only been seven years, and he still looked much the same. Same surfer-boy, tanned, blond good looks. A little broader through the shoulders, a little longer through the legs.

His faded blue eyes—the color of old denim—were still friendly, the expression

still low-key. He looked exactly like what he was: a handsome, mild, life of the party fella who never ever had trouble getting a date.

She'd even asked him out once, their junior year, but...

He cleared his throat. "Uh, Andrea... the reason I didn't recognize you right away—"

"I know why," she said thinly, climbing to her feet and brushing sand off her jeans.

"—um—aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"Of course I'm dead, you idiot. But that's not why you didn't recognize me."

She walked away, hearing faint sirens in the distance.

Chapter 2

« ^ »

"ANDREA? Andrea! Hey! Wait up!"

"What?" she growled, not turning around. A chill breeze was picking up off the lake, making her hurry. Of course, she was always cold, so what did a breeze matter? "Go away." I'm still hungry.

"So, you're dead and hanging around beaches and biting guys now? I thought you were an Economics major."

She almost laughed. Ah, the days when her biggest problem was figuring out the effect of interest rates on capital investment flows... or was it the other way around? "I was. Then I had an accident. Now I'm here."

He jogged up beside her. "Hey, listen. About before. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Sure I remember you. You were—you were really cute."

"You're an idiot," she replied. "It's all right, I'm leaving. You don't have to talk to me anymore."

"Hey, it's okay," he said, completely ignoring her broad hint. "I want to. So, like, what happened to you?"

She nearly tripped over her own feet. "Why in the world do you care?"

"Well... doesn't look to me like you're having much fun these days."

"What a tragedy," she mocked.

"Well... yeah."

To Daniel Harris, she realized, it probably was. The man had always been waiting for a party to happen. At college he'd been infamous for the fact that the lights were never out in his room.

"You wouldn't believe me anyway," she said, weakening.

"Uh... you bit me, remember? And I was a lifeguard back home. You really didn't—don't—have a pulse. I mean, when you sat up I tried to fool myself like maybe I'd made a mistake, but how hard is it to check a pulse? So are you—okay, this is gonna sound really dumb—like something out of the movies—but are you—don't laugh, now—"

"Yes. I'm a vampire."

He digested that in silence. They had reached the parking lot, and she shook more sand out of her hair.

"Well, how come?"

"How come? It's not like being a Republican, moron. I didn't exactly have a choice."

"You want to go get a drink? Talk about it?"

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"Well... not like that," he said uneasily, fingering his already-fading bite mark.

"Like at a bar."

"No." But that was a lie. She was sorely tempted. And never mind her long-dead crush on Daniel Harris... the cold fact was, she was lonely. At times, almost unbearably so. It was nice—if weird—to run into a familiar face.

And he was pleasant. Even when he turned girls down for dates, he'd always been nice about it. One of those guys who honestly had no idea how popular and sought-after they really were.

"Aw, c'mon," he was coaxing. "Look, my car's right over there. We can head over to Joe's, grab a drink. Catch up."

"Catch up," she repeated. It was absurd and sad at the same time.

"Come on, Alison."

"Andrea."

"Right, Andrea."

"For crying out loud." But when he unlocked the passenger side of the silver Intrepid and held the door for her, she climbed in.

Chapter 3

« ^ »

"I'll have a Bud," Daniel said. Huge surprise. He turned to her. "Can you—uh—"

"White wine." She sighed. "Anything from 1985."

"So you can drink stuff that isn't blood?" he asked after the waitress swivel-hipped away.

"Yes. I can drink anything, it just doesn't—ah—satisfy me."

"Oh. So, how'd you become a vampire?"

She shrugged.

"Oh, come on. I really want to know! I mean, this is just so cool!"

"Yes, being undead is a laugh a minute. I can't think why I didn't do it before."

"Come on, it can't be all bad. I bet you're really super-strong, right? And fast?"

She shrugged.

"And you can prob'ly see in the dark like a cat. And you've got that whole sex appeal thing going."

She stared at him. "I'm not sexy."

"No, you weren't sexy. Now you are. I mean, come on, you think any girl dug up on the beach is gonna be cute? But you were seriously cute. I was scared when you sat up but I was, y'know, kinda glad, too."

"Oh." That was... that was actually kind of sweet. Gross, but sweet. "Well, thank you."

"So how'd you do it?" He leaned forward eagerly. "Was it hard? Did it hurt? Did it take a long time?"

"It was very hard, it hurt tremendously, and it took no time at all."

"Oh." Slightly crestfallen, he didn't say anything until the waitress put down their drinks and left. "Really bad, huh?"

"Really very unbelievably bad." She stared moodily into her white wine. A nineteen eighty-four Riesling, dammit.

"You want to talk about it? Sometimes it helps to talk about it. Also, you've got sand in your eyebrows."

She shook her head impatiently and watched as a tiny grain of sand flew away from her table, arched a few feet over, and landed in the precisely parted hair of the woman sitting at the table beside them. Why, he's right, she thought, uncharacteristically amused. I do see in the dark like a cat.

"It's kind of a long story," she warned him.

"Hey, I got time. I wasn't leaving for home until tomorrow morning."

"Home? Minnesota, you mean?"

"Sure, I still live in St. Paul."

"What do you do?"

"Oh..." He shrugged sheepishly. "Nothin'. I came into my trust fund a couple of years ago, so mostly I play golf n' stuff. I'm only in town for a wedding. You remember Mike Freeborg? Played shortstop? He got married yesterday."

"Fascinating. So... you're driving back? Flying?"

"Driving. It's not far... six, maybe seven hours."

"Hmmm."

"Why?"

Why? Oh, no big deal... I just need to be in Minneapolis soon to pay homage to the new vampire queen. And you just might be my means, Daniel Harris.

She supposed she could play Scheherazade for him. Keep him hooked on her grisly, yet interesting (for a non-vampire, that was) story, all the way to the Twin Cities. Then she could pay homage to the new queen, and see what happened from there.

The new queen might press her into service.

Or destroy her.

Andrea was fine with either one.

Chapter 4

« ^ »

"LOOK, I'm happy to play driver-guy and all—"

"The word is chauffeur, Daniel."

"—but aren't you gonna explode or something when the sun comes up?"

"No, but I will burst into flames and make a terrible mess in your car. I'll probably scream a bit, too."

"Well, we'll just stop and stay at a motel before sunrise."

She shrugged. "Or you could just put me in the trunk and keep going."

"I couldn't do that!" he said, shocked, big dumb blue eyes wide with distress.

"We'd make better time."

"You know, you're still a cool one. I remember that about you in school. Just cool as a—a—"

"Cucumber?"

"Yech, I hate cucumbers. You're as cool as a chilly tomato. Anyway, I'm happy to take you back to the Cities, but you were gonna tell me about how you got vampired, don't forget now."

"Telling you how I got turned won't even get us out of the city."

"Well, then I'll tell you everything I've been up to."

"Swell," she mumbled. Then, louder, "All right. A deal is a deal. I was working

late—this was my internship at KPMG. And I got grabbed while I was in the parking ramp—the big one on Marquette?"

"Sure, I know it. I park there when there's no parking at the Target Center, you know, if there's a game or something."

"Terrific. We have more and more in common all the time. Anyway, it turns out it was the three hundred fiftieth year of Nostro—he was like the vampire king—anyway, it was the anniversary of his reign. Very big deal. And because he was a dramatic fuck, he had his underlings kidnap a bunch of women and made us part of his ceremony. And—and a bunch of vampires sort of—sort of pounced on us all at once. He—they—kept us for days. Then they threw us away when they were done with us. The other girls died. But I caught the infection, and rose."

Nobody around; the moon high. Smells... rotting meat, fresh earth. The moon, so bright. So thirsty. Climbing over dead girls, so thirsty. It didn't matter what happened; didn't matter where she was, who she was; only the thirst mattered. So thirsty. So—

"That fucking sucks! Those pieces of shit!"

"It was... it was extremely awful." And, oddly, she felt better for telling it.

For finally telling it.

"What a fucking awful way to die!"

"Yes. Anyway, I rose from the dead and started feeding and eventually ended up passing through Chicago and that's what I've been up to for the past six years, how about you?" she asked with faux brightness.

"Jesus, Andrea," he said, not noticing her flinch, "I'm really sorry. That sucks the root."

"Thank you. You're about to miss our exit."

Cursing, he wrenched the wheel to the right and, ignoring the hail of horns, careened over into the proper lane. "You said—you said you caught an infection. Is that like how you become a vampire? I thought you had to drink a vampire's blood and he had to drink yours, or something."

She shook her head. "Old wives' tale. Most people die of extended... attention. If you catch it, you rise from the dead. It's not a big mystery."

"So you've been roaming the streets of Chicago for the last six years?"

"I—I think so."

"Huh?"

"Which word didn't you understand?" she snapped, then instantly softened. She should be flattered that he was so curious. He certainly hadn't shown this kind of interest in her in college. Not Andrea Mercer, she of the mousy hair, mousy eyes, mousy life.

And had anybody cared enough in the last few years to ask her anything? Anything at all? She would do well, she reminded herself, to not be such a damned snob and remember Daniel was only asking questions because he cared. Or was morbidly interested. Same thing, in her world. "I don't remember much of the early years. You have to—you think about feeding all the time. All the time. And once you've fed you start thinking about when you can feed again."

"Jeez," he said, respectfully, if not very originally.

"It's like the worst thirst you've ever had, times a million, every minute you're awake. I might have made some vampires myself; I just don't know. I—I hope not."

In fact, this mindless frenzy, this constant hunger, and the complete inability to remember anything beyond the hunger, was a source of deep shame for her. She, always the top of her class, a precocious child. She'd memorized the periodic

table in half an hour. But all of last year was a blank. Likewise the year before. And the year before. And the—

"Well, you seem a lot better now. You seem just like you were in school. You know, standoffish, smart, bitch—uh, temperamental."

"Thanks," she said dryly. "The reason I seem 'better' is because I'm a little older. Don't get me wrong, I'm still a positive infant by vampire standards, but I'm not a newborn anymore, either."

"So you're not thirsty all the time?"

"Oh, sure I am." She glanced at his neck and grinned. "I can just control it a little better. Lucky for you."

"You didn't look like you were controlling yourself too good when you started chewing on me," he grumbled.

"I didn't know you then," she explained. "I thought you were just some guy."

"Oh, that makes me feel much better."

"It should," she said truthfully.

Chapter 5

« ^ »

"I still say I should just get in the trunk. We could be in the Cities in another four hours."

"Look, I'm not driving around with a vampire in my fucking car trunk, okay? I can afford the hundred bucks for a hotel room."

"Waste of money," she grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest and waiting while he fiddled with the key card.

"Says you. I'm driving, I get to say when we stop."

"What exactly do I get to say?"

"Tell me more about being a vampire."

"Bo-ring."

"That's because you don't have any... uh... what's the word?"

"Perspective."

"Right. You don't have that. But I have tons of it."

He opened the door and gestured for her to move ahead of him. She stopped short and stared at the single king-sized bed.

"Oh," he said.

"Right," she said.

"I asked for a double."

"It's no big deal. I'll sleep under the bed."

"Oh, good, because that's not incredibly creepy or anything. Look, you can trust me. I won't lay a finger on you while you're... er... slumbering or whatever."

"I wouldn't notice if you did." She marched across the room, turned the air conditioner off—

"Aw, you're killin' me!"

—and pulled the drapes. The room, a perfectly adequate Holiday Inn, became nicely gloomy.

"I'm sure you don't mean anything by it," he began, "but this is seriously fucking creepy."

"Your bright idea, Daniel. Okay, well, good night."

"Night," he said, a bit nervously. He watched her kick off her tennis shoes and

stretch out on the bed. Straight-faced, she folded her hands over her breasts.

"Did I mention you're killin' me?"

"Quit your whining," she said, and was insensible for the next thirteen hours.

"TIME to get up," she said, poking him. As always, there was no sense of time passing. One minute she'd closed her eyes, and now it was sunset again. "Rise and shine."

"Aaagghhhhh!" he cried, and nearly fell off the bed, unintentionally smacking her as he did so. "Don't do that!"

"Don't do that," she snapped back, feeling her cheek. "What's the problem?"

He sat up, rubbing his face. His shirt, she suddenly noticed, was draped over the far chair. She assumed he was still swimming to keep in shape. The broad shoulders, sweetly defined pecs, and flat stomach meant he was doing something, that was for damned sure. His blond hair was standing up in all directions, as if showcasing his startlement. "Look," he was saying, "I'm sorry to yell, but it's not every night I wake up with a vampire bending over me. Even one I know." You never knew me. She didn't say it out loud. Be nice, he's giving you a ride. Plus, he knows what you are and he didn't pull the curtains open at two o'clock in the afternoon.

"We can get going now," she said helpfully.

"Forget it. I need to shower and change." He rubbed his cheek, which rasped.

"And shave. Well, maybe not shave. D'you want to shower first?"

"I don't need to."

He stopped in mid-yawn. "How come?"

"I don't sweat, pee, or even shed hair. Why would I shower?"

"Um... so you're not skanky and nasty?"

"Takes one to know one," she said, stung. Great. Half a day with him and she was regenerating to grade school. "Look, just go take your shower, all right?"

"All right, all right. You're definitely not an early morning vampire. Early evening, I mean." He stood and began unbuckling his belt, then stopped and stared at her. "Oh. I's'pose I should do this in the bathroom. I mean... I didn't think you'd care, but—"

"I'm dead, not asexual," she said dryly.

"Ah-ha!" he cried, startling her. He bounded (awkwardly; his pants were falling down) across the room and fumbled for the Barnes and Noble bag on the small table. He pulled out a small, red-bound book. American Heritage Dictionary, it read. "Now I can understand you and we can actually talk and stuff."

She burst out laughing; she couldn't help it. The effect on him was startling; his grin lit up his whole face, made his blue eyes twinkle. "There! I knew you'd do that sooner or later."

"Oh, come on. I'm not that much of a grump."

"Sweetie, you were grumpy before you died. Now... well, never mind. Asexual..." He started flipping pages. "Asbestos... ascend... ascetic..."

"You don't need that," she said, exasperated. "I can tell you what it means."

"And have you lording it over me all night? Forget it. Ah-ha! Asexual. According to this, it's an adjective and it means—"

"I know what it means."

"So if you're not asexual it means the opposite, which is sexual."

"This is an enthralling topic," she said, suddenly nervous, "but we have places to go."

He looked up from the dictionary and squinted at her. "So, do vampires have sex,

or what?"

"Uh..."

"Holy cow, you're blushing! As much as you can."

"I am not."

"Oh, you absolutely are! Jeez, you're acting like you've never had sex as a
vam—oh."

"Can you please," she asked desperately, "go take your shower?"

"Uh, sure. Won't be a minute." He was looking at her in a very curious way.

And he was right; she was blushing. Her face actually felt warm.

"Huh. That's kind of interesting."

"Interesting," she said thinly. "Exactly the word I was thinking."

"Well, you don't have to get all weird about it. It's just sex."

"And you're just an idiot," she snapped. "Go shower."

"Okay, okay."

He kicked the rest of the way out of his jeans and went into the bathroom
without another word. She struggled not to stare at his ass, and almost
succeeded.

Chapter 6

« ^ »

"WELL!" he said cheerfully, toweling his hair ten minutes later.

Annoyingly, he hadn't put his shirt back on. At least he was wearing jeans.

Tight, faded jeans that clung to his—

"That was super awkward. Oh, well. Saddle up, Andy, let's hit the trail."

"It's Andrea, and we have to... um... stop first."

"Huh? How come?"

"I have to eat."

"What?"

"I said, I have to eat." She was, in fact, starting to feel a little desperate.

Not to mention horribly embarrassed. "And soon."

"Oh. Oh! Right. Eat. Except you don't mean eat, do you?"

"Soon," she repeated.

"What's the rush?"

"Haven't you been listening?" she cried. "I'm thirsty all the time. And the

longer I go without, the more... desperate... I become. It's—"

"You get stupid," he said bluntly. "That's what you don't like. You get totally obsessed with chomping and you can't think about anything else. And you fucking hate it, don't you?"

"How analytic of you," she said, calming... the worst was over. She had dreaded the telling of it more than anything else. And he was finding out all her secrets. It was alarming... but kind of comforting, too. "And you're right. I fucking hate it. And... it's been a while since my last... I mean, there was you, but I managed to stop myself, and..."

"Well, how much do you need?"

"I never measured," she snapped.

"Like, a pint? A half-pint? A gallon? What?"

"Daniel, what difference does it make?"

"Well." He cleared his throat. "The reason I was asking was, you could chomp on

me again."

"Oh, no!" She couldn't recall ever being so shocked. And gratified. He was so kind. He had always been kind. "No, I couldn't do that to you."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not volunteering to be the horse led to slaughter—"

"Sheep."

"Not that, either. And I don't want you to, like, drain me. But you could have a little. Holy shit, what the hell happened to your mouth?"

She clapped her hands over her lips. His words had brought out her fangs; she was very much afraid she had started to drool. "Nothing," she mumbled. "Let's talk about something else."

He came closer, trying to get a better look; she backed away. "That is so cool! And scary. It's like all of a sudden you sprouted about twenty more teeth."

"Let's change the subject."

"Okay, but don't say I never gave you anything." But he sounded relieved, and she knew at once he had been secretly hoping she wouldn't take him up on it. He wasn't afraid of her, exactly, but he was cautious. She thought it was a very healthy reaction.

"Let's get out of here," she said, still muttering around her fingers, "before I change my mind. Don't forget your dictionary."

"YOU know, if you'd told me last week that I'd be in a bar trying to help a vampire suck some poor guy's blood, I'd have said you were on drugs."

"The night is young," she said, staring into her wine.

"So, uh, how do you usually do this?"

"I usually skulk in a dark alley until someone tries to rob or rape me. Then I

assault them. Then I sulk. Then—"

"I think I get it," he said.

"But with you hovering over me like an overprotective linebacker, I'm not sure at all how this is going to work. Can't you just... wait for me in the car, or something?"

"And leave you alone? In here?" He looked around, clearly appalled. It really was a dive, with dirty floors and the pervasive odors of beer, sweat, and urine. But she could also smell blood under the rest of it, which told her this was the right place to go trolling. Violence was no stranger here.

"It's perfect."

"No way, Andy."

"Andrea," she growled, and drained the rest of her wine. "Well, then, I don't know how we—oof!"

"Shorry, little lady," the hulk behind her slurred. She craned her neck, and craned it some more... he was big. Easily six foot four, possibly a hair over. And broad. And smelly. He was wearing a filthy t-shirt, filthier jeans that might have once been blue, and Doc Martens. "Gut stampers," her dad used to call them.

"Buy m'drink?"

"I think you're supposed to buy her a drink," Daniel said.

"You lookin' fr a fight?"

"You lookin' for a shower?"

"I would love to buy you a drink," Andrea said, glaring at Daniel. "Possibly five. Have a seat."

"Oh, Andrea, come on!"

"Andeuh? S'pretty name."

"Daniel, will you stay out of this?"

"Bet y' got a pretty l'il pussy, too."

Daniel stood so quickly his chair tipped. "Okay, that's it."

"He's perfect!" she cried rapturously. The perfect bar, and now the perfect entree. Drunk, obnoxious, and all the knuckles on his left hand were scraped—he'd already been in a bar fight. It was doubtful he'd picked on someone his own size. A glance around the bar confirmed there was no one his own size. She stood also, fumbled in her jeans, remembered she had no money, then fumbled in Daniel's jeans.

"Hey, quit! That tickles!" She pulled a couple of fives out, dropped them on the bar, then turned to her O-negative in shining armor.

"Why don't we go for a walk? Get some fresh air?"

His brow wrinkled as he tried to decipher her request. "Nnnnn... walk? Don' wanna walk... wanna stay here n' talk t' you."

"You can bring your beer," she suggested, and that was good enough.

Annoyingly, Daniel stomped behind them as they left the bar. Smelly slung an arm over her shoulders as she half-led, half-carried him around the back of the building.

"Daniel... if you could just wait in the car, I'll be right with—"

"No way. I'm not leaving you alone with this—this—ugh!"

"Don't get too cocky," she muttered. She was glad Daniel couldn't see. Smelly was using the opportunity to grab and paw at her left breast, the only one he could reach. "You're about as articulate as he is."

"I can't believe this is how you spend your nights," he whined, trudging after them. "It's so bogus."

"As opposed to the fun-filled nights I could spend with Dictionary Boy," she

snapped. "Don't judge me. I'm doing the whole neighborhood a community service.

Instead of picking another fight or indulging in a little felony rape, he'll sleep the rest of the night and stagger home in the morning, hungover, violently ill, and remembering nothing."

"So, getting bitten by a vampire is the same as having six tequila shots?"

"Hilarious. I have laughed. My point—ow!"

"What?"

"Nothing." She glared at her boozy meal, who was leering at her with bleary satisfaction. What he doubtless considered "being playful" was painful as hell.

Did he not understand nipples were attached? "My point is, he won't be picking any more fights tonight, bullying women, committing date rape... none of it."

"Can't we just hit him over the head? We'll get the same result. Right down to the headache!"

"Daniel, I have to eat." She said it as simply as she could, because to her, it was simple. She was too much a coward to end herself, and too hungry to starve herself. She had chosen to live... after a fashion. This was her means.

She seized her knight in shining platelets, bent him back...

"Whu?"

... and sank her teeth into his jugular. Took her a second to find it; he had an extremely thick neck.

"Jesus! You're doing it now? Right this second?" Daniel jumped in front of her—them—arms spread wide, shielding her from passersby. Not that there were any at this hour, this location. "Andy, we're not even all the way out of the ally yet!"

"Grgle," she said, or something like it.

"Purrrrrrteeeeeeeee... " her knight in shining plasma slurred, slipping into

unconsciousness as easily as a child slid down a slide. "Mmmmm... purrrrrrrr...
gaaaaahhh."

Daniel had a hand over his eyes. "They're never going to believe this at the
reunion."

Chapter 7

« ^ »

"HEE! That was a piece of cake." She stumbled and Daniel steadied her. "Course,
it usually is... piece of cake I mean... hee... I miss cake..."

"Are you all right? You look kind of... uh... flushed, actually."

"Rush of blood," she said giddily. "Straight to the head! Zoom! Do not pass go,
do not collect any wooden stakes."

Daniel was peering worriedly down at her. He was so big, he was so strong. She
snuggled into his manlike—manful? manly?—arms, so gorilla-like in their soothing
strength. Ahhhh.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked again. "You really don't seem like
yourself. At all."

"You wanta see something super supercool? Like comicbook cool? I used to watch
Wonder Woman allia time when I was a kid."

"Uh..."

"Watch this!" She straightened out of his embrace and lurched toward the
streetlight. It was one of the old-fashioned wooden ones, with a halo of moths

and mosquitoes circling the globe at the top. She threw her fist and hit the wooden pole dead-on (a good trick, since at the moment, the pole was revolving lazily, as was the street, and Daniel's head). It shuddered and splinters jumped away from it, pattering to the street. She, of course, didn't feel a thing.

She hit it again, and it sloooooowly tipped over with a groan, hitting the street and bouncing up about a foot, then settling back and rolling over the curb.

"Holy shit!" Daniel just about screamed.

"I told you it was cool," she said. "Could you stop spinning around like that?"

It's annoying."

"I'm standing still. Uh, don't knock over any more light poles, okay? Are you sure—wait a minute!"

"Okay, but only a minute."

"That guy was three sheets to the wind, and you drank his blood—you're drunk!"

"I know you are," she said cleverly, "but what am I?"

"Great. A drunk, insanely strong vampire wandering the streets of—of whatever town we're in. With me."

"Drunken," she corrected muzzily. "And I am not."

"You totally are! Does this happen a lot?"

"I thought I was high on life," she said, and giggled. "Guess I was high on O-neg and Jack Daniel's." She laughed again, harder. It was all so stupid! And funny! And stupid! "He was so silly! And smelly! He thought he was gonna get a little, but instead I got a little. Ha!"

"Look, let's just—go back to the car, okay? This giddy, happy side of you is kind of freaking me out. We'll get to the car and we can make it all the way to the Cities before the sun comes up."

"No," she said.

"Uh... what?"

"No. You shouldn't be with me. You should leave me here and drive away as fast as you can. Put that big smelly foot to the metal."

"It's not smelly," he said, "and you're talking crazy." He reached for her arm but she shook him off like a fly.

"Go away!" she shouted.

He didn't go away. Instead, he hurried after her. "What the hell's gotten into you now? What's the problem?"

"Just... leave me alone." She weaved unsteadily down the street. The mood she was in, if those damned streetlights didn't stop wobbling, she was knocking them all over. So there!

"C'mon, Andy, will you come to the car already? You're totally screwing up our plan." She felt his fingers brush her elbow and whirled on him like a cat. She could tell from the way the color fell out of his face that all her teeth were showing.

"Leave. Me. Alone."

He rallied quickly, she noticed grudgingly; she'd give him that much. Too dumb to stay scared. It was endearing, yet irritating. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Well... I mean... what else is bothering you?"

"I'm no good, Daniel," she said, her anger abruptly shifting to racking sobs. "I have to drink blood to survive, get it?" He reached for her again and this time she let him. "I'm the worst thing there is to be... a vampire! Pull over at lunchtime," she begged, "and open the trunk."

He winced away from her, horrified. "I couldn't do that, Andy—"

"And! Ree! Uh!" she screamed into his face.

"Okay," he said, rubbing his ear. "Now, come on. You're not bad, Andy, you're just—in a bad situation. Yeah. And it's so totally not your fault, it should be a crime. In fact," he said, warming to his subject, "it was a crime! Like, murder, anyone? You're just doing the best you can. And you said yourself you only go after scumballs. You're—you're doing a community service! Yeah, that's it, they oughta give you a friggin' medal. Now—now quit crying, all right?"

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Come on. Let's get to the car. You'll feel better when we get closer to St. Paul."

"I doubt it." Did vampires get hangovers? She was afraid she was about to find out. "Thanks for listening to my hysterical ravings."

"Aw, that's okay. It's kind of nice to hear you raise your voice once in a while. You're a pretty cool customer, y'know?"

"I used to think so." She sighed, fell into step beside him, and made a conscious effort not to rest her head on his shoulder.

They found his Intrepid and climbed into it. When she refused to buckle her seat belt ("Honestly, Daniel, what could possibly happen to me?") he leaned across her and belted her in. His chest pressed briefly against her shoulder, and his breath, redolent of spearmint gum, tickled her ear.

"So!" he said cheerfully, starting the car and playfully racing the engine.

"We're off to see the Wizard! I figure we got about seven hours of darkness left. Plenty of time."

"That's true," she said, cheering up. "I'll see the new vampire queen soon, so I probably won't have to worry about anything much longer."

"What are you talking about?" He pulled into traffic after checking blind spots

she didn't know existed. For a happy-go-lucky laid-back type, he was fanatically careful behind the wheel. "Won't worry about what?"

"Well, the new queen probably won't want any baby vampires around."

"Baby vam—what does that mean?"

She was momentarily surprised, then remembered he really didn't know anything at all. "Sorry, I thought you knew. She'll kill me, of course. All the young ones.

I mean, we're not much use to her, and it's a great way to get her point across.

So I'm dead meat. Again," she added cheerfully.

He nearly drove into the stoplight. "What?"

"It's not like killing a real person," she said, trying to soothe him. She should have guessed he'd take power-killing entirely the wrong way. "I've already got a death certificate, remember." She rubbed her hands together in anticipation. "Yep, she'll take one look at me and know I'm useless to her and—gllllllkkkkk!" She drew her finger across her throat. "Sayonara, sweetheart."

"Jesus Christ!" Daniel yelled, which nearly made her throw up. "Are you insane? You're taking a trip to see a vampire who you're pretty sure is gonna kill you?"

He slammed on the brakes. In fact, he stood on them. The car shrieked like a cat and the cords stood out on his neck as he wrestled with the wheel. Her breath was cut off (big deal) as the seat belt locked. Hmm. Maybe it was a good thing he'd belted her in... otherwise she'd probably be skimming the road like a tiddledywink about now.

"For crying out loud," she said when the car had shuddered to a smoking stop.

"What is your problem?"

"My problem? My—well, forget that shit! No way am I driving you to your own

murder! I'm turning this car around right now and we're going back to Chicago."

"Oh, for the love..." She put a hand over her eyes.

"Yeah, you heard me." He twisted in his seat, glared through the rear window, then slammed the car in reverse. "Look, Andy, I'm real sorry you hate your life right now, but I think you're a super chick, and I'm not driving you to be some damn vampire queen's hors doover!"

"It's pronounced," she said gently, "hors d'oeuvre."

"I give a shit!"

"That's fine," she said, "but I guess I'll just have to steal a car—it's not difficult, I assure you—and go myself. Alone."

He glared at her. "No you won't!"

"Sure I will."

"Won't!"

"Ah... will."

"Dammit!"

He put the car in neutral and fumed while it idled. She hummed and studied her nails. Eck. She had some of Big 'n' Smelly's blood under her index nail. Could she lick it off without Daniel noticing? Maybe he—

"Okay," he said abruptly. "Here's the new plan."

"I'm breathless with anticipation."

"I still drive you to Minneapolis—"

"So, the new plan is the old plan."

"—but, I'm going with you to meet the vampire queen."

"I beg your pardon," she said politely, "but you certainly are not."

"No escort, no ride! That's the way it is."

She studied him and briefly considered knocking him out and stealing the

Intrepid. But she had the odd feeling it might not be quite as easy as she thought.

Well, she had a ride (again), and she could always ditch him at an opportune moment.

And his concern was really... well... really...

"Let's go," she said, "before I start to cry again."

Chapter 8

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"HEY, I have a present in the trunk," he said, returning to the car with their room key.

"A pillow?" she asked brightly. "Your trunk's certainly long enough to stretch out in."

"Yuck, no." He opened her door, waited impatiently while she slowly climbed out, then slammed it and popped the trunk. He withdrew a bag with the Target logo, and tossed it to her.

"Awww," she said. "Plastic. Gee, I didn't get you anything."

"Open it, wiseass. Sheesh. If I hadn't known you before you were a blood-sucking fiend of the night, I'd think all vampires were this weird."

"Oh, we are." She opened the bag and saw several t-shirts, a few pairs of shorts, two cardigans: one in white, one in black. "Oh. Clothes."

"Well, you sort of joined me with, like, just the stuff on your back, and I know

you don't need to shower or anything, but new clothes are kind of nice, doncha think?"

He was watching her so anxiously, her dead heart almost skipped a beat. "They're very nice," she assured him. "Very thoughtful. Thank you."

"Sure."

"I don't have any money to pay you b—"

"Forget it. We're on the end, here, second floor." He led her through the lobby and into the elevator. "Listen," he continued when the doors closed, "what have you been doing for money?"

She blinked at him. She didn't have to blink much anymore, but she liked to do it for effect. "Nothing, of course. What do I need money for? Food? Shelter? Warm clothes? Bikinis? Sunscreen? A family to feed?" She tried—and failed—to keep the bitterness out of her voice. "Let's not forget, for the last few years I've been little more than an animal. This is probably the first time I've even thought about money in six years."

"Huh."

That was all he said as they exited the elevator, walked down the hall, and entered their room like robots who didn't know each other. The room faced west, and she was gratified to see the curtains were thick.

"So what about your folks?" he asked, just when she thought he was going to shut up for a while.

She'd been pretending to read the "Welcome to the Super 8" brochure. "What about them?"

"Well... aren't you going to tell them you aren't dead?"

She stood, crossed to him, took his hand, and placed it in the middle of her chest. Then waited patiently. Then said, "I am dead, Daniel. Please note the

absence of a pulse."

He didn't move his hand, but made an impatient expression with his eyebrows.

"You know what I mean."

"Well, let's see... my mom left my dad when I was twelve, and I haven't seen her since, and last I heard Dad was off somewhere in New Jersey with Stepmother Number Three. I doubt they noticed I was dead."

"Oh," he said. Then, "Sorry."

"It's nothing."

"How come I didn't get invited to your funeral?"

"I'm sorry," she said politely. "Your invitation must have gotten lost in the garbage disposal."

"Now, cut that out! You know what I mean."

"Look, I wasn't exactly around to plan the fucking thing, okay? Ask the funeral director why you weren't invited. I was busy clawing my way out of my own grave."

"O-kay. Y'don't have to be so touchy."

"And you don't have to be such a dumbass," she snapped, "and yet, you seem unable to stop."

"Well, it's better than being a bitch!"

"No, it is not!"

"Yeah, it is!"

"You know, most people would have the sense to be afraid of me, but you, you're too dumb!"

"Afraid of what? A bloodsucking shrew?"

"Do you even know," she asked with deadly venom, "what a shrew is?"

"A shrew," he said, his index finger stabbing her nose, "is a woman of violent temper. It's also a small mouselike animal with a sharp nose."

She paused. "I'm going to make you eat that dictionary."

"Try it, cutie. I'll bounce you across this room like a Super Ball."

"I don't want to be bounced like a Super Ball," she admitted, and he cracked up.

"Awwwww," he said when he had finished hee-hawing like a donkey. "Our first fight."

"I could snap your neck," she commented, "like a toothpick."

"You'd never hurt your driver, sugar buns!"

She concealed a shudder. "Please don't ever call me that again."

"What were we fighting about again? Because we shouldn't go to bed angry at each other."

"You're confusing us with newlyweds." The thought would have made her blush, if she still could have. Sadly, Smelly's blood had been long metabolized and she was back to being corpse white until she fed again. "Never mind. Chalk it up to a long day."

He patted the bed. "Well, you can sleep... or whatever you do... right now." He flopped onto the bed and groped for the remote. "The nice thing about having you for a roommate, absolutely nothing wakes you up."

"I'm so happy for you." She gingerly climbed on the bed and stretched out beside him. "Honestly? It doesn't... creep you out or anything?"

"Heck no!" he said, a little too heartily. At her piercing stare, he added,

"Well... a little. I held my finger under your nose for, like, an hour—nothing.

Not a single tickle of breath."

"I hope you washed it first."

"My finger?" he teased. "Or your nose?"

"Very funny."

"But anyway, once I got used to it... no biggie. I mean—no offense—but you were always different."

"Yes," she said, staring at the ceiling. "I suppose I was."

"I should have gone out with you in college."

"It doesn't matter now."

"I was an idiot."

"Yes."

"But sometimes," he said, reaching for her hand, "things can be fixed."

"And sometimes," she said, gently extricating her fingers from his, "they can't."

It's too late now, Daniel. Years too late. We were just different people then.

Now we're different creatures entirely."

"That doesn't mean you can't have a fresh start."

She sighed and put a hand over her eyes. "Daniel, dear, you're so dumb you make me tired. Because that's exactly what it means. I'm sorry to be blunt."

"I'm not as dumb as you think, you know," he said with mild heat, but half his attention was already captured by ESPN.

"Of course not," she agreed. "You're just dumb compared to me."

"Go to sleep," he said sourly.

"I can't. The sun isn't up y—"

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THE first thing she heard, hours later, was Daniel yawning like a bear at the end of winter. "Finally," he said by way of greeting. "I didn't think you were ever gonna wake up. And did you know it's one, two, three, you're zonked? I thought you'd had a stroke or something."

"Fine, thanks, how are you?"

"Very funny." He yawned again. "Would you check in that bedside drawer for the HBO guide? I can't find it anywhere."

"Why?" she asked, rolling over and groping for the knob. "We're staying in to watch The Sopranos instead of driving the last half hour to St. Paul?"

"I just like to know what's on," he said. "Hey, you should be glad I'm reading."

"Oh, I'm thrilled," she assured him. Her lips wanted to smile but she sternly repressed them. "I'm—" Her hand dropped into the drawer and instantly she was on fire; her mind was equal parts agony and surprise and fury: surprise at the pain, agony at the pain, fury that she could be so stupid.

Her shriek brought Daniel off the bed and at her side in less than a heartbeat; she didn't think a mortal could move so fast. She was holding her wrist with her left hand. Her right hand was smoking. The drawer had pulled all the way out of the table, and the Gideon Bible had tumbled to the floor.

"Oh my God," Daniel gasped, which made her shriek louder. "Your hand, Andy, your poor—" He hauled her off the bed, kicked the Bible under the bed, and then he was running the tap in the bathroom, taking her poor crisped paw and running it carefully under the cool water. "Andy, I'm so sorry, I didn't—I should have—" She took a deep shuddering breath, which made her dizzy, but calmed her a bit, too. "It's my own fault. I should have known it was in there. It's in every bedside drawer in every motel in the country." She shivered against him. "It

hurts," she added dully.

"Of course it does, poor baby. If you were anyone but... well, you, we'd be calling 911 this minute and taking you to the ER. But..." He looked at her doubtfully, doubtless picturing a frantic intern trying to find her pulse, her blood pressure, anything.

"It will heal," she said. She dared a peek at her hand. At least it wasn't boiling smoke anymore. Her thumb was blackened, but the rest of her fingers merely had the dark red look of boiled lobster. "Eventually."

"This is bogus," Daniel said angrily. "I get that you're a vampire and all, but you were forced into it, and it's not like you're munching on first-graders.

What's God got against you?"

"I don't know," she replied, "but He appears to be plenty pissed."

"Well, shit. That's not fair."

"This is—is the Creator, remember? Not known for his scrupulous sense of fair play. He asked Jacob to kill his own son, if memory serves, set Eve up, screwed over the Jews... oh, all sorts of things. He never plays fair. He doesn't have to—it's his board game."

"For a vampire, you know a lot about it."

"Theology minor," she reminded him.

He turned the water off, took a snow-white hand towel from the shelf, and gently patted her hand dry. It stung like mad, but it wasn't the burning agony it had been before.

"Poor Andy," he said again, and kissed the tip of her middle finger, which was dark pink. "I'm really sorry. Should have got the damned HBO guide myself."

"You read my mind."

He laughed and hugged her to him. "Cripes, woman, you scared the shit out of me.

You got some lungs on you, didja know?"

"It's not every day I feel the agony of myself bursting into flames. To think I used to fantasize about walking on the beach during sunrise! Well, forget that."

His grip tightened. He was so tall, his chin rested on her head. "Don't talk about that," he said into her part. "Not anymore, okay?"

"I think it's safe to say my self-destructive streak is at an end for now," she said truthfully into his neck. His lovely, taut neck. She could actually see the blood pressure pumping up his jugular, and jerked back.

"Oh, come on, don't do that," he said coaxingly, grabbing her elbow and pulling her back into his embrace. Her burned hand stuck out behind him like a crosswalk sign. "We were kind of having a moment and everything."

"Uh... Daniel... it's not that I'm not finding this pleasant, because I truly am..."

"Good. Now stop talking and enjoy it."

She growled at him.

"Oh, go ahead and bite, then," he murmured. "I don't care. And I bet it'll make your hand feel better, huh? The only thing is, if I pass out, you've got to get me to the car and drive the rest of the way."

"Daniel, you have no fucking idea what you're saying."

"Sure I do. I think you're pretty cool. It's not that I didn't like you in school; I just didn't bother to get to know you. But now... I think you're a tough chick handling herself in an unbelievably sucky situation. Also, you've got a great rack for a dead girl."

"For crying out loud," she said, resting her forehead on his shoulder. "I suppose you think you're being sweet."

"Awww, you can't resist me, gorgeous."

"Dammit!"

"I couldn't help but notice," he said, running his hands up and down her back as she snuggled more firmly into his embrace, "that you didn't exactly deny it. You just swore again. It totally proves me ri—mmph!"

She was kissing him. She couldn't believe she was doing it... had gotten up just the right amount on her tiptoes and mashed her lips to his. Oh, sweet relief.

She'd wanted to do it for eight years. Of course, she'd only remembered wanting to do it for the last seventy-two hours, but forgetting hadn't made him less of the boy she'd pined after in college, the boy she'd followed to St. Olaf from Carleton College, the man she pined for now. She'd left a school to follow a football player, and had despised herself for it at the time, and ever since.

There was nothing to despise, now. He was good, he was kind, he liked her, he didn't wince away in horror at what she was. So what if she had a few IQ points on him? What had that gotten her, exactly? An early grave, that's what.

His tongue eased past her lips and her good hand slid through his short hair, caressing the fine hairs at the back of his neck. His hand was under her shirt, stroking her bare back, and then she bit him.

Now he was the one up on his toes, trembling, and as his hot salty essence flooded her mouth the burning agony in her hand faded, faded, was a slight pain, was a negligible itch, was gone. She could hear him groaning, could feel him groping at her, and then her shirt was in shreds, and his was split down the middle, and they were dancing/ staggering out of the bathroom, toward the bed, pulling and tugging and biting and drinking and kissing.

Her back hit the bed and she disengaged, threw her head back and groaned at the ceiling. He leaned down and kissed the blood from her fangs and she nipped him

again, gently, and sucked on his upper lip, and then he was tearing her cotton shorts down the middle, ripping her panties away, and she got the fly of his jeans open, got them partway down his hips, burrowed past his Jockeys and got hold of his cock—oh, warmth, warmth, hot stiff warmth and he wanted her so badly he was shaking with it and she could have wept with sheer gratitude, but instead she arched toward him, locked her ankles around his back, and when he came in for the stroke she bit him again, on the other side of his neck.

He hissed, but not in pain.

He was so warm, it was like being fucked by an electric blanket, except infinitely sexier, and she came at once, with fresh blood in her mouth and that hot hard part of him digging into her, pushing, stroking, shoving.

She shoved back and he groaned and gently slid his palm over her nipple, then gripped her breast, hard, and bent, and pulled the stiff peak into his mouth, and bit her. She was swallowing and licking the blood from her fangs and came again when his warm mouth closed over her, when his teeth nipped her tender flesh. She grabbed the bedspread and heard it rip beneath her groping fingers.

"Daniel," she called, wild with wanting and fear that she was hurting him, he was mortal, he was fragile, he—he was coming inside her, she could feel her temperature change as he filled her up.

"Andy," he managed.

"Don't—call me—that—"

"Andy," he said again, and dropped his head to her shoulder, and was insensible for half an hour.

"DAMN!" he said when he regained consciousness. "You are a demon in the sack! You've, like, ruined me for live girls forever."

"Eww, don't say it like that," she said. "And get off me, will you?"

"Oh, right. Sorry." He rolled to his side. "Cripes, you're squashed right into the mattress. I must have been crushing you—how long was I out?"

"It's no big deal. It's not like I had to breathe." Actually, she had spent that half an hour stroking his hair and listening to his long and even breaths, listening to his pulse, wondering at the thud-thud-thud thundering in her ears, and thinking maybe, just maybe her life hadn't gone into the shifter after all. She had no idea vampires could have sex—well, she'd imagined they could, they had all the right equipment, but she hadn't thought it would be like flying, like soaring above the clouds, like—like being alive. It was—traitorous thought!—better than drinking blood.

"Are you all right? Not too shaky or anything? I'm afraid I might have gotten carried away."

"No chance, sugar, check this." He bounded up, then did half a dozen jumping jacks. She watched his penis bob around energetically and fought a grin. "I feel like a million bucks! I feel like I could go clubbing all night long! Want to?"

"Dead girls don't dance," she laughed.

He pounced on her and nuzzled her cleavage. "Fine, be a grump... how about you? How's the hand?"

She flexed it for him.

"Niiiiice," he said, gently stroking the unblemished skin. "I'll be taking full credit for that, by the way. My kick-ass blood and mighty dick were just the curative powers you needed."

"I'm about three seconds from putting you through the window," she said, smiling. "I don't think there's enough room on this bed for you, me, and your

overly satisfied male ego."

"We'll make room, bay-bee!" He gave her a hearty smack on the mouth. "Ummm..." He busied himself with her mouth for a minute and she kissed him back, thinking about flying, thinking about being alive, when he pulled back and said, "How about you? Did you like it? I know it's been a while and you were kind of freaking out about it... Jeez, like—sorry," he added, seeing her flinch. "I keep forgetting."

"It's not your fault. And it was wonderful. Really very wonderful. Thanks for letting me feed."

"Oh, baby, if I get laid when you feed, then slap a sign on my ass and call me a buffet."

She started giggling and couldn't stop. He bounded into the bathroom and she heard him yell, "Check this! All my bite marks have totally healed!"

"I think there's an enzyme or something in a vampire bite," she called after him. "It promotes fast healing."

"Well, Jeez, that's the coolest—sorry." He came out, looking at her curiously.

"What's it like?"

"What? Watching you preen? Stupefying."

"No, when I say something about G—uh, the Big Guy. I mean, I know what it's like when something from that neighborhood touches you—" He shuddered. "And I never want to see it again. Or hear it! You screamed like you were—"

"On fire?" she suggested dryly.

"But what's it like for you, just hearing the name or whatever?"

"It makes me feel like throwing up," she said simply. "Like my stomach has turned inside out and I'm going to vomit or die or both. It's—it's awful."

"Oh. Well, I'll try really really hard to curb the taking of the Big Guy's name

in vain."

"You won't have to worry about it much longer," she pointed out, though her stomach turned inside out—and he hadn't even cursed!—at the thought. "We're almost there. Drop me off and away you go."

"No," he said stubbornly. "That wasn't the deal. I'm taking you to see this badass vampire queen, that was the deal."

"Mmmmm."

"Don't grunt at me, missy. And don't be thinking about ditching me, either."

"Wouldn't dream of it. But Daniel, have you really considered this? Not all vampires are like me, you know."

"Cripes, I hope not." He was examining his shredded clothing and scowling at her.

"No, I mean it. Comparably speaking, I'm a pussycat. Most vampires are much, much worse." She shivered. "The ones that killed me, for example. Minnesota nice, my ass."

"For crying out loud, Andy, did you, like, eat my jeans?" He tossed the ruined clothes toward the garbage can. "Have you ever met any? Bad vampires, I mean? Since you've been one?"

"I ran into one or two while I was passing through, but they didn't have anything to do with me. I wasn't really fit for adult conversation at the time," she admitted. "Too young. One of them tried to help me but I ran away from him. He was..." Terrifying. All height and dark flashing eyes and power, such a sense of power! He wore it like he wore the expensive clothes. And his eyes... she knew if she stayed a second longer she wouldn't be able to refuse him, so she'd fled. He'd been kind ("What is your name?") and concerned ("How old are you?") but

he'd been too strong ("Stay a minute.") and she couldn't abide being near him, not for another minute, another second. And he'd let her go. She'd been as relieved as she'd been disappointed. "Anyway. Most of them are bad. And the queen... the new queen... she'll be the worst of us all."

"How come?"

"Because the vampire she defeated—Nostro—was really really bad."

"Really really bad?" he teased.

She shook her head at him, unsmiling. "I don't have words to explain it to you, to make you understand how bad. And he was in power for hundreds of years, and with vampires, the older you are, the more power you gain. He was considered completely unstoppable, for centuries.

"And she killed him, Daniel. She just—just woke up one night and killed him and took his seat of power and there was nothing more to be done. No warning, no formal declaration of challenges, nothing. It was like she rose one day and said, 'I think I'll kill the old vampire king,' and then it was done.

"And to do that, she had to be more powerful and more wicked and—and—" She paused, remembering something she'd heard, a scrap on the wind, a whisper. "They call her Elizabeth, the One. The most powerful vampire in two thousand years. And she's fated to rule at least two thousand more."

"Wow," he said respectfully.

"So I strongly urge you to reconsider this notion you've gotten about—"

"No."

"Idiot," she muttered.

"Ah, but I'm your idiot, bay-bee. And howcum you don't reconsider?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why go see this Liz the One at all? Let's hang out, have some more fun."

She blinked, caught completely flat-footed by his offer. "That's a nice... a wonderful offer... but this is something I have to do. It's like her name is in my head, all the time. Like she's calling me to her." She shuddered. "I imagine there's thousands of us on the way to Minnesota these days."

"Talk about a creep-out. Come take a shower with me."

"Why?"

He made an exasperated sound. "Because."

"We're wasting valuable driving time."

"We've got the whole damn night, and just half an hour to go."

"Fine," she grumbled, and rose from the bed, but secretly she was glad; glad to keep half an hour between her and the queen.

Chapter 10

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THE shower was delightful. She'd forgotten. Daniel was all slippery hands and long limbs and broad pecs and the water beat down on them and then he kissed her and one thing led to another and he was bleeding again—

"S-sorry."

"Shut up," he groaned, "and move a bit to your left."

—and then they were writhing together beneath the spray, and at the height of her pleasure she grabbed the shower curtain, which let go with a pok-pok-pokking sound and tumbled her onto the bath mat.

"Wow," Daniel panted, peering down at her. "Just like the shower scene from Psycho. Except a lot sexier."

"Help me up, you idiot," she said, hardly able to speak, she was laughing so hard.

"As soon as I can take a step without falling on my ass, I'm all yours." Moving like an old man, he turned and shut the water off, then settled into the tub with a sigh. "Damn!"

"I have to say, if I was going to break the no-shower barrier, that was the way to do it."

"Anybody ever tell you you're really... uh... flexible? Like, Olympic gymnast flexible?"

"Not in the last few hours. You should see what I could do if we filled that tub."

"Eh? What could you do?"

She sat up and tweaked his ear—playfully, she thought, but he yelped and jerked away. "Oh, sorry, forgot my own strength. Anyway, I don't have to breathe, remember? One time I was in a mood—"

"You? Naw!"

"—and instead of hiding underground I spent the day in the middle of Lake Michigan, just walking around on the bottom. Did you know there are muskies bigger than me down there?"

"That's the saddest, and creepiest, thing I've ever heard."

"Oh, it's not so bad. Anyway, my point is, think of the fun we could have in a hot tub!"

He didn't say anything, so she stood, shook herself, grabbed a towel, and started blotting herself dry. "Well, I suppose we should check out and hit the

road. No time like the present, let's get the show on the road, pick your cliché—Daniel?"

"I sort of locked up when you said hot tub," he admitted, shaking his head like a dog. "Damn! Okay, we have to find one right now."

"Forget it," she giggled. "We have to get going. We've pissed away enough time tonight already."

"Rain check," he said grimly.

"Fine, fine." If we live through the night, I'll do you in a public fountain if that's your pleasure. "Now let's get dressed and get out of here."

"Sure thing, Nancy Drew!" he said enthusiastically, climbing out of the tub on rubbery knees. "Lucky for you I've got more clean clothes. Try to resist your unholy urge to shred them or eat them or whatever you've been doing to my jeans."

"I'll try," she said solemnly, and shrieked as he smacked her bare ass on the way past.

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

WAREHOUSE DISTRICT

"STAAAWWWWWPPPPPP!" Andrea screamed, and Daniel stood on the brakes again.

"This—is—very—bad—for—my—car—" he managed through gritted teeth as his Intrepid narrowly avoided crashing through a wooden fence.

"I'm sorry, I just saw it out of the corner of my eye..." She was out of her Daniel-mandated seat belt in a flash and standing beside the car, staring at the building. "Will you look at that?"

Daniel climbed out, panting from the adrenaline surge, and leaned against the car. "Look at what? It's an old building. News flash, dead girl, we're in the warehouse district."

"You can't see that?" She knew he couldn't smell it, but how could he not see it? The letters were a foot high.

"See what?"

She pointed. "It says 'Private Library; Patrons Welcome.' "

"Uh... says it where, exactly?"

"There. Right there. The letters are a foot high and they're written in dried blood. In fact, that's interesting in and of itself... how do they keep it from wearing off? Washing off in the rain? Crawling with bugs?"

"Who the hell cares? It doesn't have anything to do with—oh, shit," he added, falling into step beside her. "You really are Nancy Drew. Why check this out?"

"I've never seen a welcoming sign in blood before. Maybe—" She looked at him doubtfully. "Maybe you—"

"No way."

"Okay, okay, it was just a suggestion. A logical suggestion from a vastly superior intellect, but ignore me, see if I care."

"Well, I will."

"And stay behind me."

"Pass!" His hand clamped firmly over her elbow. "Man oh man, like this area of town wasn't creepy enough without vampire buildings."

She paused outside the door, which looked like it was hanging on only one set of hinges, tapped, then watched in amazement as the door straightened, settled, and slowly swung open.

"Eeeeeeeeeennnnnnnnnnnnhhhhhhh," Daniel creaked.

"Hush up!" she hissed. "This is creepy enough without your sound track."

They both stepped inside, expecting a dusty warehouse. Instead, they saw shelves and shelves of books, low lighting, a hardwood floor gleaming mellowly from countless applications of wax. The place smelled like old paper, wax, and coffee.

Daniel whistled. "This place is bigger than the libe at the U of M."

"Of course it is," someone said from their left, and they both jumped.

"Sorry," the woman said. "I thought at least one of you could hear me coming."

Daniel and Andrea stared at her in frank wonder. She looked like someone's mother... her chocolate-brown hair was streaked with gray, and her brown eyes were bracketed with laugh lines. She stood straight and erect in her dark blue suit, frothy white blouse, tan panty hose, and sensible shoes. She was very pale, but the lightest touches of makeup on her face served only to play up her features, not make her unusual coloring stand out.

"Welcome to the library," she was saying. "I'm Marjorie, the head librarian. How can I help you, Andrea?"

Daniel gasped and his fingers sank into her elbow like claws.

"Ouch!"

"Andy, she knows your name!" he hissed in her ear. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

"I'm standing right here, dear," Marjorie said dryly.

Andrea plucked Daniel's hand off her elbow. "I'm sorry, I've never been here before, how do you know my name?"

"You have been here, dear," Marjorie said, looking at her with something like compassion. "You just don't remember. When Nostro's followers finished with you,

you and the other girls were brought here for cataloging."

"Say what?" Daniel growled.

"We took fingerprints, DNA samples, everything. In case you survived your first decade and found your way back here, we could tell you who you were. Had been," she corrected herself. "Of course, the other girls never rose, poor things, and you wasted no time leaving town. We tried to talk to you, but..." Marjorie shook her head.

"But... I don't remember any of that! I thought I'd been buried, or—"

"You assumed you had been. But those who die at the hands of a vampire are brought here when it's at all possible. Of course, in the first place very few of them come back, and in the second, there's little we can do to help them, but when they do return we have their credit cards, their checkbooks—we keep all those accounts open, we help you hang on to your house—or sell it, if that's your wish—in fact, kudos, Ms. Mercer! You're about three and a half years ahead of schedule. And showing up with a sheep, of all things!"

"A what?" they said in unison.

"Oh. Ah. Pardon me." Marjorie coughed into her fist, a dry sound like a bullet.

"I assumed... I assumed you were keeping this nice young man for feeding."

"Well, she isn't. I'm her driver, so there," Daniel snapped. "Anything else going on is between two consenting adults."

"Yes, of course."

Andrea was rolling her eyes. "Daniel, could you not pick a fight with the first vampire we meet?"

He ignored her. "And I want to know about the fucks who killed her. What happened to them?"

"Well... nothing, at the time. Nostro was still in power. But now that Elizabeth,

the One, has taken the throne, things will change. Three of them, in fact, died defending Nostro's throne." Marjorie smiled. It was kind of terrifying, like watching winter grin. "Too bad, so sad."

"Awwwwwww," Andrea said, feeling for the first time in a long while like it was her birthday.

"As to the others, you could certainly take your grievance to Her Majesty. You have considerable cause. What they did to you..." She shook her head. "Shameful. No excuse. We're not animals."

"Well, thanks, but I'm a little new around here to ask the queen to solve my problems. I'm—"

"We're."

"—just here to pay tribute. We stopped when we saw your sign."

"I'm flattered!" Marjorie actually clapped her hands. "And you have no idea how much good it does this old lady to see you in such control of your faculties.

Why, you could be fifty years old!"

"Really?" she said, thrilled. "That's so nice of you."

"And to think you came to see the library when you have pressing business with the queen."

"What's—uh—what's she like?"

Marjorie fixed her with a paralyzing stare. "She is unlike any vampire sovereign I have ever seen, and I have lived through three."

Out of the corner of her eye, Andrea could see Daniel mouthing numbers and counting on his fingers.

"I'm eight hundred sixty-eight years old, dear," Marjorie said. "If you were wondering."

"Are you shitting?"

Andrea elbowed him sharply in the side. "But—Marjorie—why aren't you the queen?"

She could get behind a queen—a scholar—like Marjorie.

Marjorie made a face like she smelled something bad. "Ech! Not hardly. This," she said, her hand indicating the huge library, "is my passion. I'd rather eat a garlic sandwich than run the world. Can you imagine the headaches? The paperwork? The hostess duties?" The ancient scholar actually shivered.

"Oh. Um, do you know where we can find the new queen?"

"Certainly. Nostro's holdings now belong to her—that law is a thousand years old—and his old properties are out on the edge of Lake Minnetonka. I'll get you a map."

She clacked away in her sensible shoes and Daniel let out a breath. "That nice middle-aged lady is older than America? Shit!"

"Much older, and be nice. She could have ripped both our heads off and used them for bookends."

"Yeah, well, she might be super decrepit, but I'm still—aagggghhh!"

"Here you are, dear," Marjorie said, coming around—somehow—from behind them.

"I've marked the queen's territories in red. You should have no—well," she added, fixing her gaze on Andrea, "you should have no trouble."

"Thank you very much, ma'am."

"Feel free to poke about in the stacks before you leave—hardly anybody ever comes here to read," she said with a disapproving sniff.

"Wh-what do they come for?" Daniel managed.

"Maps."

"Oh. That's a toughie, Marjie."

She fixed him with a forbidding look. "Marjorie. And thank you for your

sympathy, shee—Daniel."

"Thanks again," Andrea said. "I'll be back, if the queen doesn't kill me. I love libraries."

"You're welcome here any time. As to the other matter..." Marjorie made a vague gesture and clacked off.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Daniel whispered in her ear.

"Don't do that, it tickles. And I guess it means I'm supposed to find out for myself. Come on, let's look me up in here."

They found the Ms after a few minutes. The library was a peculiar combination of the old card catalog system, and up-to-date computer files. They found a card which simply read, Mercer, Andrea. DOB 07/29/76; DOD 07/29/97.

"Oh, that sucks!" Daniel cried. "They killed you on your birthday?"

"My twenty-first birthday," she added thoughtfully. "Must have needed people that exact age for his dumb ceremony. Barely drinking age forever... oh, the humanity!"

"You're in a weirdly good mood," he muttered, jumping at small noises—who knew when Marjorie would appear out of nowhere again?

"I like libraries." She took the card with her name on it and inserted it into the slot in the computer. Instantly information about her began to scroll down the screen... there was her old house, there was her high school, her parents' names and occupations, her grandparents... there were her college transcripts, including her transfer paperwork to St. Olaf... there was her credit report, there was her bank account... "Huh. Would you look at that?"

"It's creepy, is what it is. Creepy dead librarians keeping track of your whole life, lurking here waiting for you to come back... yech!"

"It's a pretty logical system, actually—what the hell?"

"What, what?"

She froze the screen. Under Affiliations, there was a single name: Sinclair.

"What's a Sinclair?"

"I have no idea. I don't affiliate with any vampires."

"Shit, you barely affiliate with me."

"I wish we could cross-reference my file with Sinclair's to find the—whoa." The computer unfroze and started to do exactly that. In a few seconds, they were staring at the screen, which read:

04/06/00. His Majesty King Sinclair, passing through Des Moines on business. See transcript.

"Let's see it," she ordered.

Instantly a dark, slightly amused voice came out of the computer. "I was passing through town—this was a couple of years before I became Elizabeth's consort—and back-trailed a young vampire. It was a chilly night; I thought she might need a hand. She was very young; I doubt she knew her own name at the time. She was afraid and wouldn't come with me. I made a few attempts and left her to her own devices. See if her description matches anyone in your files: about five foot six, shoulder-length brown hair, brown eyes, pale coloring—hereditary, not as a condition of being dead—slender, no tattoos or birthmarks that I could see, but she had a beauty mark high on her left cheek. Transmission ends."

"Holy shit," Daniel said, poking her beauty mark. "You met up with the king of the dead guys!"

"I remember him, too," she said faintly. "I was too scared to talk to him. I'm not surprised he's Elizabeth's consort. Still, it was nice of him to try to help me."

Daniel snorted. "He barely tried and gave you up as a bad job quick enough."

"It's not really in a vampire's nature to help another vampire," she explained.

"For him, for what he was, he went above and beyond, believe me."

"Well, d'you want to look up more toothy dead guys, or finish what we came to do?"

She was tempted to remain in the library—to sleep in the library!—but Daniel was right, they were just postponing the inevitable. She had no desire to look up Elizabeth's file—for one thing, it was probably forbidden, and for another, why find out more information that was just going to scare her? And she had no wish to look up Nostro's file, since he was dead and gone.

"Elizabeth must be a thousand years old," Andrea muttered. "Maybe more."

Daniel puffed out his chest. "Well, she's no match for the baby and the sheep, tell you that right now."

Andrea had to smile. "Still got that map?"

"No, in the three minutes since Marjie gave it to me, I've managed to lose it.

Yes, I've got the damned map."

"All right, then. Let's go find the queen."

Chapter 11

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" THIS place is so totally creepy," Daniel commented, his hand firmly in the center of her back as they moved through the ankle-high grass of the lawn. "I

feel like Shaggy on Scooby-Doo."

"The resemblance," she agreed, "is remarkable."

"Man, if you hadn't told me a ton of badass vampires lived here, I'd have totally figured it out on my own."

"Sure you would have. Stay close."

"Don't worry, Andy. Anything comes shooting out of the dark, I'll kick their ass."

"Don't call me that. And if anything comes out of the dark, you get down and you stay down and you let me handle it, do you understand?"

"Sure. Not too lame," he muttered.

She could hear a chain-link fence rattling and, after a moment's effort, could see it, barely illuminated by the cold sliver of the moon. "There. That way."

"What way?" he complained, stumbling beside her. "It's darker than a woodchuck's asshole out here."

"Never mind. I can see."

"What, you've got flashlights for eyes now? Is that, like, a vampire power?"

"Daniel, hush up." To her left, she heard a low, feral growl, and stopped suddenly. Another to her right.

"What?" His voice seemed very loud in the night air; booming. "What's the matter? Change your mind? Because we could be back in Chicago in—"

"Shhhhh."

Another, flanking them... no, two of them. No, three. Shit. She didn't worry for herself—what did she care if she was ripped to pieces? But Daniel was easy meat.

She wasn't about to stand and watch one of these things eat his dear face.

She heard them coil to charge and jerked him behind her ("Hey!") and got ready.

She felt her fangs come out; part of her was always ready for a fight, welcomed

a fight, and that was the true tragedy of her condition.

She could see their attackers now, scrambling toward them on all fours, but they weren't wild dogs, as she had first thought. Or even wolves. They were too big, too long-limbed, too... pale?

They were... they were people.

She could smell their breath; old blood, and death. She could see their eyes; devil's eyes, all black, like pits, but far down, sullen red light... their pupils? Their pupils were red? She could see their fur—hair, rather—long and falling to their shoulders in greasy clots. She could—

"Hey! Stop! Quit it, you guys! Bad fiends. Baaaaaad fiends!"

Blinking, she saw a tall blond woman stumbling after the—the whatever-they-were.

The woman's progress was impeded by her footgear... ridiculously high heels in electric blue, with white toes. She was wearing a black skirt and a black double-breasted jacket, sleeveless. Her arms were slender; the wrists tiny, barely two inches across. Odd, on such a tall woman. Her hair was light blond and curled under at the ends, framing an attractive face with high cheekbones.

Her eyes were bright green. Andrea had never seen such green eyes before.

There was a gold cross nestled in the hollow of the woman's throat; it made her slightly sick to look at it.

Perhaps oddest of all: the things were listening to the woman.

"Bad, bad, bad!" she was saying as she neared them. The things cowered and whimpered but kept their distance. "You guys! Gross! I mean, just stop it now! You just had, like, ten buckets of blood apiece, how could you possibly be hungry? Bad!" She turned to Andrea and Daniel, and covered her eyes with her hands. Her nails were beautifully French manicured, Andrea saw, and the fingers

were long and slender. No rings. "This is, like, so embarrassing. I'm not with these fiends, you know. I mean, I'm with them, but I'm not with them with them, y'know?"

"Sure," Daniel said, which was a relief, because Andrea was completely mystified. It's like the woman was speaking another language. One Daniel could understand! Thank goodness she'd brought her own interpreter.

"Like, just really gross-out, you know?"

"Totally," Daniel said.

"Thank you! Usually people don't get it, but it's just... yech!"

"Not to mention massively bogus 'n' stuff."

"I know!" The blonde shook her head and rested her hands on her hips. "So, what brings you guys to Hell's Acre? In case you missed the memo, it's so totally dangerous out here. Probably looking for a nice place to make out but this is so not it. I hate to be a hardass, but I'm really gonna have to ask you to leave."

"Hello," Daniel muttered. It was obvious his eyes had finally adjusted to the dark... while remaining oblivious of the danger. "Babe alert."

"Down boy," Andrea muttered. Louder, she said, "We'll be glad to go, miss, but we can't just yet. We're in town for—never mind. Thanks for helping us. Are these your... ah..."

"They're mine, all right," the woman said grimly. "Unfortunately. Don't get me started. I mean, yech! We try to keep them clean, but they're like puppies... they roll in everything."

"Sure," Andrea said, humoring the woman. Puppies. Undeniably evil puppies with foul dispositions and the appetites of rabid, starving tigers. All righty.

"Well, thanks for calling them off. Listen, this might sound kind of weird, and I promise we're not crazy, but we're looking for a vampire."

"Oh, yeah?" she said, totally unfazed. "Which one?"

"Well, the, uh, the queen. Of the vampires."

"Whyyyyyyyyy?" the blonde whined. "I mean, you've got nothing better to do with your time? What do you want?"

The blonde was weirdly unfazed by this... maybe she was a what-do-you-call-it, a sheep. Before Andrea could answer, Daniel was bulling in.

"Well, she's here to pay her respects n' all, and I'm here to kick the queen's ass if she tries to do anything to my girl."

"Oh."

"Daniel!"

The blonde snickered. "Well, the queen is me, and I don't want to kick anybody's ass."

"Don't be ridiculous," Andrea snapped, her nerves almost at the breaking point.

"You're not a vampire."

"Am, too!"

"You certainly are not."

"I am, too!"

"Oh, now just stop it! You can't be a vampire, and you certainly aren't an all-powerful queen. For one thing—" Andrea pointed triumphantly. "You're wearing a cross."

"Oh, that." She shrugged. "It was a present from El Jerko, aka Eric Sinclair."

"Eric Sinclair? As in the Sinclair?"

"Guy gets around," Daniel muttered, then gasped as a fiend licked his hand with her cold tongue. "Uh... nice kitty. Go away."

Andrea, puzzled, said, "But Eric's the consort of—"

"Let's not talk about it," the blonde said thinly. "Look, you're just going to have to take my word for it: I'm a vampire. The—uh—the queen." She choked back a giggle. "Believe me, I know how it sounds."

"This isn't fair!" Andrea wailed. "I come all this way—I was scared, but I came anyway—and you won't take me to the queen! You're just playing games!"

"Look, babe, do I have to write it on my forehead? I'm the queen. I sicced these guys..." Indicating the fiends. "... on Nostro. They had him for lunch. I didn't know that by doing that I'd end up the queen; I thought I was just saving my friends. Now I'm stuck with this fucking crown and that sneak, Sinclair, and frankly, I'm pretty pissed off about it!" She was shaking her perfectly manicured finger in Andrea's face, while Andrea was trying not to vomit from being so close to the woman's cross. "So believe me or don't, but either way, get lost!"

"Perhaps I can be of some assistance?"

"Aaaaagggghhhhh!" all three of them howled in unison.

Andrea literally couldn't speak, and Daniel was busy sucking gasps of oxygen into his lungs. So only the woman whirled on the darkness that had approached them. "God damn it, Sinclair! Stop doing that! And stop following me, it's so fucking creepy and you know I can't stand it!"

"Good evening to you, too, Elizabeth. Away, fiends," he said, snapping his fingers, and the poor things scattered.

"My heart," Daniel muttered, "is not having a good day."

"I do apologize," Sinclair said smoothly. "I didn't mean to startle you.

Elizabeth, aren't you going to introduce me to your—" He saw Andrea and his black eyes narrowed. "You. Iowa?"

"Yes, we ran across each other there, sir," she said faintly. It made her

extremely nervous to be chitchatting with the king. He was just as terrifying, just as powerful, just as frighteningly polite as he had been that long-ago snowy night. He was, in fact, everything Elizabeth, the One, was not.

"You seem better now. In fact, you're a couple of years ahead of schedule." He carelessly turned his back on her. "Why are you here, Elizabeth? We have staff to take care of the grounds. If you won't live here, why can't you stay away?"

"If you won't fuck off and die, why do you keep bugging me?" she snapped back.

Andrea was filled with admiration: the woman seemed more irritated than terrified. "These guys are here to pay homage to the—" She gnashed her teeth and finally spat it out. "The queen, but they didn't believe me when I told 'em—"

"We believe you now," Daniel and Andrea chorused.

"Oh. What gave it away? My innate royalness? My fabulous highlights? My shoes, did you see my shoes?" She propped one of her feet up on its heel, showing off her slender ankle. "Aren't they cute? I knew if Kate Spade put her mind to it she could do decent pumps."

"Actually," Daniel said, jerking a thumb toward Sinclair, who looked gratified, "it was him."

"Welllllll, isn't that great." Elizabeth, the One, scowled at them, then whirled on Sinclair. "Dammit! You told me this was going to stop eventually! It's like some sort of twisted The Incredible Journey, except with dead people instead of animals." She turned back to Andrea and Daniel. "Why, why, why do you all have to be so dumb and dependent? Can't you just migrate somewhere else? Like to North Dakota, or the Antarctic Ocean?"

Daniel snickered and poked Andrea. "Queen says you're dumb."

"Shut up, sheep," she muttered. Then, louder, "But you—you've been calling me!"

"Nuh-uh!"

Sinclair ahem'ed. "It's a function of your power as sovereign," he explained.

"You probably have been calling them. Her. And the others who have been—"

"Well, shit!"

"Yup," Daniel said.

The queen frowned. "What do you want, anyway?"

"N-nothing," Andrea managed. "Just to see you. To make myself—"

"Us," Daniel corrected firmly.

"—known to you."

"Well, that's nice and all, but you sure didn't have to come all this way just to see me. Ever heard of e-mail?"

Daniel laughed, and the queen smirked as he exclaimed, "Don't even tell me we could have avoided this whole trip!"

"Okay, I won't tell you, but you could have. What's your name?"

"Baaaaaaaaa," Daniel said.

Andrea smacked his arm. "Very funny. I'm Andrea Mercer, and this is my friend, Daniel Harris." She shook the queen's—the queen's!—hand. "It's very nice to meet Your Majesty."

"Betsy, for the love of God. Sorry," she added, seeing Andrea flinch and Sinclair wince. "I keep forgetting."

"Hey, I do that all the time, too! Whoa." Daniel made the time-out sign. "You can swear? And wear crosses?"

"Uh-huh. Don't ask me why."

"Okay, I won't, but then you can't get mad at people when they don't think you're a vampire."

"Can, too! If I'm the queen I figure I can do whatever the heck I want, so

there. Although I have to say it's nice to meet a vampire who has a sense of humor—"

"He's not a vampire," Sinclair and Andrea said in unison.

"Oh. My bad. I usually can't tell until they jump on me and start chewing, anyway."

"You mean vampires attack the queen of the vampires because they don't know you're a vampire?"

"My life," she sighed, "in a nutshell."

"And he's not my sheep, either," Andrea blurted out, glaring at Sinclair, who was looking entirely too smug. "He's—he's my—"

"Hot love monkey," Daniel supplied helpfully.

Andrea buried her face in her hands. "Anyway," she said to her fingers, "if Your Majesty doesn't require anything of me at this time—"

"Go hit a Dairy Queen, have a shake, go crazy," Betsy said carelessly. "Have fun with your love monkey."

"As long as we're on the subject of hot monkey love," Sinclair began.

"Forget it, pal! The last time I got naked with you, I got stuck with a crown.

And you. I'd rather have gotten a hemorrhoid!"

Andrea grabbed Daniel's elbow and began to slowly lead him away. "Well... we'll be going, then..."

"Ah, Elizabeth, you really should succumb to the inevitable."

"How about if instead I set your shoes on fire!"

"You wouldn't: they're Kenneth Coles."

"Nice meeting you!" Daniel called.

Faintly, the queen: "I didn't ask you to come out here, FYI."

"Ah, my queen, you know I can't stay away."

Louder, the queen: "Well, you better!"

"Good-bye!" Andrea yelled and, holding hands, they ran to the car.

"What's the rush?" Daniel gasped, keeping stride.

"Do you want to be around if they start throwing punches?"

He picked her up and ran the rest of the way.

Chapter 12

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"SO now what?" Daniel asked. They were in yet another anonymous hotel room, this one the downtown Minneapolis Marriott. Andrea had to admit it was much nicer than the others. "Do we stay? Do we go back to Chicago? Do we keep driving west, running from the rising sun? What?"

"I don't know. I—I didn't expect to still be alive. Or in charge of my own destiny. I thought she'd kill me or enslave me."

Daniel snorted. "Her? The only thing she'd enslave is a pair of high heels. She was cute, though. Really cute. If you like 'em annoying, flighty, and fashion-obsessed."

"Which you do," she said thinly.

He tackled her, bringing her to the bed. "Nope. Used to like 'em that way." He nuzzled her nose. "Now I like them stuck-up and brainy and on a liquid diet."

"Daniel, that's so—"

"And the dude with her! Cripes! It was like the devil showed up in her

backyard!"

"Tell me."

"No wonder you got the hell away from him when you were still a drooling baby vamp."

"Yes, rushing off while fueled by cowardice was one of my finest moments."

"Don't knock yourself, Andy. He was scary. I don't know how she's gonna keep him in line."

"Oh, that's obvious enough." For some delightful reason, Daniel was nuzzling her earlobe. She'd thought, once his obligation had been discharged, he'd be long gone. It was odd that he was lingering, but nice. "Did you see how he looked at her? He loves her. And not like a subject loves a queen, I think."

"Mmmph."

"Stop it, that tickles."

"Nuh-uh. I've got something else to tickle you with, by the way."

She laughed. "That's terrible!"

"So, look." He straightened up and propped his chin on his elbow. "You gonna ditch me?"

"I was sort of waiting for you to ditch me," she admitted.

"Because the way I see it, you can go to that weird library and reactivate all your accounts, your credit cards and stuff. And get a vampire-type job. So you don't really need me anymore."

"Such a lie."

"Right, but—what?"

"Daniel, you moron, I was never hanging around with you for the clothes from Target. You were the first person in six years to take an interest in me. Even

when I was at my worst, you took everything I could dish out and you were always waiting for me the next night. You could have killed me anytime but you didn't.

That's..." She started to sniffle, and sternly ordered herself to cut it out.

"That's priceless to me."

He was frowning at her. "Let me get this straight. You're all goo-gooey about me because I didn't ditch you? Or kill you? Andy, you are such a weirdo."

"Yes, so they tell me."

"Well, I don't care if you don't need my money or if you want a big ring or whatever. I'm staying. I—I kind of love you."

"Kind of?" she teased.

"I told you, you ruined me for live girls."

"That's very... romantic."

"Of course, I'll get old and smelly and you'll always be young and cute, but we can fix that," he said cheerfully.

"Daniel, I'm not turning you into a vampire."

"Oh, sure you will. Not now... I'm still in my prime! Maybe in ten years."

"Daniel!"

"It'll be the coolest!"

"Daniel..."

"But first..." His hand was sliding up her shirt. "Aren't you just the tiniest bit thirsty...?"

"Daniel, I'm not—"

"Okay, well, look, let's talk about it in ten years, okay?"

"It's more complicated than that," she said, pretending she wasn't overjoyed. It was amazing... she was getting everything she ever wanted, but she had to die first, and see a queen by way of a library. The world was strange. "You can't

just decide to shack up with a vampire—"

"I was thinking more like marrying a vampire."

If she could have gasped, she would have. "Well, there are things you haven't considered—"

"Andy, will you please shut up and kiss me?"

"Okay," she warned, "but we're talking about this later. In depth."

"You're so sexy when you're stern and lecturey."

LATER, after making love, she said, "I kind of love you, too."

"Yeah," he yawned. "I know."

"What, you know?" She kissed the bite mark on his neck. "How could you know?"

"Sweetie, you're smart and all, but some things, I just know." And he picked up their entwined hands, and kissed them.