



BLOOD OF MY BLOOD

Vampire Legacy 4

By

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

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The bar was dark. It didn't matter much, I could see what I needed. Even when the flare of a lighter and thick clove-scented smoke caused my eyes to blink and tear, I could see my reflection in the mirror clearly over the bottles. And knew myself for what I was.

The same wasn't true for my companions; they were too young to see anything at all. They tried and tested life, rejected and embraced ideals. I found them both amusing and tiresome at the same time. But they accepted me fully as the real thing, even when my clothes and actions didn't always mirror theirs. My life was darkness and darkness was what they said they wanted. Fools. All of them fools.

It was Monday and their night at The Blackened Orchid; they had a different bar for every night of the week. Drink all night and sleep all day seemed to be their motto. Suited me fine, since I only ever saw them once a week. That night they were playing a game; they always played games. I didn't usually join in, but this one, in particular, interested me. Smiling at my reflection in the mirror, I ran my fingers through my closely cropped red hair, downed my Pernod and knew I'd win.

"Earliest childhood remembrance, right?" The boy who called himself Hyde began. "I guess I was about three and I fell down and cut my knee. I watched the blood run down my leg, and put a finger in it and tasted it and liked it." He licked his lips and smiled what I guessed he considered a wicked grin. "I liked it a lot and went back for more. Then it started to hurt and I cried. My mother picked me up and cleaned it off; the bandage had pictures on it. But I liked the blood better."

One after another they told their stories, childhood woes of despair and pain, disillusionment and deaths, grandmothers' funerals and hospital bleakness. When they had all finished, Hyde turned toward me and touched me, tracing the black rose tattooed on my shoulder. "Okay, Lily, love, your turn. What's your earliest childhood remembrance?"

A smile twisted my mouth. "Interesting that you should ask, Hyde." My voice was quiet, pitched almost to a whisper, but they all stopped to listen. From behind the bar, Moon gave me an admonishing glance, but I winked at her and shook my head, sending her the message that it didn't matter. They'd never believe what I had to say.

"Go on, then, Lily, tell us."

I looked each of them in the eyes before I started, and when I was sure I held them, I spoke. "One night, my first night of awareness, I wake to darkness and death and the dirt of the grave. How long I've been here, inhaling the corrupted odors of the surrounding dead, I don't know. But I know that I have to get out."

I paused a bit for effect and Moon filled my glass. As I swallowed it all and continued, the memories took hold and my voice filled with desperation. "I have to get out." I hissed the words. "Get out. I am suffocating. Dying again. I do not want to die. Not again. I claw through the cheap wood of my coffin, splinters piercing my tender baby hands, blood dripping onto my face and into my mouth as I struggle, blood giving me strength and feeding my desire for freedom. Finally I break out and tunnel through the compacted earth up to the surface. It's a long way, and I feel like I've been digging forever. My shroud eventually falls away in tatters, scraped away by the dirt. And when I emerge into the night, my second birth, I am naked, shining lily white in the light of the moon, squalling after life and the bitch of a mother who left me for dead."

The bar remained for at least a minute in total silence. Then Jewel began to clap her hands, the dim light catching the sparkle of her silver rings. Eventually the rest of them joined in, until Hyde cleared his throat and licked the tip of his middle finger, tracing a line in the air. It served as a salute and an insult both. "Score one for Lily. A very good *story*, love."

From behind the bar Moon chuckled, checked the clock and announced last call. Answered by the standard protests and profanities, she still served them all a final drink with a smile, then verbally pushed them out of the bar when they were done. "Go on now, you've all got places to go. So get."

Hyde lingered longer than the rest, nursing his last drink, casually bumping up against me as if by accident. I didn't acknowledge him; I just kept my head down, studying the bar and my glass. Finally, when he cleared his throat, I looked up at him. He gave me a twisted smile and I smiled back. He had an interesting face, young but with promise of depth as he grew older. His skin was darker than mine, and his features were a fascinating blend of white and red, reflecting mixed blood somewhere in his not too distant ancestry. His head was shaved on the left side, exposing an ear with a row of studs and hoops, but the rest of his hair hung over his face and his neck like a thick dark veil. We'd been lovers when I first arrived in this city, and I knew he hoped for a repeat of the experience.

Encouraged by my smile, he wrapped an arm around my neck and whispered in my ear. "We're heading out to the graveyard, love. Come with me. We'll fuck each other's brains out on the steps of one of the mausoleums. You won't be sorry."

I chuckled deep in my throat. "A charming offer, Hyde. But not tonight. Maybe you can give me a rain check, huh?"

"Aw, Lily, please." With his pleading he lost all pretense of sophistication, and I could hear the voice of the young boy who'd drunk his own blood so many years ago. "I've been dying for a taste of you since that last time."

I reached up and scratched my nails lightly over the stubble on his cheek. "Well, then you'll have to die just a little bit more, Hyde. That's what it's all about anyway, isn't it?"

He gave a drunken laugh and dropped his head to lick my tattoo. "If that's what you want, love. But if you change your mind you know where I'll be."

He reached into his pocket and put some money down on the bar. "Night, Moon," he called as he went out the door to join his friends on their weekly date with death.

I stayed with Moon, staring into the dim mirror over the bar as she completed the washing up, trying to peer into my past, trying to pull answers to my questions out of the air, out of the haunted look that always seemed so deeply set into my eyes. Somewhere, I knew or prayed, there was a woman who could answer all my questions. Not the least of which was "Why?"

My thoughts were broken by the touch of a hand on mine. I looked down. *Moan's skin is so beautiful, I thought, so brown and rich, so much more complete, more satisfying than my own pasty white color.* I sighed and she laughed, her broad face shining. "Let's go home, girl," she said, "ain't nothing left to do here."

We walked the tree-lined streets silently for a while. The air had cooled from the heat of the day and a

light breeze wafted the scents of magnolia and wisteria to us. "Ah," Moon said with a pleased sigh, "a beautiful night, Lily. Almost cool enough to make my cup of tea a welcome event, ain't it?"

I snorted. "You and your tea, Moon. It's always a welcome event for you, no matter what the weather."

"True, child, but on a night when there's a chill in the air, it's a blessing, too. And would you look up there at that sky? That sickle moon holding on for dear life? Tomorrow night at this time it'll just be a memory. And it'll be colder still. Almost October now."

I nodded. Another winter on its way. More death for the city.

But she was right, the night was beautiful, and I almost wished I had taken Hyde up on his offer. Moon, as usual, seemed to read my thoughts. "You should've gone with your friends, honey. Ain't nothing to do with an old lady like me."

"They're not really my friends, you know that. Besides, you're not old. How can you be old when I can remember when you were born?"

She shook her head. "The world's full of wonders, Lily girl, and you're one of them. Look at you, young and bursting with life, and then look at me, dried up and past sixty years. And you can remember when I was born."

"But you know how it is, Moon."

"Lord, yes, child, I know how it is. And I know the sun sets and the moon rises, but it don't stop me from marveling at how that all works from time to time neither."

I hugged my bare arms to myself and shivered slightly. "*Does it work?*" I whispered the words and she didn't seem to hear.

Instead, she frowned down at me and shook her head, wrapping a fleshy arm around my shoulders.

"Cold, honey? I told you to take your jacket, but no, you never listen, do you?"

"Don't mother me, Moon. I don't really feel the cold, you know that. I feel..." I stopped. *Damn it*, I thought to myself, *I shouldn't have told that stupid story*.

"What do you feel, Lily?"

I snuggled into her warm flesh and wrapped an arm around her waist. I felt lonely. I felt lost. I felt myself a complete misfit, at odds with the rest of the world. But most of all I just felt angry. No one should have to live the way I'd had to: balanced between life and death, not truly human, not truly other. A hybrid mixture. And the worst of both.

"Lily?"

The sympathy and love in her voice brought me back to the world. But I didn't want her sympathy and love. I didn't know what I wanted. Didn't know what I felt. And it didn't make one damn bit of difference. No one had ever asked me what I wanted. You got what you got. One of the few things I had in common with my friends in this city was the firm conviction that life sucks. They would follow the statement with "then you die." As for me, well, I wasn't so sure.

But for them, lifewas short. I had no doubts about that, having seen foster mothers and friends grow old and die. Suddenly I had a longing for a pair of warm arms around me, a pair of warm lips pressed against mine.

I gave Moon a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I feel like I want to meet Hyde and the others. Don't wait up for me, okay?"

CHAPTER TWO



One thing I'd noticed in all my travels was that each place had its own distinctive scent Kansas, where I'd spent most of my first hundred years, had a clean smell, wholesome and pure, with an underlying aroma of cow shit that somehow only added to the ambience for me. Places further south seemed to carry a sultry floral scent, seductive and tempting. This city, this very fine city, was no exception. But underneath the perfume of the people and the flowers and the wine, death and decay were ever present. Despite the guise of carnival, there was a dark element at work, like waking up and finding a finely dressed corpse in bed next to you instead of the lover you thought was there. But, hey, it was home. At least for a while.

When I arrived at the cemetery, I was surprised that the police hadn't already been called to the scene. Someone had brought a boom box and the wailing of songs about angry young boys and girls echoed from the crumbling tombstones. Couples had already paired off and were in various states of making love. My eyes scanned over them all briefly, searching for Hyde. He was why I'd come, wasn't he? I needed a panacea for my soul, for quieting my thoughts and my mind. For one night, at least, he could provide.

I found him, sitting alone on the steps of a mausoleum, legs spread, elbows resting on his knees, arms hanging down, one hand gripping a bottle neck and the other cupping the inevitable smoke. He lifted the bottle to his mouth and when he raised his head, he saw me. A faint light seemed to glitter in his eyes. He waved and called.

Sighing, I walked over, climbed the steps and flopped down next to him. Hyde wrapped a leather-clad arm around my neck, cigarette dangling from his fingers. He passed me the bottle and I took a large swallow, choking only slightly.

"Jesus, Hyde, what is this stuff?"

"Mad dog, Lily Love, 20/20. The finest wine available for four dollars."

I took another drink; it wasn't so bad the second time around. "Nothing but the best, huh, Hyde?"

He laughed. "Drunk is drunk. And just as drunk regardless of how much you spend."

"Ah."

The tape that the others had been playing ran out with a loud click. We sat quietly for a time, the silence

punctuated only by moans from some of the couples and by Hyde taking an occasional drag. He didn't bother to unwrap his arm from my neck to do this, just pulled my head in to rest by his chest while he inhaled. Somehow I didn't mind. When his cigarette was done, he flicked it out onto the cemetery path and we watched the embers die.

"What's it all about?" His voice was pitched low so as not to disturb the others around us.

I gave a small chuckle. "Alfie?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, never mind. It's an old movie, probably about thirty years old or so. I remember watching it when I was younger. It had a song, a good song as I remember."

"Oh." He took another drink and tried to hand the bottle back to me.

I shook my head. "No, you drink it, I've had enough."

He put the bottle up to his mouth, then seemed to think better of it. "It's not all that good, anyway. And it'll just make me sick tomorrow." He set it down on the step next to him. "I sort of remember that song. Do you?"

"Yes."

"Sing it for me?"

I laughed. "Right here?"

"Sure, no one cares. Hell, they're all so involved with each other they wouldn't know it if all the dead people here got up and danced around."

"Okay." I gave him a dubious glance. "Here goes nothing. But stop me when the dead start dancing, okay?"

My voice wavered at first, then grew stronger, asking the questions the piece of sixties music raised. I felt silly singing this song here, although Hyde seemed to hang on my every note as if his life depended on it. At first I thought he was putting me on, feigning the interest, but when I got to the end, he wiped at his eyes.

"Hey." I reached up and stroked his cheek gently. "I'm not that bad a singer, am I?"

"Nah, you sing good. It was just, I realized when you got halfway through that my mother used to sing me that song. When I was a baby, you know."

"Why that song?"

"Alfie. It's my name. Well, Alfred anyway. Only, Mom called me Alfie." He glared at me as if he expected me to challenge his name.

"Alfred is a perfectly good name. Although Hyde suits you better."

He grunted just a bit. "Yeah, I suppose so."

I got up from the steps, brushed off the back of my jeans and held out my hands to him. "Let's go for a walk. This place depresses me."

He laughed. "Yeah, you know what? It does me, too. I think I'm getting too old for all this shit."

I gave him a glance out of the corner of my eye as he took my hand and we walked out. Hyde? Growing up? I shrugged. "Has to happen sooner or later, I guess."

We strolled aimlessly for a block or two, hand in hand, not speaking. Then I cleared my throat. "S-so," I stammered, then shivered to disguise the feeling as cold. "Where do you want to go?" I was surprised to find out that I suddenly felt uncomfortable with him. I was used to Hyde the boy, the joker, the one who played games. Tonight he was different. He'd changed. It always amazed me how fast true humans could change. It'd taken me almost a century and a half to reach the ripe old age of nineteen, but they seemed to grow and age and change right before my eyes.

"Oh, I don't know. We could stop over at my place. We could get a pizza or something and I think I have some beer. Maybe even some more wine."

I chuckled. "I'll pass on the wine, if you don't mind. And probably the pizza. But a beer would taste good."

"Yeah. And we'll have it all to ourselves. Ron's still over at the cemetery."

"Ah." I shivered again and he put his arm around me.

"It's okay if you don't want to make love, Lily. I won't pressure you."

"It's not that, Hyde. It really isn't. I think I might want to make love anyway." I put an arm around his waist and pulled him close to me. "I've just been in a strange sort of mood since we were all at the bar."

He laughed and kissed the top of my head. "I like your strange moods. Good thing, too, 'cause as far as I can tell, you're always in one."

"I have a strange life."

"Tell me about it."

"I'm not sure I can." *Or that you'd believe me if I did.*

"Whatever." He bumped his hip over into mine repeatedly until I started giggling and pushed him away playfully. "We don't *have* to talk, you know."

We didn't talk much at first. When we got to his apartment he didn't even turn on the lights, but stood behind me, putting his hands on my shoulders, walking me back to his bedroom. He put something on the stereo, lit a few votive candles and sat down next to me on the bed. Once again he ran his finger over the rose tattooed on my shoulder.

"Why a rose, Lily?" he asked softly. "Shouldn't it be a Lily? And a white lily to match the owner?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. It was an impulse decision. It seemed right at the time." I thought about it for a little bit. "Still does, as a matter of fact."

"Well, then maybe I should call you Rose." I snorted. "If you do, I'll call you Alfred."

He pushed me back against the bed, held my shoulders down and moved his legs over to straddle me. "You wouldn't dare," he said.

"Oh." I smiled up at him. "You think not?"

"Actually," he said as he ran his hands down from my shoulders, caressing my breasts through the thin T-shirt, teasing my nipples into erectness, "I don't much care what you call me. I'm just glad you're here."

"Oddly enough, Hyde, so am I." Afterward, I realized that he had changed. The first time we'd made love, he'd been awkward, unsure of himself, unsure of what to do with my body and his. This time, he had been smooth and flawless, from the time he stripped me bare to the last few little shudders we both gave when I raked my nails over his shoulders and back. He rolled from me with a sigh, leaned over to deposit a light kiss on my shoulder and stretched out on the bed next to me, his naked body barely grazing mine.

I felt like I was glowing down to my toes. "Why don't we do this more often?" I asked, resting on one elbow and brushing his hair away from his face. "It was wonderful."

"That's a question I've asked myself many times, Lily Love. You tell me."

I giggled. "Because I kept saying no?"

He tilted his head to one side and smiled. "Yep, that'd be it. Now, how about that pizza and beer?"

I managed to eat one piece of the pizza, and did better than that with the beer. I could eat solid food, but generally preferred a liquid diet. Once I'd recognized the fact that I was different from other people, somewhere around the biological age of seven or so, I'd tried to force myself to grow. Gorging on everything I could find, I only succeeded in making myself deathly ill for a week. I never tried the experiment again.

Hyde didn't seem to suffer from anything worse than a healthy appetite, and he didn't seem to mind that I ate very little. "More for me," he mumbled around a mouthful when I refused a second piece. "Although it wouldn't hurt for you to have just a little more meat on your bones."

"I noticed you weren't complaining about that a little bit ago."

"Probably not. Why would I? You're a beautiful woman, Lily. Perfect just the way you are. As skinny as an alley cat and twice as horny."

I rolled up my napkin and tossed it at him, hitting him square on the forehead. "Thanks a lot, Hyde.

Although, at least you have the good sense to call me a woman and not a girl."

He finished the last slice of pizza and wiped his mouth on the napkin I'd thrown. "I think, somehow, it's been a long, long time since you were a girl."

"Really." My tone of voice was evasive. I avoided his eyes and got up, picking up the empty pizza box and carrying it to the kitchen. When I came back he was sitting on the couch, still regarding me with a faintly puzzled look.

"Hyde, you said your mother *called* you Alfie. What does she call you now?"

"She doesn't call me anything anymore."

"You don't speak to her?"

He gave me a funny lopsided grin. "I guess I could, but it wouldn't do much good. She's dead. Been dead for about three years now."

"Oh," I said, wishing that I hadn't steered the subject in this direction. I could hear the sadness in his voice. "I'm really sorry to hear that. She must have been young. And it must have been a shock. For you, I mean."

"Nah, it's okay. It wasn't too bad, as these things go, I guess. She had cancer, but she didn't linger. And she didn't even seem to suffer too much."

We sat silent for a while. He stared at me, cleared his throat and looked away. "So," he said, glancing back at me, this time catching and holding my attention, "what about you? I got the feeling from the story you told that you don't get along with your mother. She still around?"

"My mother?"

"Yeah."

"*My* mother?" My voice rose a little hysterically. "How the hell would I know? I never knew the bitch, but I assume she's still around. And I doubt she'll ever do me the favor and die."

"Hey, Lily, calm down. I was only asking."

"Yeah, I know, I'm sorry. I'm not angry with you, Hyde. It's just not a good situation."

Hyde shrugged. "Like me and my dad. Yeah, I know how it is. But everyone dies sometime, Lily. You're just saying all of this because you feel like you're inferior or something, because you weren't important enough to her. Obviously, she abandoned you when you were just a baby. I could recognize the truth under that goofy story from the bar."

"No, Hyde, I'm saying it because it's true. It's all true. I woke up in the grave, the premature grave she consigned me to. She gave birth to me and then she walked away and let them bury me. She didn't even stop to see if I was breathing, didn't even stop long enough to see if I was alive. That's how fucking important I am to her. I bet she doesn't even remember having me."

"Of course she remembers having you, Lily." He reached up and pulled me down so that I was sitting on his lap. "You're hurt and upset and that's perfectly understandable. You don't need to embellish your

story to impress me. I like you anyway."

If his words were supposed to be calming, they had the opposite effect. I pushed away from him and stood in front of the couch, glaring down at him. "It's not a story, Hyde. How many times do I have to say that?"

"It's okay, Lily. Say it as often as you need to. I don't mind."

I gave a little exasperated scream. "It's not a question of need. It's the truth. My bitch of a mother left me for dead. And what's worse? She may never die. Ever. You see, she's a vampire."

CHAPTER THREE

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Hyde's mouth dropped open and he stared at me in shock for a second, before he shook himself and smiled. "Yeah, I understand. You mean she's like a vampire, you know, figuratively?"

I shook my head. I didn't even know why we were having this conversation. It didn't change anything. But I laughed unpleasantly and continued. "No, I meant what I said. She *is* a vampire. Period. Not just that she acts like one, although"—and my mouth twisted in a wry smile—"I guess she must act like one on occasion. She'd have to, wouldn't she? But other than that, she is really and truly a vampire."

"Uh-huh."

"You don't believe me." It was not a question. "I might've thought that you would at least hold out a semblance of belief. Ever since I've known you, you and the others have been playing at life and death, playing vampire. You talk incessantly about taking and drinking blood; you stay up all night and avoid the sunlight. I guess it never occurred to any of you that you might be imitating something more real than pulp novels and cheap movies." I sat back down on the couch and he put his arm around me.

"Well," he said, giving me a weak grin, "I know how you are, Lily. I know you can spin a story and have even the smartest of us believing it. So when you ask me if I believe that your mother is a vampire, I have to say no. And if you were to ask if I believed in vampires in general?" He shook his head. "In a word? No."

"Ah. Okay then." I gave it up; there was no use in trying to convince him. "But I had you going for a while, didn't I?"

Hyde leaned over and kissed my forehead. "Do you really want to know?"

I nodded.

"It's a hell of a good story, Lily, but once again the answer is no."

I shrugged. "All right. Have it your way. We'll give it a rest. It's been a wonderful evening, Hyde. I'm sorry I spoiled it with talk. Would you walk me home?"

"Of course," he said. "And you didn't spoil a thing, Lily. I love the sound of your voice. And as a matter of fact, I think I love you."

I blinked. "Yeah. Right. Let's get going, Moon will be waiting for me."

"You told him what?" Moon was angry.

"I told him the truth. You know I did. Same as I told the truth in the bar tonight. He didn't believe me. They didn't believe me. Why would they?"

"Even so, Lily, honey, you can't go around telling everyone your mother's a vampire. They'll think you crazed. Besides, no one really knows for sure what your mother was."

"Philomena knew. When she found me in the cemetery that night, she knew. And I listened to her when she talked about it to others. She knew."

Moon nodded. "Gramma Philomeen was a wise woman. So I guess if she said that's how it was, that's how it is." She got up from her chair. "You want a cup of tea, Lily? My old bones got awful cold waiting for your young ones to get home."

I laughed. "I told you not to wait, Moon. But yes, I'll have a cup of tea."

"What else do I have to do but wait, child?" she said as she walked into the small kitchen. "I don't sleep so well these days, anyway."

While she was fussing in the kitchen, I went to my room and took off my clothes. On my way to the dresser to get my nightgown I paused at the mirror. My body was flawless, as white as polished marble and just as cold. I squinted at my reflection, as always, thinking *she* might look just like this. Then I shook my head, put on my gown and went back into the living room.

Moon set a mug next to my chair and settled back into hers. Taking a sip from her cup, she glanced over at me. "But you had a good time with him, yes?"

"With who?"

"Hyde. You like him, don't you?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I suppose so. He's changed. Or changing. Anyway, I think he likes me more than I like him."

"Nothing wrong with that, Lily. Comes a time a girl thinks of moving away from her folks and getting on with life. And you are certainly old enough." She laughed, then grew serious. "You'll need someone to take care of you, once I'm gone."

"Gone? Where are you going?"

"Nowhere. Don't pay any attention to me, girl. I'm just feeling old and cold." She paused for a minute, shivered, then took another swallow of tea. "So, was it like the way you told it? Tonight in the bar?"

"Yes, it was. If I close my eyes and think about it, I can remember. And, you know, I don't want to remember."

"Ah. I can well understand that, honey. It's not a pleasant thing to look back on. Still, you are here now. And I love my Lily child. You are my comfort."

I snorted, trying to think how I could be her comfort. I had teased her from the day she was born, to the point now that few people remembered her given name. I'd grasped at her first childish attempt to say her given name, and she had become Moon. I teased her now, even when it seemed our roles had reversed. I'd been a moody, willful child, and an angry and resentful teen, attempting to adjust my old knowledge to a body that developed painfully and slowly, chafing constantly under the restrictions placed on me by my perceived age. "I must be a cold comfort, then, Moon, and you could do better. Why did you never marry?"

She shrugged. "Never got around to it. You were a handful; it's not easy raising a child that takes ten years or more to grow one year. And besides"—she leaned forward and gave a girlish giggle—"the only man who ever asked me was Bowlegged 'Lo."

I laughed with her. "Bowlegged 'Lo? Angelo asked you to marry him? Please tell me you're kidding."

"Sure as I sit here, Lily. He wasn't a bad-looking man, really, when he was younger. But Mama would have no part of him. 'He's got evil eyes and bad legs, Mary Lou,' she'd say. 'No girl of mine is going to give herself to that bastard bokor.' " I could hear her mother's voice as she spat the word. "Why, he even followed us around for years so he could be with me, hoping Mama would change her mind." Moon settled back into her chair, fanning herself with her hand. "It wasn't no use. But bad legs or not, oh, girl, how that man could kiss. I was real crazy about him for a while, but then Mama died and I got you and he quit asking."

"Still, you had no daughters. And there have always been daughters."

"I have you. And that's enough for me." She set her mug down and got up, laughing. "More than enough, actually. And the time comes sooner or later when it all has to end. Get some sleep, Lily." She moved over to me and kissed the top of my head. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Moon."

I sat for a while, flipping through the television channels. Nothing was on, as usual. Turning the set off, I wondered what Hyde was doing right now. Sleeping. Probably snoring. Or maybe he'd gone back to the cemetery with the other kids. I hummed his song idly and opened the box that contained Moon's caracoles: the twenty-one small cowrie shells that told her the future.

They were worn from years of use, having been handed down mother to daughter starting with Philomena. Much like I had been. But these, at least, served a purpose. From my cradle I had watched Philomena cast these for her clients, foretelling their future, guiding them as well as she could. And since the fortunes would always come true, the shells would bring us gifts: food, money, clothes and trinkets. Philomena refused to train me in the art. "You have other powers, baby," she'd say, "no need to be mixing them up." But even forbidden, I had watched and I had learned. I separated five from the group that would not be cast, and cupped the other sixteen in my hands, holding them to my mouth and breathing my question into them.

"Is it time?"

As I dropped them, I knew by the way they fell that the answer was the same as always.

"No, the time is wrong."

"Thanks so much." I put them back into their box and closed the lid. "And what a surprising answer."

Moon called out from her room. "Put those things away, Lily. They've got nothing good to say for themselves tonight." I should have known she wouldn't yet be sleeping. Had I been caught with the shells by Philomena, I'd have had a lecture to look forward to. But Moon was more at ease with her rituals and her religion. More at ease with me. "And you get yourself to bed now, hear?"

I sighed. Over a century lived with nothing to show for it but the same unanswered questions. It would never be time. "Okay, Moon. I'm going."

I lay in bed for a while, watching the patterns of shadows on the ceiling, counting years instead of sheep. So many years stacked up behind me. So many stretched out ahead of me. And still, to the outside world, I was nothing but a scrawny young woman, barely out of her teens. Moon and I had once played with a politically correct term for what I was; temporally challenged was the best we'd come up with. But there were no help groups for me, no twelve-step program to make me normal. I was what I was. And I hated every long minute of it. All the decades of school, learning the same facts time and again, until I knew them better than my teachers, only to start over with each new move. And it was as much or more of a nightmare for my keepers as it was for me. Having to move every five or six years had taken its toll on their patience and their finances. Now, at least, I had achieved a maturity of body, which meant that Moon and I could stay here in this place for a longer period of time.

Poor Moon. She did not even have the luxury of love and children to make it worth her while. She should have married 'Lo anyway, I thought, bad legs or not.

I sighed and rolled over on my side. Just before I drifted off, I said the names of all the women who had been my mothers and whispered a prayer for their spirits, those lovely spirits who had sacrificed much to keep me safe. Each name, each face, each voice that had sung me to sleep, the arms that had held me and rocked me and tried to give me love; all were carried deep within me. But following the list, there was always the nameless one. The bitch who birthed me and left me for dead. The one who made me what I was. I cursed her life, prayed for her death and fell asleep into bitter dreams of betrayal and the stench of the grave.

CHAPTER FOUR



"Wake up, Lily love, I've brought you a present"

I pulled the blanket up over my head. "Go away," I muttered, waving a hand imperiously at whatever annoying person dared to bother me.

"But it's a pretty present and you'll like it Come on, Lily, it's a wonderful day outside."

"Hyde?" I squinted out from under my covers. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Moon let me in. And she says it's high time you were out of bed anyway."

I groaned. "Hyde, go away. I hate mornings."

"Well, then"—he tugged at my toes—"you're in luck. It's not morning anymore."

I sighed and rolled over, trying to fall asleep again. But I could still feel his presence. Sitting up, I stretched and yawned. "Okay, okay, I'm up." I glared at him and then opened my eyes wide. "Jesus, Hyde, what the hell did you do to yourself?"

He rubbed his hand over his hair. "I got a haircut," he said, blushing slightly.

I crawled out of bed and touched his closely shaved head. "What did you do? Join the Marines?"

He laughed. "Nope, Lily, it's worse than that. I have a job now; I'm working at my father's shop."

"Working? But you always said you were never going to support society by buying into the system."

Hyde shrugged. "It's only my father's shop, Lily. I'll be learning to be a mechanic; it's a good skill. And besides, I said that years ago, when we were just kids. I'm surprised you even remember."

I gave him a twisted smile. "I remember everything, Hyde, you should know that by now. And speaking of remembering, where's my present?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, square black box. "It's not much, really, just a token. Dad was so happy when I told him I was coming into the business, he gave me a little money to live on until payday. And I saw this in the window of the jewelry store, the one next to the bar, and thought of you."

I opened the box. It contained a small silver ring, in the shape of a lily. "Oh, that's lovely, Hyde, thank you."

"Go ahead, put it on. I want to see it on your hand."

I gave him a hesitant glance. He'd changed so much since we'd known each other. And I wondered what this was a token of. Esteem? Love?

"Jesus, Lily, just put the damned thing on. It won't bite." He took the box out of my hand, pulled the ring out and pushed it onto my right ring finger. "There, see? A perfect fit."

I held my hand out, admiring it. Then smiled at him and gave him a hug, not so much for the present as for his picking the right hand.

He kissed the top of my ear. "I'm glad you like it, babe. Someday, maybe I'll get you another for the other hand."

I pulled away from him and changed the subject. "So when do you start your job?"

Hyde looked at his watch. "In about twenty minutes, actually, so I'd better get moving. You going to be

at the bar tonight? I'll pick you and Moon up and walk you home."

"That would be nice. Thanks."

He gave me one more kiss, this time on the tip of my nose, and went back out of the room. "Later, Lily."

I walked out into the kitchen and sat down at the small table. Moon handed me a mug of coffee and I looked up at her.

"Who was that man?" I said. "He sort of looked like Hyde, but I don't know him."

Moon chuckled. "He's growing up, Lily. Got himself a new haircut, a new job and a beautiful little girl. I expect he feels pretty good right about now."

"And I feel like shit. He bought me a ring, Moon."

She leaned over me. "So I see. It's very pretty."

I gave a little smile. "Yes, it is. But what am I going to do with him?"

"Love him if you can. And if you can't, you send him on his way as graciously as possible. He'd take good care of you, Lily."

"But I have you, Moon. And besides, I'm way more than old enough to take care of myself."

She turned back to the sink and continued washing dishes. "That may well be true, Lily. But until I can scrape the money together for another set of identifications for you, you'll have to take care of yourself without a job. And if something should happen to me, I'd like to be sure you'll be okay. It's what I've lived my life for, after all."

Moon finished drying the last dish and turned around, towel in hand. "Now, let's not worry about this. You going to wait some tables for me today?"

"Sure, why not?" I got up and stretched. "Tips are usually good. I guess I'd better start earning my keep before you marry me off to Hyde."

She laughed. "So go get yourself dressed and be quick about it. I don't want to open up late."

Moon usually tended bar with the same quiet confidence as she approached everything else in her life. Considered one of the best bartenders in the Quarter, she was also among the few to be mentioned by name in one of those prestigious travel magazines. Unlike other tourist bars in the area, The Blackened Orchid did not provide music other than the blare of the jukebox. Instead, we relied on solid and simple food, a good selection of wine and the atmosphere that Moon provided to attract and keep our clientele. On slow nights, Moon would often cast her shells for customers or read their palms.

I watched her, as I always did, in between carrying trays of drinks and blackened steaks to my tables.

Secure in who she was, Moon was beautiful. Her smile lit up her entire body and made one feel blessed. I loved her, more than Philomena and any of her descendants, perhaps because she had not been

distracted by marriage and children of her own. For Moon, my care was not a burden accepted in the name of duty. It was something done of love.

Tonight, though, she seemed nervous and moody. Close to tears, she struggled to deal with a situation she normally dealt with easily by a smile or a joke. "Harry"—her voice quavered as she called to the bouncer—"get this gang of young hoodlums out of my bar. Now! And I don't ever want them in here again. They're nothing but trash. And underage trash at that. Out!" She flicked a towel at them, shooing them like chickens. "Out!"

They yelled obscenities back at her while Harry pushed them out. "You fat old bitch," one of them screamed, his pasty face reddening with anger, "you'll be sorry you fucked with us."

Moon lost her temper completely. "Any woman would be sorry to admit that, boys." She continued to scream even though they'd gone. "No woman in her right mind would let you near. Not that boys like you can do much more than talk about it."

I went over to her and put an arm around her. "It's okay, Moon, they're out of here. What on earth did they do?"

"They were saying how they'd like to..." She gave me a quick glance and then just as quickly looked away again. "Nothing, really, Lily. Don't pay me any mind. I'm just all unsettled tonight." She waved to Harry. "Come on over here, honey, and tend the bar for me. I need to go wash up after dealing with that dirty trash." She ran from the room; the tears on her cheeks glistened in the light as she pushed open the kitchen doors.

I caught Harry's eye and he shrugged. "Just a bad night, Lily," he said. "Let it go."

Hyde showed up, as promised, just around last call. Moon, having calmed somewhat, although not without considerable damage to the glassware, greeted him warmly, displaying more enthusiasm than she'd had all evening. Still, I thought that she dawdled at the bar, taking much longer than normal to do the closing tasks. She chattered at Hyde while she worked, asking him questions about his first day at work. And he told stories of the people who'd come in and the crazy way they'd acted.

Looking back now, I recall that they laughed a lot together. But I didn't join in. I didn't pay them much attention at all. Instead I listened to the night. It whispered darkness and anger and danger. Since the altercation between Moon and the young men, I had grown increasingly nervous. I had even sent Harry out several times to make sure they had gone. With each of his reassurances that everything was fine, Moon relaxed. And I had tightened up inside, until every muscle in my body was tense. By the time Moon was ready to go, I was so edgy I wanted to scream.

"Lily?" Hyde touched me on the shoulder and I jumped.

"Don't pay any mind to her, Alfred," Moon said.

"She's nervous as a cat tonight. We had a run-in with some trash tonight and it put her off."

I stood up and stretched my neck, trying to loosen the tenseness. "Me? And who's the one breaking all the glasses tonight?"

"That's neither here nor there. I'm just a clumsy old lady, Lily. Let's go home."

Still, I hesitated at the doorway. The streets were quiet and dark. I did not want to go out onto them. "Can't we just stay here?"

Moon took my arm. "I want some rest, Lily. I can hear my bed calling to me from here." Leaning over me, she whispered in my ear, "And what will happen, will happen, my Lily child. You can't hold it back. Besides," she said louder now, "we have your fine young man to protect us."

I looked over at Hyde. "He's not my young man."

"Well, if you were to ask me, he should be." She pulled me out onto the sidewalk and started to lock the door, but stopped abruptly. "Lord, what's wrong with me tonight? I forgot the shells. You two wait here and I'll be right back."

Hyde pulled me into his arms and gave me a long, passionate kiss, his tongue lightly grazing my lips. "Think she'll let me stay the night?" he whispered.

I laughed. "Maybe she will. But I'm not sure I will."

"Aw, Lily, you heard Moon. I'm your young man now."

"So she says. Don't I have anything to say about it?"

"Of course you do." He hugged me close to him. "And I hope it'll be yes again."

I smiled, thinking how nice it was last night. At least before we started talking. "I'll think about it, Hyde."

Moon came out and locked the door, giving Hyde a quick wink. "Can't forget the shells, now, can I?" she said, putting the box into her apron pocket. "How can I tell the future of you young folks without my shells?"

"Future?" I asked. "Who said anything about the future?"

"Well," Moon said, "someone should be talking about it. So I'll just walk ahead and let the two of you work it out. Don't be too long, though. I'll want that cup of tea with you both tonight."

She headed out at a quick pace. Hyde put his arm around my shoulder and began leading me in the same direction. I looked up at the sky as we walked. "No moon tonight," I said quietly. "It's such a dark and evil world without it."

Hyde snorted. "Nothing evil about the phases of the moon, Lily. What's gotten into you tonight?"

"Nothing," I said, walking a bit quicker now to catch up with Moon. "It was a pretty ugly scene tonight. I don't like that."

"Yeah, I know. You're sensitive." Hyde kissed the top of my head just as Moon turned the corner.

I heard the scuttling of feet and her muffled scream. "Moon!" I called, and tried to break away from Hyde's arm.

He pushed me away with so much force that I fell to my knees. "Stay here, Lily." To my surprise, he reached into his boot, pulled out a large knife and ran to the corner.

"The hell I will." I got up off the sidewalk and ran after him.

Moon lay on the sidewalk still and quiet, as one of the men from the bar rifled through her wallet; the other two circled Hyde, switchblades out. I didn't stop to think or reason. Instantly I launched myself at the man with the wallet, grabbed him by the waist and threw him down to the pavement. He bounced and groaned, until I kicked him in the stomach as hard as I could. His body rose up off the ground and then settled back down about a foot away and he was silent. I dropped down next to Moon, laying a hand on her shoulder.

She'd been stabbed and the blood pooled around her body. Her eyes were open and glazed over. The shells from the box had scattered around her, some covered with her blood, but still easily readable, the last fortune she'd ever cast.

Unheeding of my surroundings, I moaned in disbelief at what the caracoles had to tell.

"Lily, run!" I turned away from Moon and saw Hyde doubled over; the men were laughing and their blades dripped blood. When Hyde hit the ground they turned to me. "Lookie here," one of them said, "we got us a bonus."

I faced them, standing slowly and deliberately, and snarled. "Bonus, my ass. What you've got is trouble."

They came toward me, closing their knives and putting them back into their pockets. "We like trouble, bitch, and we like ass." One of them started to unbuckle his belt; the other smoothed back his greasy blond hair. "And we think we're really going to like yours."

"Moon was right, you know," I taunted them, "you really are nothing but fucking trash. So you want me? Hell, who am I to say no? I'll even meet you halfway."

My arm shot out and grabbed the closest one by the elbow. I snapped him around and slammed him up against the brick wall. The street seemed to echo the cracking of his bones; he twitched once and lay still. His friend took one look, turned around and ran like all the demons of Hell followed.

I let him go and went over to Hyde. He opened his eyes for a second, his teeth bared in a terrible parody of a smile. He tried to talk, I think, but what he was saying, I never knew. The words garbled up in his throat and blood trickled out of his mouth.

Then he was gone. And I was alone, totally alone, for the first time in over a century. Alone and almost as helpless as the baby Philomena rescued from the cemetery.

I smoothed back his short hair and wiped the blood from his mouth. Then, on hands and knees, I crawled over to Moon's body, ignoring the way my knees scraped against the rough concrete of the sidewalk. I held her cold hand and picked up the scattered shells, putting them one by one into my pocket, cursing the twofold message they foretold.

"The cost is great."

"The time is now."

CHAPTER FIVE



When the police arrived, they found me incoherent and hysterical, babbling on about wasted lives and bloody hands. They assumed I was in shock. In reality, their arrival brought me back to myself, but I continued the act. No one would expect the eyewitness of such an attack to make sense. I needed time to rehearse in my mind the story I would tell; I had, after all, killed two men, in a rather incredible manner. I had no desire to start out a new life in jail.

It soon became apparent that I wouldn't be required to tell much of a story at all. The whole event seemed self-evident to them; we'd been attacked and Hyde had killed two of the assailants before he died. I latched on to their theory and reinforced it with nods and sobs. The only other living witness was not likely to come along and set the record straight.

So, after answering their questions and making my statement, after watching them cover and carry off the bodies of the only two people I'd had in this world, I was finally free to go. It was almost dawn when they loaded me ever so gently into a police car and drove me home.

One of the men took my keys from my hand and opened the door for me. "Are you sure you'll be okay?" he asked. "I can take you somewhere else, if you like. I still think you should go to the hospital and..."

"No, thank you. I'll be fine, Officer." I turned my head away from him so he couldn't see my unnaturally dry eyes. The last thing I needed now was to be burdened with more of his assistance. "I really have no other place to go. But I will be fine, thank you." I shut the door, then leaned up against it.

Drawing in one ragged breath after another, I attempted to hold myself together. I had arrangements to make, I reminded myself; it was important for me to stay in control. And I'd been so used to my guardians dying; this was just one more to add to the list.

"But," I said aloud to the now-empty house, my voice quivering, "this was Moon. And Hyde."

Walking into the living room, I stopped in front of the shrine of her patron saint. "You had no right," I told the statue of St. Barbara, "you had no right to take her away, to take them away. They were all I had. I was all Moon had. What will she do without me? And what will I do?" I picked up the statue and thought to throw it on the floor. But just the feel of it was comforting; warm to the touch and familiar, it was part of Moon and breaking it would hurt her. Instead, I sank to my knees and cradled it like a baby, rocking back and forth, staring at the statue's face until I couldn't see it anymore. But there were no tears.

At some point in my misery I must've curled up and slept. I dreamed that Moon came and stood over me, taking the statue out of my arms and placing it back on the altar. She bent over and smoothed my hair and whispered again the words she said outside the bar door. "What will happen, will happen, my Lily child. Even you can't hold it back."

"But, Moon," I said in the dream, "if you knew this was going to happen, why didn't you try to stop it? You walked right into it."

"Hush, child." She ran the back of her hand along my cheek. "It will all work out. You'll see. It always does."

Because it was a dream and because she was with me, I was comforted and slept on.

The phone woke me. Bleary-eyed, I peered at the clock; I'd slept for about three hours, just enough to leave me miserable and craving more.

I got up off the floor and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Lily?" I didn't recognize the voice. Must be a policeman, I thought.

"Speaking."

There was a pause. The man on the other end of the line cleared his throat. "This is John Shepard. Alfred's father."

"Alfred?" I shook my head. *Who the hell is Alfred ?*

Then I remembered. Hyde. "Oh, yes, Alfred." I took a deep breath. "Oh, Mr. Shepard, I'm so very sorry."

"They said you were there? Can we talk about it?"

"Of course," I started, "there had been a disturbance earlier, you see..."

"No, not on the phone." His voice was hoarse. "The boy deserves better than that. Can I come and see you?"

"Of course." I gave him the address, asked him to give me about an hour and said good-bye.

I wandered into my bedroom, aimlessly, with absolutely no idea what to do with myself. Totally unprepared for a life alone, I couldn't bear to think of all the things I'd longed to do once on my own. And I would have given up every single one of my dreams for the sight of Moon walking in the front door.

"But it's not going to happen, Lily." I looked at myself in the mirror. "Moon is dead. Hyde is dead. Two other people you don't even know are dead. All because of her. Your mother." I spat the word and watched my eyes narrow in the mirror. "I hate her, whoever and wherever she is. But I will find her. And I will get my revenge."

Stripping off my waitressing clothes, I walked down the hall to the bathroom. I lingered in the shower longer than necessary for cleaning my body; I stood for a long time, my head pressed up against the smooth shower wall, and let the water wash over me, let the hot stream release the tensions and aches. But the water did nothing to loosen the bitter tears I knew were trapped inside, did nothing to release the hard little knot that had tied itself around my heart last night. Was it from seeing Moon and Hyde dead on the sidewalk? Or was it from finding out I could kill? And kill with precision and elation?

I searched my memories for other occasions when I'd used this sort of force, and found nothing. I had never been in a similar situation before; my caregivers had seen to that. I'd led an incredibly long but sheltered life. And I had been taught from the minute Philomena found me that aggressive physical action against others was wrong. Had she known the extent of my true powers and established this taboo early on for the protection of all? Or for my protection?

"It doesn't matter now," I said, turned off the cooling water. "They're all gone."

I heard the doorbell ring as I was toweling myself off. "Hold on a minute," I called. "I'll be right out."

I put on some clean underwear, a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. For just a second I pulled the shirt up to my nose and sniffed. Moon had always done the laundry and made sure my clothes were clean and sweet-smelling. She'd even taken to putting lavender sachets in with the clothes when she put them away. It was a comforting and soothing smell.

I stopped by the bathroom and picked up another towel, rubbing my hair with it on the way to the door. When I opened it, I was surprised to see someone other than Mr. Shepard standing there.

"Hello, Angelo."

"Miss Lily." He doffed his hat to me and gave a sad little smile. "I heard what happened to Moon and that young man, and come to offer my sympathies. May I come in?"

"Well." I looked at him, this wrinkled old toad of a man, and I was barely able to control a giggle, remembering how Moon had spoken of him. "For a while, I guess. I'm expecting someone."

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, that young man's father. He was here when I show up, sort of skulkin' outside the door, afraid to ring the bell, Bible in hand, all sorrowful eyes and hound-dog ears hangin' down. I can tell, he just want someone to tell him it's not his fault. So me, I sent him away for a while."

"You sent him away?" I opened the door wider and Angelo walked in, hanging his straw hat on the rack as he passed. "What do you mean you sent him away?"

Angelo winked at me. "You know, I cause him to remember something important he needed to do back home. He get there, he'll wonder what it was." He threw back his head and laughed; it had a dry, humorless sound. "Some of them is so easy to turn, it seems a crime not to."

"Ah." I motioned with my arm. "Come on into the kitchen. I'll fix us a cup of tea."

"Not got nothing stronger?"

I raised my eyebrows. "So who's got sorrowful eyes now? I'll see what Moon has put aside."

He followed me into the kitchen and sat down at the table. "Ain't Moon's stuff anymore, child, it's yours. And I figure you're plenty old enough to pass out the booze. How old are you now, anyway?"

I pulled a bottle of sherry out from under the sink and held it out for his approval. "I'm nineteen or so, 'Lo, you know that."

Angelo nodded, and I filled a small juice glass and handed it to him. He drank half of it down. "Shit, missy, you been nineteen for a long time now. Ain't no need to prevaricate for me. I was almost your

stepdaddy, after all. I know the score, I do."

"I'm sure you do." I hesitated, then took another juice glass from the cupboard and sat down at the table with him, filling both glasses. "Okay, so I'm almost a century and a half old. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

He shook his head and gave a long, low whistle. "I knew you was different, but I didn't know how much. One hundred and fifty years old and never been on your own?" He finished his glass and poured himself another, then reached across the table and patted my hand. "Don't you worry, Miss Lily, I'll take care of you now. I figure I owe it to Moon."

I stood up, leaned over the table and stared him down. "Jesus Christ, Angelo, you act like I was five years old and not very bright. I don't need anyone to take care of me. I don't want anyone to take care of me."

"Independence. I like that. It's a good thing. But you be needing some help, I think, with the funeral and such?"

I sighed. "Yes," I admitted, "before there was always someone else to take care of it. I don't know what to do."

"Then you just leave it to ol' Bowlegged 'Lo. I'll see that Moon goes out right. Her mama never thought I was good enough"—he gave a low laugh—"and maybe she was right. But I loved that girl. Ah, she had a smile that could light the world and make a bad man good. No tellin' what sort I'd have been if she'd had me." He wiped at his eyes and I had to look away, ashamed that this wizened old reptile could cry and I couldn't. Where were my tears?

After a while, he reached over and touched my hand again. "Ah, well, the dead are dead. And we are left behind to live. But I can be a help to you, Miss Lily. Just tell me what you want."

"What?"

"You said you don't want no one taking care of you. So what do you want?" His eyes were bright with tears, but eager and searching.

I sat back down at the table again and drained my glass. "I want to find my mother, my real mother."

"I can help with that. Already know some stuff, yes, I do. And when you find her? What then?"

I looked him dead in the eye so that there would be no mistaking my intent. "And when I find her, I will make her pay."

CHAPTER SIX



Since I was *analeyo*, not an initiate on any level, I was required to wait outside the mortuary doors while Moon's ceremony was held. Angelo sat and kept me company, though, and gave me a running

commentary on what was happening. I didn't listen; I didn't care. Moon was dead and gone; nothing they said or did would bring her back. And after going through similar ceremonies for other mothers I had lost, I knew the routine by now. They would bathe her, purify the body and clothe it in her initiation robes. The spirits that had been with her in her life would be asked if they wished to stay or to go with her. Shells would be cast and read. A black chicken would be killed and they would sprinkle the blood over the funeral gourd filled with bits of food and ashes. Then they would moan and chant and cry, bidding farewell to their sister.

I knew the ceremony well enough. And it gave no comfort. When I heard the series of three loud knocks on one of the inner walls, I knew that the service was almost over.

"They goin' soon," Angelo said unnecessarily, "and she goin' with them. Now we take the old used shell to the cemetery."

I gave a relieved sigh and stood up, smoothing the skirt of my black dress and picking up my purse. "These things seem longer each time I go to one. And after all these years, one would think they'd let me go in."

Angelo looked up at me. "They don't know nothin' about all your years, girl."

After the procession, I stood at her grave and watched them lower her into the ground. I had no tears to cry; instead I stood tall and pale amidst her weeping friends. One by one they stopped in front of me, some with a kind word, some with just a nod. Two handed me trinkets, a set of red beads and a white plate, souvenirs from the ceremony I'd been barred from. Soon only Angelo and I remained at the grave site. I gestured around me. "All these graves," I said quietly, but not caring if I was heard. "All this death, all this sadness. And it hasn't touched me. Will it ever?"

Angelo sidled up next to me. "A better question, Miss Lily, is why would you want that touch? You're perfection—ageless, graceful, beautiful."

I shook my head. "So are the goddamned statues here, 'Lo." I gave a bitter laugh. "And they probably know more about life than I do. Hell, even you probably know more about life than I do. What do you want with me?"

"I told you. I want to help you."

"But why? And don't tell me it's for Moon." I pointed to the open grave. "She's beyond caring or knowing."

"That may be, Missy, or it may not be. You want I tell it straight?"

"Yeah."

He pulled himself up to a height I'd not have thought his wizened body capable of. He seemed to stand straighter, prouder, almost defiant. "I one of the best *mayomberos* alive in the world today. Baptized or unbaptized. I have power, I like power; I am drawn to it like iron shavings to a magnet And you, Miss Lily"—he shrank back down a bit, as if in deference to me—"you have powers like I never seen. Unskilled, undeveloped, but so strong I can smell them." He sniffed to emphasize his point "Oh, yes, they be strong. And I can teach you to use them. To get what you want in life."

"And what exactly do you get out of it, Angelo?"

"I learn about you. Maybe some of that beauty and grace you don' want will rub off on old Bowlegged 'Lo. Maybe I learn to live a very long time. Maybe I get nothin' but the thrill of the tryin'."

I sighed. "Can we talk about this later? I'm tired, Angelo. And I want to go home."

Angelo must have given Mr. Shepard a suggestion to end all suggestions, since he never returned to the house. I finally met him at Hyde's funeral service two days following Moon's. He was very much like Angelo described, eaten up with guilt inside and sorrowful as a whipped dog. I half expected him to put his head back and howl while the congregation sang "Amazing Grace." Trying to stave off an attack of the giggles, I threw myself into the singing of the song. It had always been one of my favorites; so many of my mothers had rocked me to sleep singing it. By the time the hymn ended, though, I had no desire to laugh. All those wasted lives over the years. I had lost too many mothers, I thought angrily, and too many friends.*It's time for a reckoning* .

I stood biting my lip and clenching my fists as they carried the coffin out of the church. The rest of the congregation filed out around me until I was alone.*Let them go without me* , I thought.*I've no desire to stand tearless over another open grave* .

But as I left the church, Hyde's father came up to me. "You can ride with me, Lily. He'd have liked that. Besides," he said, taking my hand, tucking it into his arm and walking me to the lead car, "we never had that talk." He shook his head slightly, wondering, I supposed, why we hadn't. I made a mental note to ask Angelo just exactly how that little trick worked.

Once we were in the car, Mr. Shepard cleared his throat. "I've heard the police tell it, of course, but you were there. How did my son die?"

"He died well, if such a thing is possible. There had been trouble at the Orchid earlier that evening and these men were waiting for us, or maybe just for Moon. Hyde, er, Alfred died protecting her. And me."

"That's what the police said."

"And that's what happened."

"I was afraid"—he looked out the window for a second, then looked back at me—"that he'd maybe started the fight himself. It wasn't easy trying to raise the boy after his mother died. Alfred was always difficult for me to handle; his mother had a way with him, but he and I never could agree. And when she died, he kind of went weird, that crazy hair, the black clothes, staying out all hours and associating with freaks." I shifted uncomfortably in my seat; I was undoubtedly one of those freaks.

He cleared his throat again and continued. "It seemed like he and I were constantly fighting about one thing or another, all of it so unimportant now." Tears began to flow from his eyes and stream down his face, but he didn't notice or care. "And so, when the police came and told me he'd died in some sort of a scuffle, I thought that he'd done it on purpose. To show me that he was a man, or to prove something. I felt, oh, I don't know, like maybe if I'd listened more to him or given him more, he'd not have done it."

"But it wasn't like that at all, Mr. Shepard. He was a good person and his death was not your fault. It

was just something that happened, that no one could prevent. You shouldn't blame yourself."

"Then who can I blame?" He turned to me, angry. "His mother gone and now him?" He shook his head. "It makes no sense."

I gave him a sad smile. "Nothing makes sense these days."

My voice seemed to bring him up from the depths of his thought. "But here I am going on about me and I've forgotten that you haven't just lost one person close to you, but two. I am sorry for both of those losses, Lily." He reached over and patted my hand. "I heard you singing in church; you have the voice of an angel. Such a voice can only be inspired by faith in God. And the Lord will give us each comfort in our grief."

I shook my head angrily as the procession stopped at its destination and we got out of the car. I had no Lord to comfort me, no gods, no beliefs to hold close in the dark of night. I had no love now, none to take and none to give. All I had left in me was anger. And that anger would have to carry me through.

I stayed only long enough to watch them pull the coffin out of the back of the hearse and set it up on its platform. The prayers they would say over his body meant nothing. The flowers that they'd heap on the newly covered grave would wither and die. Hyde was dead and all I had left of him was the taste of cheap wine, a remembrance of soft kisses and the touch of a silver ring on my hand.

I turned my back and walked away.

For several days I ignored the phone and the doorbell, choosing to take the time to sort out the many years of memories left in the house. Most of Moon's belongings I bundled up into bags and boxes for charity, keeping only a few items for myself. They wouldn't fetch much at a pawnshop, I knew, but they had sentimental value for me. I dragged old dusty boxes and trunks from the crawl space, disturbing spiders and roaches, the former sauntering away to sulk in dark corners and the latter scuttling away like dead leaves in the wind. The deeper I delved into the boxes, the deeper into early memories I sank. Bits and pieces of my previous caretakers formed fully fleshed in my mind. The ring Moon's mother, Sarah, wore, a flower I had picked for her on a sunny spring day, her grandmother's wedding dress; all precious in my eyes. I almost laughed out loud when I found the favorite lace shawl that had belonged to Philomena's youngest daughter. I smoothed it between my trembling fingers; there was the tear I had made in it one day, carefully mended by loving hands.

Finally, near the bottom of the last trunk was a real treasure. Wrapped in faded silk, an ornate garnet necklace set in gold, it had been the first object I remember ever seeing, sparkling in the moonlight around Philomena's throat as she bent down to pick me up from my own premature grave. It was worth more money than all the rest of it, probably worth more money than any of them had ever had. That no one had ever sold it was a testimony to the love everyone held for that remarkable woman.

And I was the last in her line to own it. I sat down cross-legged next to the trunk and I fastened it around my neck. Holding the stones against me, I thought I could hear Philomena's rich laughter and her dark velvet voice. I felt her warm presence, and the anger I'd been holding inside seemed to lessen. "No," I said bitterly, pulling off the necklace and throwing it back into the trunk. "I don't want your comfort. It's a lie. Just leave me my anger and leave me alone."

Something crinkled when the necklace hit the bottom. I leaned over, peered in and saw a fairly large

scroll of paper, brittle with age. I pulled it out carefully and unrolled it.

It was a rubbing of a tombstone. That much I could tell. I carried it into the kitchen and laid it out on the table. I could read the name Williams and the date 1860. The rest was too faded. I held it up to the light, only to see lettering on the back. Turning it over, I recognized the crude writing of Philomena. She hadn't been able to read, but she could copy the letters. These, too, were faded, but I could read them. "John Williams Beloved Husband of Dorothy Grey Williams 1830-1860." Beneath this a different hand had written, "Father and Mother?"

The doorbell rang and I answered it. Angelo stood there. "Miss Lily, you finally answerin' the door?"

"Hello, Angelo."

"You got dirt all over you." He peered at my hair. "And a spider in your hair. What you been doin'?"

I brushed at my head. "Cleaning. Sort of."

"And you ain't wearin' those red beads like I told you." He walked over to Moon's altar and took them from where I'd draped them about the statue. "You give offense to that spirit, you sorry."

I allowed him to put the necklace on me. Unlike Philomena's garnets, they were cold to the touch and their presence far from calming. Instead, they reminded me of my anger and that was a good thing. I needed that emotion; it was the only one I had.

"You're right, Angelo," I said. "I'll wear them from now on."

"Good. They give you strength, they give you protection if you treat them right." He hummed and nodded. "But I didn't come to tell you that."

He walked into the kitchen and helped himself to the sherry, pouring two glasses and handing me one.

"Besides to drink all Moon's sherry, Angelo, what else did you come for?"

"A celebration, Lily." He clinked his glass up against mine. "You be happy when you see what I found for you." He smiled his froggish smile, reached into his coat pocket and handed me a folded piece of paper.

I opened it up. It was a copy of a ten-year-old newspaper article from the *New York Times* fashion section.

I looked at him. "So?"

"The picture, Missy, look at the picture. And tell me who it look like."

I peered at the paper. It was hard to see clearly; the machine on which he'd copied it wasn't very good. But the likeness was there and I felt the shock of recognition reverberate through my whole body. It could have been me, older and more haunted, perhaps, but I'd looked in the mirror often enough to see the truth. I gave a triumphant laugh; the bitch was nameless no more.

"Deirdre Griffin," I said aloud.

Then, looking back to the kitchen table where the other paper lay. "Dorothy Grey."

"Dorothy Grey?" Angelo grinned at me. "Who she?"

"Deirdre Griffin, Dorothy Grey, my dear sweet mother." I smiled back at him, then impulsively hugged him. "You know, Angelo, I've always wanted to go to New York City."

PART TWO

CHAPTER SEVEN



The scent of her blood drew me, such a tantalizing fragrance, beckoning me to leave the forest behind, to be pulled against all instinct into the warmth and comfort of light and fire. The Wolf and I had run far and fast, but he'd tired of the game long before I had and now I was alone. Alone, as it had been at the beginning. As it seemed I should be.

There were hours left before dawn and so I stayed, just beyond her range of vision. Perhaps she saw the twitching of my tail or the glare of my eyes in the glow of the moon as I paced back and forth beneath the trees. Perhaps she sensed the presence of another mind just outside her cabin. But she showed no fear; she merely sat, rocking, peering out into the night and waiting for me to reveal myself as I was so often tempted to do.

I knew her fairly well, in my other form, that graceless and flawed form onto which I had held tight for so many years. Too many years. I growled at the thought of having to reassume that form.

"Hello?"

I edged back. She had never attempted to speak to me before, not when I came as Cat.

"Deirdre?"

The name. She called that name, the one that pulled me back into the other form. I snarled, then screamed my anger.

"Deirdre?" She stood up, moved to the railing of her porch and called me again, this time with doubt in her voice. And a small cache of fear.

A low rumbling vibrated my whole body; the Cat was pleased. She could feed off fear almost as well as she could feed from this woman's blood. But with the calling of the name came the knowledge of who I was deep inside. And the knowledge that this woman was a friend and not to be harmed.

The Cat growled again, but quieter this time, recognizing her defeat. "It is all right, my pet," I whispered to her in the recesses of our mind, a soft whisper, as if I were soothing the tufts of hair on her ears. "We had a good night. We will have other nights more glorious. But now it is time for home and bed."

In response, the Cat yawned. The woman gasped at this careless display of deadly teeth, and the hands that gripped the railing turned white at the knuckles. The small rush of her fear was invigorating, but the game was over. I gave one last call to her and ran off into the night.

I shed the cat form just before I reached the door of our cabin. Transformation had become easier over the years, still painful and still a wrenching away from the familiar, but it was a known pain and sadness I had learned to discard as quickly as a wet garment. There would always be time enough to wear it again.

"Hi, honey, I'm home." I called our typical greeting when one or the other of us stayed out alone. Mitch looked up from where he'd stretched out with a blanket in front of the fire.

"So I see." He smiled and held his hand out to me, the blue of his eyes reflecting the dying flames. "Come warm yourself by my fire, Mrs. Greer?"

"Always." I lowered myself onto the floor; he wrapped me up in his arms and dropped a lazy kiss on my forehead.

We lay for a while in silence, basking in each other's presence, and then he chuckled.

"Did the cat have fun playing with her toy?"

"My toy?"

"Elly. I knew you would go there after I left. You really shouldn't, you know. Elly's a good person. A friend. We have so few of those, we should be careful of them. And not scare them to death at night, romping in front of their house."

"She is never all that frightened, Mitch. Tonight she called my name. She knew it was me."

"See, that's what I mean. It's not good. You're breaking all your own rules, Deirdre."

I gave a low laugh. "But for the fact that I break my own rules, Mitch, you wouldn't be here now."

"Yeah." He stopped for a minute and kissed me on the end of my nose. "I'd still be a detective in New York, eating bad Italian food and hanging out with shady characters."

"The good old days?" I was sorry I'd said it before the words were even out of my mouth.

He said nothing, just looked deep into my eyes, then looked away, as if absorbed by the fire. "I love you, Deirdre, you know that. So let's not discuss the past."

Just those few short words and I could feel my life drain away. *And here it is*, I told myself, *the resentment and the anger you've been expecting for so long*. I'd hoped never to face this situation, knowing all the while that it would come. I had done the unthinkable to him, ripped him away from humanity and life, and he would never forgive.

"Besides," he continued, as if it mattered now to either of us, "it's not wise for you to tease her. She's perceptive and she's curious. A dangerous combination for us."

"What?" I glanced over at him, trying to maintain a balance between reality and my inner fears. He seemed unaware of my struggle, unaware of the turmoil his previous words had wreaked.

"Elly. You should quit visiting her late at night."

"Yes, Mitch, you are right." This conversation was safe, at least, and I sighed to myself in relief. "But sometimes I feel like I have to communicate with one of them."

"Yeah, I know." He pulled away from me and got up from the floor, walking over to the door of the cabin, opening it onto what remained of the night. "Deirdre, we need to talk about the future..." he started, then stepped, radiating a tension that was palpable even from across the room.

"What is it, love?"

He paused in the doorway, staring out into the night, then closed and locked it. "Nothing," he said. "I thought I heard someone outside, but there's no one there." He fastened the heavy shutters on all the windows and pulled the draperies closed. "I'm imagining it. After all, who would be there? Forget about it. Let's just go to bed."

We made love, tucked up together in the loft of the cabin, sealed tightly against the killing rays of the sun. I had searched so long for someone, despairing over the years and decades. Then I had found him and lost him and found him again. His presence was all I needed to make me smile, to make me whole. When he made love to me, he was everything I had ever wanted. Passionate and tender, rough and gentle, he took me places I'd never dreamed existed, carried me to heights and depths almost unimaginable. He was my mate and my soul. Forever.

As always with Mitch, this time was like the first time, filled with need and desire and hunger no amount of blood could quench. And when it was over, I still ached with love and longing for him as if it were our last. I lay awake after the sun had risen and he had fallen into the deathlike sleep I used to know.

Sighing, I got out of bed, pulling the heavy comforter with me, wrapping myself up to keep vigil. I sat in the armchair by the bed and waited, listening to the birds outside greeting a dawn I would never see. *Soon*, I prayed, *let the dreams start soon and get it over with*.

Mitch began to mumble in his sleep and I tensed, but he quieted down almost immediately. So it would not be soon. With one last doubtful glance at his still and perfect body, I rose from the chair and went downstairs to prepare for the long day.

In the kitchen I made a pot of coffee, gathering a mug and a carafe and the cigarettes sitting on the counter. There were only three left in the pack, just as there was very little coffee remaining. I glanced anxiously at the calendar on the wall. Sam would be visiting in about a week with our quarterly shipment of supplies. We could do without the coffee and the smokes and all the other little luxuries he brought, but three weeks ago we had drunk the last of those precious little bags Sam managed to procure for us. And even though taking from animals could maintain our bodies, only human blood could assuage our darker thirst.

"You will find us quite hungry when you arrive, Sam." I laughed after I said it. He was always so avidly curious about our feeding habits that I accused him last time of deliberately shorting the order so that he

could better observe our hunger when next he arrived. He didn't deny the possibility and showed no fear of my anger. After having been Mitch's psychiatrist and the best man at our wedding, after having removed a bullet lodged in my shoulder and acting as my confidant, after having taunted me into feeding on him one lonely night, I suppose he was entitled to this familiarity. I missed him, missed the interplay of vampire and human. Here was the reason I sought poor Elly out for so many nights—I longed for recognition and acceptance, longed for an acknowledgment of my existence.

The coffee had finished, so I filled the carafe, and prepared to carry it, the mug and one of the remaining cigarettes back upstairs. As I walked past the front door, I shivered, an involuntary reaction. But a reaction to what? I looked over my shoulder, peering at the solid wood as if I could see through it. There was nothing and no one there, of course. And even had there been, I could hardly open the door in broad daylight. I gave a nervous laugh. I was letting my hunger and my worry about Mitch and his dreams get the best of me. Still, I hurried up the stairs as quickly as I could, feeling vulnerable and exposed.

Upstairs, settling into the chair again and wrapping the comforter around me, I poured a cup of coffee and waited.

The dreams began about two weeks ago. Mitch said he never remembered them and I always told him that was for the best—they couldn't have been pleasant. He would thrash and flail and cry out with such anguish and pain that I found it better to sit up and wait until the dreams played themselves out. To be perfectly honest, I was not sleeping all that well either; I would awaken with the setting of the sun, feeling as if all my energy had been completely drained away. Without blood and sleep for so long, it was no wonder we were both tense and nervous.

"You are quite right, my love," I whispered to him. "We do indeed need to talk about the future." But I feared the future all the while I continued to run from the past. All I had was now. What was there left to say?

I drained my cup of coffee and poured myself another. *Maybe he won't dream today*, I thought, but even as the words came to me, Mitch cried out. I jumped from the chair and lay down *next* to him, holding him as he screamed, attempting to comfort him with the touch of my body.

"Hush, my love, sleep now." I crooned it over and over, wrapping my arms around him and rocking him like a child. But the dream was strong, stronger than it had ever been before. He trembled, he clenched his fists, he thrashed back and forth on the bed, he bit into his lip until blood dripped down his chin.

Every muscle in his body seemed to tense and flex. He shuddered and opened his mouth. And for the first time his distress found words—words that made me loosen my embrace and retreat to the corner of the room.

"Kill her." The words began as a choked whisper, increasing in vehemence with each repetition. "Kill her." Stronger now, it became a chant, growing louder and louder until the words echoed off the walls of the small loft, filling the cabin that had once been our home.

"Kill the bitch who made me what I am."

CHAPTER EIGHT



As soon as the sun set, I left. I had no other choice. Mitch would most likely have no remembrance of the dream upon awakening; he had never remembered before. But I would be tortured by the memory with each touch and every word, knowing only the truth of the dream.

I had thrown some of my clothes into a backpack and dressed in my heaviest jeans, shirt and hiking boots. It was reflex only; no coat in the world would ever give me warmth. Shivering uncontrollably, I made my way through the woods, carrying the thoughts of Mitch's voice with me.

"Kill her." The words were uttered with such hatred and such vindictiveness, it was hard to believe that they had come from the mind and heart of the man I loved. How could I have been so wrong about him?

I stopped and turned, standing just under cover of the trees, watching the cabin for a minute or two. Would he wake soon and find me gone? And would he come after me or would he consider my absence the best alternative? I ached to go back inside and crawl into his arms. But now there could be no comfort found in his embrace.

The Cat prowled restlessly inside my mind. "Let me out," she begged, "and I will take you far away. We will run and we will feed and we will be whole again."

I shook my head as I turned my back and walked deeper into the forest. She would carry me beyond myself, beyond remembering, true, but the cost was great. With no reason to return to human form, the Cat would soon forget the rules that governed our life. If I had wanted death, I'd have stayed and accepted it from Mitch's hands.

I wandered for a while, aimlessly, shivering and crying. The Cat growled within, not liking or understanding the despair. She knew only the night and the forest and the taste of blood. "Let me out," she wailed again, "and I will kill them. It will be easy, we are stronger than they are, older and wiser."

"No, my pet. There will be no killing."

It only needed the cold October rain to complete my misery. The trees provided no protection from the storm. And I was chilled, with a deathlike cold that penetrated beyond my flesh and bones and burrowed deep into my soul.

"Oh, God, how could I have been so wrong?"

It came as no surprise when I found myself mounting the steps to Elly's cabin and knocking on the door.

She threw the door open. "Deirdre? Oh, my dear, please come in. You're soaked to the skin." She peered past me into the darkness. "Isn't Mitch with you?"

At the question, I collapsed into Elly's arms, incapable of speech. She let me cry for a while, then led me into the warmth of her cabin and sat me down in a chair next to the fireplace.

I shivered. "You'd better get those clothes off," she said. I fumbled with my shirt, but my hands trembled far too much.

"Help me. Please."

She couldn't have heard the words clearly through my sobs, but she understood and knelt down in front of me, taking off first my boots and socks, then my jeans and panties. Her touch as sexless as that of a mother, she unfastened the buttons on my shirt, undid my bra and pulled me to my feet.

"Stand there in front of the fire and dry off. I'll get you a blanket."

I did as I was ordered, comforted somehow by her command. It was a relief to let go of all the decisions and cares, to deliver myself into the hands of someone I trusted. Elly's cabin was plainer than ours, but homier somehow. I never walked into her place without feeling peace descend on me; from the candles always burning on the mantel to the braided rugs on the floor the room exuded a welcome, even for such as me. As I watched the dancing of the flames, my sorrow subsided slightly and I felt warmed.

Elly entered the room again, bearing a heavy blanket, and gasped when I turned around. I managed a smile. "What?"

"You are so perfect. Like a goddess."

I laughed—a wild and desperate sound. "I am not a goddess, Elly."

"No? Are you sure?" She held out the blanket to me, an offering.

"Positive," I said, and took the blanket, wrapping it around me as I sat back down. "Not a goddess, just a bedraggled and miserable creature of the night. Thank you for taking me in. I had nowhere else to go."

"No problem, you are always welcome here." She showed no surprise at my words, but merely repeated hers. "You're always welcome. Can I give you a cup of tea? Or"—she gave me a shy smile—"something" a little stronger?"

"Something a lot stronger would be great, thank you."

She nodded and headed out to her kitchen, coming back with a large bottle of red wine and two glasses. "Will this do? I have scotch instead," she said as she uncorked the bottle, "but as I remember, that is Mitch's drink. Dare I ask? Is he okay?"

I felt my mouth clench. "Mitch is fine, I daresay. And the wine is, too."

She poured the wine and held a glass out to me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not particularly."

"Ah."

The fire crackled and sighed. Beyond the cabin's walls, the storm continued, accented now with great booms of thunder. It was exactly the sort of night that had always made Mitch and me abandon all thoughts of the world outside; we'd make slow love by the fire for long, lazy hours, needing only each other.

I choked back a sob and drained my glass.

"More?" Elly's glance was curious, but kind.

"Keep filling them. Please."

She did so and we were silent for a while, drinking and listening to the rain.

"So," Elly said as she poured the last of the wine into my glass, "we're not to talk about Mitch. What shall we talk about?"

"What would you like to talk about?"

She threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, what couldn't we talk about? There must be a million questions I want to ask you."

"Questions are good," I said, finishing my glass, "but what if you don't want to hear the answers?"

"Deirdre, I always want to hear the answers. More wine?"

"Yes."

As Elly got up and went into the kitchen, I laughed quietly to myself. Which of us was now the cat and which the mouse?

"I've got a better idea." She came back into the room, handed me an open bottle and picked up a carved wooden box from the mantel. "You drink this and I'll read your cards. Then I won't have to ask as many questions."

"My cards? As in telling the future?"

She shrugged. "The future, the past, the present.

It's all in here." She shuffled the brightly colored deck, larger than normal cards.

"But I don't believe in such things."

Elly laughed. "In this case, it doesn't matter much. The cards don't care if you believe or not." She handed them to me. "Just hold them for a minute and think about what you'd like to know."

I cupped my hands around them; they felt warm, almost as if Elly had transferred some of her human warmth to them. Perhaps she had. I closed my eyes and thought about the question that had been bothering me ever since the dreams started.

What the hell is happening to us?

"Done?" Elly asked. I opened my eyes again and at my nod, she reached out and took the cards from me. "You're cold as ice, Deirdre. Tuck back under that blanket." She groaned as she knelt on the floor in front of the fire. "Bad knees," she said, a note of laughter in her voice. "Oh, I'm getting old, you know how it is." Then she gave me a sharp look. "Or maybe you don't. Doesn't matter, does it? Now"—and she began to deal out the cards one by one, carefully and meticulously setting each one in its place—"let's see what's going on."

She studied the cards for a long time. And as she viewed them, I studied her, trying as always to find an understanding of her. She was probably in her middle or late sixties, her hair gray and curly, her face crinkled with creases imposed by life and laughter. She was every bit as homey as her cabin.

Elly looked up at me, nodded, looked back at the cards and gave a small, nearly imperceptible sigh.

I decided to play along. "What is it? Elly, you are making me very nervous."

"No need to be. Give me your left hand."

I held it out to her, palm up. The light of the fire reflected off my golden wedding band, and I sighed. *I should have stayed at home, I thought, and given Mitch a chance.*

"Probably," Elly said, staring intently at my palm.

Had I said it out loud?

"No, but it's an easy enough thought to read. And you just tensed, so I could guess your response. I'll get you home to Mitch very soon. But here, see this." She cradled the bottom of my hand very gently in hers and slowly traced a line along my palm. "This is your lifeline." She stopped abruptly, her fingernail marking the spot. "I have seen them branch out; I have seen them straight and continuous; I have seen them pitifully short. But I have never seen one with such a complete and definite stop. And then a gap; not a very big gap, I'll grant you, but it's there nevertheless." She lifted her nail and set it down on a different spot. "And then here it starts again. By the looks of this you will live for a very long time." She dropped my hand and shivered, hugging her arms to herself. "A very, very long time."

"Great." I hoped the sarcasm was not lost on her. "But what do the cards say?"

She got up from the floor, poured herself another glass of wine and bolted it down. "I thought you didn't believe in such stuff."

I smiled and shrugged. "Well, you have gone to so much trouble, the least I can do is ask."

"You want a blow-by-blow description? Or just the overall view?"

I looked at the clock on her mantel. It was late, far later than I had thought. Most of the night was gone, with only wine and talk to show for it. I would need shelter during the day; I knew of a cave not too far away, but I had little time to waste on foolishness. "Overall, I think. I should be going soon."

"You can stay the day here, you know. I have an extra room and I won't disturb you. It's small but completely dark. I suppose it was to have been a storage room or something. But I use it for meditation sometimes, so there's a bed and a lamp and a heavy lock on the door. You'll be quite safe."

"Ah." I gave her a doubtful glance.

"We'll talk about the cards first and then you can inspect it. How's that?"

"Fair enough."

"You have nothing to fear from me, Deirdre." She reached over and lightly touched my arm. "I certainly

know that you aren't quite human and I believe I know what you are. We needn't talk about it. But I have been your neighbor and your friend for over a year—if I'd meant you harm, you'd have sensed it by now. And"—her mouth twisted into a wry grin—"I'd have been dead. Mitch would rip my heart out if he thought I was a threat"

Just yesterday that comment would have brought me a feeling of security and love. Tonight it made my already cold blood freeze up in my veins.

"I'll stay. And the cards?"

"Oh, yes, the cards. Things will work out for the best eventually."

I almost screamed in frustration. "Jesus, Elly, that's it? Things will work out for the best eventually?"

She snickered. "You did say you wanted the overall view. And that's it. I can explain what all these cards mean, of course. There are swords." She pointed to one particularly gruesome card of a dead body impaled with ten swords. "They represent strife and conflict. And the others, well, they represent other powers in the world that seem to be opposed to you. There has been sorrow and confusion. And there will be more to come. But in the end, it will all work out. You must have faith and hope."

"Sounds easy." I stood up from the chair, stretched, and the blanket fell away from me. I'd gotten so comfortable, I'd forgotten I was naked underneath.

"So perfect," she whispered, and I blushed as I hurriedly wrapped back up again. "First things first," Elly said. "I'll get you a nightgown, get you set up in your room, and then we'll talk some more." She gave me another quick appraising glance. "So very perfect, it's hard to believe you've ever had a child."

CHAPTER NINE



The room was exactly as Elly described it. It had a single bed, a nightstand with a lamp, an ashtray and a half of a pack of cigarettes. The walls were bare, with the exception of a shelf that held an assortment of candles in cups. Small but safe, the room would be perfect for my daytime sleep. If I could sleep.

I had taken a shower to warm up and while I was drying off, she'd knocked on the door and handed me a plaid flannel nightgown. "Still hot from the dryer," she'd said, "and probably a bit too big for you, but it'll do."

"It will do perfectly." The gown had a clean fresh smell; I had held it up to my face and sniffed, then smiled. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," she'd said. "You get right into bed, now, and I'll bring you a cup of tea to help you sleep."

So here I was safely ensconced in Elly's little meditation nook. I sat on the edge of the antique bed; it rose high off the floor, so high that my feet did not touch the carpet. I swung my legs back and forth, appreciating the still-sweet smell that wafted off the voluminous gown, and I felt like a young child again.

Elly knocked on the door.

"Come in," I said. "It's your house."

"For you," she said, and handed me a cup of something hot.

I smelled it and crinkled my nose. "What is it?"

"Herbal tea. I brew it myself. In fact, I grow all the herbs in the back garden. This blend is chamomile, mostly. A little bit of rosemary. And catnip." She sat on a small wooden chair next to the bed.

"Catnip?" I smiled and sniffed at it again, then took a small sip. "It is not bad, actually, all things considered. What will it do to me?"

She laughed. "Nothing. Except perhaps relax you a bit. And, I hope, help you to sleep. I took a chance that your physiological makeup is human-based. Especially since the candles work."

I looked over my shoulder at the candles flickering on the shelf. "Well, of course they work. You light them and they burn."

"And how do you feel?"

I thought. "Peaceful. Calm. Remarkably mellow, now that you mention it."

"And are you hungry?"

It was an interesting question. I hunted deep inside my body for traces of the blood thirst; I knew that I hadn't fed for days and that I was craving human blood. But the drive wasn't there. The instinct was buried, covered up with layers and layers of comfort and peace.

I shook my head. "No, I am not hungry. I should be hungry, but I'm not. At least not enough to..."

She finished the statement for me. "... feed on me. That's good."

I blinked. Was it good? Of all times, could I afford my instincts to be suppressed now? I set the cup of tea down on the nightstand, picked up a cigarette instead. I saw no matches, so I got up from the bed and lit it from one of the candles, blowing them all out after I had finished. "All the same, Elly, I do not wish to be drugged, so I think I'll pass. And take my chances on the sleep. Just as you will have to take your chances on the other."

"Fair enough," she agreed. "I invited you in knowing what you were. I can hardly throw you out now. I'm sorry if I gave offense."

"No offense taken." I inhaled deeply. Already I felt my mind clearing of peace and comfort and the dearth of instinct. I was not so sure it was better this way, but my restless hunger had always been my truth and I did not want it taken away. "You need not fear I will feed on you. I am not that hungry and I have over a century's worth of practicing willpower."

"That long? When were you born?"

"Too long ago, Elly. It might as well be eons."

"And Mitch?"

She was determined to talk about Mitch. I sighed. "Mitch is much younger than I; he is new to the life. Or the death." I gave a sad little laugh. "He was transformed two years ago."

"And you brought him over?"

"An interesting way of putting it." I took a last long drag on my cigarette and stubbed it out angrily.

"Almost as if I had invited him to a dinner party." I hugged my arms to myself. "If only it were like that. A pleasant little invitation to a pleasant event."

She reached to the nightstand and got a cigarette for herself, lighting it with a pack of matches from her jeans pocket. "And it isn't like that? All those years, all those endless, wonderful years to spend with someone you love?"

"Love?" I blinked at her again, this time through a cloud of smoke. Anger built up within me and the Cat growled, clawing at the surface of my mind. "We know nothing about love."

I stopped and put my hands over my face, drawing in a deep breath, forcing calm upon the Cat. Slowly, I brought my hands down to my mouth, exhaling gently. "What I did to Mitch was not done out of love. I did it out of my own selfish need for him, for a companion. Out of desperation and loneliness."

"Even so, you love him, Deirdre, and he loves you."

"Does he? Yesterday, I would not have doubted that statement. But now, you see, he wants me dead. Can you blame him? I made him into an inhuman monster, took away his soul and his life."

Elly got up from the chair, walked over to the shelf that held the votive candles and picked up each cup, sniffing each one in turn and setting them back down. "I make these," she said. "It involves a lot of work, gathering the herbs, blending the scents, making sure that all the elements are in place. And yet, when I pull them out of the mold, they seem so much more than what I've put into them."

"And?"

"And Mitch is more than what you have made of him. He's himself, his own man. He's with you because he loves you. I'd be willing to bet my life on that. Why won't you?"

"Because I heard him say the words. He talks in his sleep."

"In his sleep? Then he was dreaming? But that's not the same as saying the words when he's awake."

Suddenly I was angry. "What the hell difference does it make? You do not understand. Cannot understand. The dreams are real. And so are the words. I heard his voice, Elly. You did not."

"And will running away from it do you any good?"

"Of course not. Tonight I will go back and face him."

"Good. You owe him that, I think."

We fell into silence. I took another cigarette from the pack and Elly handed me the matches. I pulled one out and closed the cover, glancing at the printing as I did so. A jolt of shock shivered up my spine. "Meet me at the Ballroom of Romance?" I read. "Where on earth did you get these?"

"Your place, I think, last time I was there. Why?"

I laughed. "Actually, I suspect the question is, 'Why the hell not?' I really should not be surprised. It's his damned legacy after all. I used to dream also, you see, dream of killing my maker."

"And did you?"

"Yes."

That one word took me back years. Back to the wet, cold streets of New York City and the terrifying weeks between holidays that held no meaning for one such as me. Weeks that ended with the lifeless body of Max pinned to his office door at the Ballroom.

He had been my best friend and my worst enemy. Not a day went by when I didn't curse his name. I would miss him forever.

"And"—I looked Elly straight in the eye—"do not doubt me when I say I loved him. That is how much love means to me."

She reached over and wiped a tear from my face. Then she held out her finger for me to see. "Do you always weep blood?"

I looked away from her. "It means nothing."

"If you say so."

Not very subtly, I changed the subject. "Elly? Why aren't you afraid of me? You invite me into your house, you give me wine and friendship and counsel, you even touch me. And yet you show no fear."

She laughed. "Life is too short for fear."

"For you, perhaps. But for me?"

"For you, most especially. Now, I should leave you to get some rest." She walked to the door, put a hand on the knob, then turned back around. "Will you be okay?"

I shrugged. "I will be fine. So long as I do not dream."

"You dream too? The same dreams? Is that possible?"

I thought. My dreams, when I did sleep, had been confusing, filled with darkness, the dirt of the grave and a struggling toward the light. And a deep hatred toward someone who betrayed me. Could this be what Mitch dreamed?

"It is possible, I suppose, that I share his dreams."

"But are they his?" She moved back into the room and sat in the chair again.

"Who else would they belong to? They certainly do not come from me."

"Who else indeed? I saw someone in your cards. A woman, capable of great mischief and evil, but tied to you very closely by blood. When was the last time you saw your daughter?"

"I have no daughter. I did have a child, once, stillborn. They took it away from me before I even saw it. I was changing, then, you see. Becoming what I am now." I shook my head. "They buried it, Elly, damn it, I saw the grave. The child was dead."

My hands cradled my stomach as if I could still feel the movement within, rocking back and forth on the bed. "Poor little one," I whispered, unheeding of Elly's presence, "you never even had a chance. How could you escape your fate, with your father dead and your mother dying? And all of us sacrificed to the blind hunger of a vampire."

"Deirdre?"

I looked up at her now and saw my anguish mirrored on her face. "The child was dead, Elly," I repeated with conviction. "Any other option is unthinkable. And impossible."

She said nothing.

"I should rest now," I said, crawling under the covers and turning my back to her. "Please go."

"I'm sorry, Deirdre. I didn't know. Of course the child is dead. The woman in the cards is someone else, obviously. And they are only cards, after all; they know nothing. Sleep well, my dear."

CHAPTER TEN



The first thing I did when Elly left was to get up from the bed and lock the door. I did not want further conversation; I did not want more questions. The ones she raised were distressing enough.

The second thing I did was relight the candles on the shelf. I made a mental note to find out from Elly what herbs she used in their making. Sam would be greatly interested. And if they could grant me a solid day's rest, I would be grateful. I had no audience right now, no reason to be proud or strong. I wanted sleep.

Turning out the lights, I lay in bed and watched the flames flicker in the glass cups; their reflections danced on the paneling behind the shelf. I felt the wash of unnatural calm and comfort sweep over me again and abandoned myself to the sensation. In the back of my mind, I heard a soft purring; even the Cat was quieted.

My last thought before I drifted off was of Mitch. "Sleep well, my love," I whispered, and reached my mind out to him, to open the link we so often shared, but felt nothing in return. Had he shut me out? Or

was he sleeping and dreaming of revenge, of killing me?

I inhaled deeply; right now, I didn't care. I was too calm, too tired to worry or dwell on the situation. There would be time tonight to make it right. Time was the one thing we had in plenty.

I slept straight through until dusk, a dreamless and rejuvenating sleep. I could almost feel the sun setting as I opened my eyes; the Cat stretched and yawned, testing its claws on the edges of my mind. "We're hungry," it protested, "and we do not like the smell of this place."

"I am sure you do not, my pet, but soon we will be home." Thoughts of returning did not worry me, as they had last night. *Amazing*, I thought to myself, *what a good day's sleep can do for one*. I looked around the room for my clothes, but realized that Elly had left them downstairs. I hoped they were dry by now.

I opened the door to almost total darkness. The cabin had a feel of emptiness. There were no sounds, no movement and no life within, as if it had stood empty for years. I paused outside what must have been Elly's bedroom, and peered inside. It was neat, orderly and unoccupied. When I started down the stairs, I wondered how long I'd actually slept, then laughed to myself. I might have delivered myself into the hands of a witch, but I was hardly the Sleeping Beauty type. And any Prince Charming who came to wake me up would have a definite surprise.

"Elly?" I called out when I got to the living room, although I knew she wasn't there. I checked all the areas of the cabin, but there was no sign of her, although she had left some herbs on the table in her workroom. Putting them to my nose, I recognized some of the scents as those she'd used in her candles. And I realized that they were picked fairly recently.

After switching on a light in the living room, I saw that a fire had been lit, sometime ago, and that my clothes were folded neatly and set on one of the chairs. I dressed by the dying flames, ran my fingers through my tangled hair, laced up my boots. Finding a scrap of paper in the kitchen, I wrote her a short note, thanking her for her hospitality. I called her name one more time with no answer, before going out the unlocked front door and closing it behind me.

The night was clear and cold and beautiful. The Cat grew alert, waking from the stupor of the day; its senses tingled. "Let's run," it urged, "far and fast and wash off the scent of that place. Let's feed. I smell blood." I nodded; I too smelled blood. Fresh blood. I inhaled deeply and sighed. Human blood.

We followed the scent; it led us behind Elly's cabin and to a still, fragile form lying on the ground outside a tidy little herb garden. "Ah," the Cat purred, "she can't have been dead long, her blood is still fresh, we will feed well for a change."

"No!" I screamed it in defiance of the instinct. And with that sound, Elly moved slightly and gave a low moan of pain.

I moved toward her. From the way her leg was twisted up underneath her, I knew that it was broken. And broken quite severely, if the smell of blood was any indication. I knelt down next to her, holding my breath, holding tight control over the Cat. "Elly?" Brushing her hair back from her face, I said her name again and her eyes opened.

"I don't know what happened," she said, in a voice so soft it could have been drowned out by the

rustling of leaves. "It was almost as if someone pushed me."

"Hush," I said, examining her for wounds other than the leg injury. That was all there was, but it was bad enough. I poked my fingernail through the knee of her blood-soaked jeans and ripped the fabric down to the hem. Pushed her? Hell, it looked as if someone had cracked her leg wide open; shards of bone stuck out through the skin's surface and the entire leg from knee to foot was purple. The bleeding had stopped, but not all that long ago, judging from the warm pool beneath her leg. And she was pale and shivering; she'd lost quite a lot of blood.

"I can't fix this, Elly. And I can't move you, or you will start bleeding." I brushed her face again and tried to smile, but stopped when I realized that with the scent of blood my fangs had grown. She looked at my mouth, winced and closed her eyes. "But I will get you a blanket and call an ambulance. Will you be all right here?"

She gave a weak snort that might have been amusement, but didn't open her eyes. "Been lying here for what feels like most of the afternoon; a few more minutes won't kill me. But hurry."

It only took a few minutes to make the call and gather up some blankets from my bed upstairs. The scent of the candles still lingered in the room and in the fabric, for which I was grateful. I had no desire to present the ambulance crew with a bloodless body to carry away.

Elly stirred slightly as I wrapped the blankets around her. "They will be here soon." I began to get up, but she reached up and grabbed my hand.

"Don't leave me, Deirdre," she whispered. "The woods are full of evil."

"Hush, Elly. Don't be silly. There is no evil in these woods. You are in shock, and it is no wonder. You have lost a great deal of blood. Your mind is wandering."

She gripped my hand with more strength now. "There's nothing wrong with my mind. Just don't leave me."

I sighed and sat down cross-legged next to her. "I am here." I pulled her hand away from mine and tucked her arm back under the comforter, but left my hand on top of hers through the fabric, so she could feel my presence. "I am here, Elly. And I will stay with you until they get here."

"Talk to me, Deirdre. Give me something to concentrate on. I don't want to drift away."

"What should I talk about?"

"Tell me about how you became what you are."

I laughed in spite of the seriousness of the situation. "Very well," I said. "That will guarantee you won't drift away. It is not exactly a bedtime story."

She gave a weak smile and began to talk.

"It was 1860. Right before the war. I was seven months pregnant and my husband and I, oh, we were so happy. We had married late, you see, and I was old to be having a first child."

"How old?"

"Twenty-eight."

Elly smiled. "That's a magic age. And not too old for children."

"Not now, no. But then? Most of my friends had been married for ten years or more, with a brood of children to show for it. It was a different time." I sighed. "As for it being a magic age, try being twenty-eight for over a century. I would give a lot to see just one gray hair in the mirror. Or just one wrinkle. But that's not in the story." I reached over and smoothed her hair back. "It was cold that night. Raining. We had been at his sister's house, and decided to take the ride back regardless of the weather and the lateness of the hour. The horse took a fright, the carriage overturned, my husband died. I went into labor. And then I was rescued." I gave a short, hard laugh. "At first I thought it was my husband, that everything would be well. But the eyes were all wrong, the hands were all wrong and I was damned forever."

Elly had grown quiet; her eyes were closed, but her face was still twisted in pain. "It was not his bite that turned me, you understand. I fought him, fought him hard, knowing even amidst the pain and the darkness and the death, that what he was forcing on me was wrong. Oddly enough, the fighting both saved me and doomed me. He didn't drain me dry and leave me dead, true, but after that time his blood was in my blood, his legacy in my soul. And he abandoned me then, to find my own way."

Elly made no response; she had either passed out or fallen asleep. The smell of her blood filled my head; I touched my hand into the pool below her leg and brought it up to my mouth. The little bit of blood remaining was cold and sticky and coated with dirt from the ground. Still, it was blood, and human blood at that, so I licked my hand, slowly at first, savoring the taste. The Cat howled, frustrated with this half feeding. "Tonight, my pet," I soothed it, "we will feed tonight. But not this blood."

I finished cleaning my hand just as the ambulance pulled up. The two medics worked quickly and efficiently, examining Elly and getting her onto a stretcher and into the back of the vehicle. They asked me questions while they worked.

"How did this happen?" The driver's tone was brisk and slightly accusatory.

I wiped my hand on the side of my pants, feeling strangely guilty for what little taste of blood I'd had. "I don't really know. She said she fell."

"A pretty bad break for just a fall. When did it happen?"

I thought for a second. "Not that long ago, I would suppose. Probably an hour or two before sunset."

"Where were you at the time?"

"When she fell? I was upstairs, either sleeping or dressing."

"Sleeping? At sunset?"

I shrugged. "I'm a bit of a night owl, I fear. Otherwise I would have been here when she fell. Or I would have been able to prevent it."

"Are you next of kin by any chance?"

I gave him a sharp glance. "No, only a neighbor.

Why do you ask? Surely her injuries cannot be that serious."

He shook his head. "She's lost a lot of blood and she's unresponsive. At the very least she'll probably need a transfusion. I was just hoping you two were related. Makes it a bit easier, is all. No problem, Elly's well known around here; we'll have no trouble finding a donor if we need one. Shall we go?"

"We?" I glanced at the evening sky. I had hoped to get back to Mitch soon, but felt an obligation to make sure that Elly would be all right. Mitch would wait. "Fine." I began to step into the back of the vehicle.

"Why don't you ride up front with me?" the driver asked, "and John will ride in the back."

"Fine," I agreed again. I opened the door and settled into the seat.

John sat in the back, and the driver slammed the doors and got in behind the wheel, turning on the siren and heading carefully out of the dirt road to the main highway.

"So," he said to me over the sound of the siren, "who are you anyway? I thought I knew everyone round here."

"Deirdre Griffin-Greer. I live in the cabin next to Elly's."

"Oh. The new summer folk. I see."

"Not exactly summer folk, since we were here all last winter. But I get your point. And you?"

"Nope. I've lived here all my life."

I laughed. "No, your name?"

"Oh." He blushed slightly. "Bob Stephens. Pleased to meet you."

"Not such pleasant circumstances, I fear. Will she be all right?"

"Should be. She's a strong old bird. Strange, too. Sort of our local wise woman." He gave me a sideways glance. "Some call her a witch. Which is nonsense, of course. There's no such thing. But she's highly respected; folks will be real upset if something happened to her. Are you sure you don't know how she fell?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I didn't push her, if that's what you are implying."

"Not implying anything. Just curious."

We pulled up at the hospital and they rushed her inside. "Stick around," Bob said to me. "We'll need someone to fill out forms and such."

I sighed. "I'm not sure how much help I will be, but I will stay. For a while."

Over the many years I have developed an active dislike for hospitals. For one with heightened senses,

they can be agony. The sounds of pain, the smells of sickness, death and despair are overwhelming, frightening in their intensities. This place was no different from countless other hospitals I had encountered. The accumulated scents of distress and fear hung heavy in the air, making the space feel closed and entrapping.

Still, I sat in the emergency waiting room for a while, attempting to occupy my mind with magazines and television, but the Cat was restless and so was I.

A woman came in, cradling a small child in a blanket. "She was running," the mother said to the nurse hurriedly, "and fell down." She flipped the blanket back, exposing the little girl's knee, wrapped with a red-stained towel. "She must've been carrying a glass of something, I guess, and it broke when she fell. There's a huge piece still stuck in there. I couldn't pull it out."

The scent of blood and panic washed through the room and I caught my breath. This was torture, for the Cat as well as for me.

Quickly I moved out of the room and walked up to the reception desk. "Excuse me," I said to the nurse on duty, "if there is any news of Elly, can you let me know? I'll be right outside the doors. I really need some air."

She looked up at me with tired eyes. "Don't we all, honey? Go on out. If I hear anything, I'll let you know."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The rain had stopped and the sky was almost clear, but it had gotten colder.

"Think it'll snow?"

I turned around and saw the ambulance driver, huddled over, smoking by the outdoor ashtray.

"Probably," I said, walking toward him. I glanced at the sky again. "But not for a while."

He laughed. "You can tell?"

I nodded. "Usually." Then I gestured to his hand. "Would you happen to have an extra? I hate waiting and I hate hospitals."

"You and everyone else in the world." He handed me a cigarette and lit it for me.

"Thanks."

We stood silently for a while until he cleared his throat. "It's Deirdre, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"So, Deirdre, why were you sleeping at Elly's place instead of your own?"

"More questions? You should be careful what you ask, Bob."

He shrugged. "Can't help myself, really. Just naturally curious, I guess. You don't have to answer, you know."

"But still you keep asking. The last time a man got this interested in my life..." My voice trailed off. *I should not have come here*, I thought. *I should have gone home to Mitch*.

"What happened to him?"

I laughed. "He asked so many questions that I had to marry him."

"Oh. A fate worse than death, then?" He was smiling at his joke.

"Actually, Bob, that is not too terribly far from the truth."

He stared at me a long time. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"No. Excuse me, I should go back inside and see about Elly."

"Damn, I'm sorry. I should have told you earlier, I guess, and I meant to, but it slipped my mind. Elly's fine. You could see her if you wanted, but she's heavily sedated right now. I suspect she'll sleep till tomorrow morning. Probably best that you come back later."

He stared off into the trees and shook his head "It really was quite a nasty break. I'd still like to know how it happened."

"So would I."

He lit up another cigarette and offered one to me. I shook my head. "No, I should be going."

"Where?"

"Home. Thank you for all your help." I began to walk away from him.

"Hey, how are you going to get there?"

I'd planned to get into the woods as quickly as possible and give free rein to the Cat. But I could hardly admit that.

"I'll walk."

"Don't be ridiculous. All that way? In the dark? In the cold? I'm off duty now. Let me get my stuff together and I'll drive you. I need to stop by Elly's place and lock up, anyway."

Bob drove a little red convertible with plates reading BABEMGNT. After I'd settled into the seat I turned to him and smiled. "Babe Management?"

Even in the darkness of the car, I could tell that he was blushing.

"They're old plates. From my youthful days. I just never got around to changing them. And besides, it's Babe Magnet."

"Oh." I gave him an appraising glance. He was quite good-looking; although just a few inches taller than I, he was well-proportioned and muscular, with clean features and white teeth. I could well believe the epithet was apt.

"Youthful days? And just when would that have been? Two years ago?"

"More like nine years. I don't think I'm any younger than you. You're what? Twenty-six? Twenty-seven?"

"Close enough."

We rode in silence for a while.

"So why were you sleeping at Elly's place?"

"You never stop, do you? If you must know, my husband and I had a small disagreement." *Yes, I thought to myself, if hearing that someone you love wants to kill you could be considered small.*

"Eh. Marriage. I have to admit I don't understand it. And I wasn't very good at it. This your first?"

"Second, actually." The tone of my voice went flat, expressionless.

"A rough time, Deirdre? And this one isn't going any better? You can tell me all about it."

"No," I said firmly, "the first was not a rough time. He died. And Mitch is not a rough time, either."

"Which, if you don't mind my saying so, is why you spent the night at Elly's place. I understand."

"No, Bob. I do not think you do. But it does not matter."

He gave a small snort of amusement. "You're probably right, especially since I don't seem to be getting anywhere. You can't blame a guy for trying."

Trying? Was that what he was doing? And was I that much out of practice? I had been holed up for way too long, I realized, to not recognize a pickup attempt. I glanced over at him again, reassessing, reevaluating. Yes, he would do. He would do quite well.

Still, I was nervous. I had fed for over a year from animals or from the supplies that Sam provided; I was a long way from the lone huntress I'd been. "But fresh blood," the Cat protested. "You promised fresh blood."

"That I did, my pet," I whispered as the car pulled into a rutted lane that led to Elly's cabin. "And we shall have it."

Bob stopped the car. "I'll just be a second," he said, opening the car door. "Have to make sure

everything is secure."

I followed closely behind him. "I will come in with you if you don't mind. I need to get my stuff together and use the bathroom. I will only be a few minutes."

"No problem."

As I walked up the stairs, I could feel his eyes on me. I went into the bathroom, closed the door and ran the water to disguise the fact that I was not tending to natural functions. "This should not be difficult," I told my reflection. "You used to do it all the time. He is already interested. Take it slow and easy, make up something to keep the two of you here." I combed through my hair with my fingers, pinched my cheeks to coax a little bit of color into my pale skin. Not that it really mattered; his kind always found me attractive. "The nature of the beast," I said, giving myself a wide smile, feeling the excited anticipation of feeding build, the slight tingle of gums as my fangs began to grow. "It's show time."

"Bob?" I called out to him as I came down the stairs. "I don't think I want to leave here yet." I tried to put a small tinge of fear into my voice.

"Why, what's wrong?"

I avoided his eyes and shrugged. "If you must know, I'm a little nervous about going home. It would probably be better if I wait and sneak in while my husband is sleeping. He always goes to bed right at ten o'clock, no matter what." It was a blatant lie, but Bob would have no way of knowing that. I warmed to the part and expanded a bit. "He'll have put away enough beer by then to be totally unaware of anything. And in the morning, well"—I dropped my head as if ashamed—"he'll be so hungover, he will take any sort of explanation I give. Yes," I said as if just making up my mind that second, "I should probably stay here for a while."

"He won't come looking for you?" Bob was falling very nicely into the role of protector. I almost laughed out loud; if anyone needed protection right now, he did. And if Mitch came for me, he would allow nothing to stand in his way.

But I played along and hesitated as I looked at the clock on Elly's mantel. Not quite nine-thirty. "Probably not"

"But he might?"

"It is possible, I suppose."

He nodded. "Then I'll stay as well. Just in case."

"Thank you." I gave him a weak smile. "Why don't you build a fire and I'll find us something to drink?"

He began to hum a song as he eagerly arranged some wood in the fireplace, and his thoughts were easy to guess. The babe magnet strikes again. I shook my head as I walked into the kitchen. Why was I playing this game? It was demeaning to all of us. And totally unnecessary. I could do anything I wanted with this man and make him forget it all one second later. He was mine for the taking, game or no game.

"Bob, can you come in here for a minute?"

"Sure thing." He moved into the doorway. "Need help with a bottle or something?"

"No." I looked him straight in the eyes. "Come closer, please."

He approached, curious, but with just a small touch of fear. "So, what's up?"

"I did not bring you here for protection from my husband, who is neither a drunkard nor an abusive man."

Still held by my stare, he took this in. "So why are we here?"

"We are here because I want you. Because I need you. Because it has been way too long since I have fed."

"Fed?"

I smiled at him. It might have been an encouraging smile, even a reassuring smile, except for the fangs that were growing in anticipation.

He stiffened and made an effort to pull away. But held by my gaze, he was helpless. I moved over to him and took him into my arms. "Yes, my darling. My sweet, sweet darling. And you will feed us well, won't you?"

Bob shivered, trying to break my grasp, then relaxed as I continued to look into his eyes. "Yes," he whispered. "I will feed you. I will give you anything you want."

"I know you will." I smiled one more time, fangs fully grown, fully visible. Then my mouth went to his neck and we were both carried away by the tide of his blood.

I had almost forgotten the taste of fresh human blood; forgotten the sheer ecstasy feeding was. Time seemed suspended, thoughts forgotten; all that was important was my mouth and his blood, the pressure of his warm body up against mine, his moans, my contented sighs.

How could I have gone so long without human blood? And what had I become in the interval? A hunter of plastic bags and animals? I almost choked in scorn, and the Cat rejoiced deep in my mind. "Yes," it purred, "this is what we've needed. This is what we have craved. Take it all."

Not all, I thought, we must never take it all . But still I drew upon him, one glorious mouthful after another, a hand holding the back of his head, and the other pressed up against his heart, measuring the beats, waiting for them to slow. And when they slow , I told the Cat, reminding it and reminding me, when they slow, we must stop .

And there it was: the jump of his heart and a faltering of the steady pulse. *Stop. Now. We must stop now .*

I pulled my bloody mouth away from his neck as I forced the snarling Cat back down deep into my mind. *Poor pet , I thought with sympathy, you are still hungry, I know. And I am still hungry. We will have more later .*

His eyes rolled open and focused on mine; he smiled, faintly. "Are you all right?" I asked, my voice husky from the emotion of feeding.

"What happened?"

I shook my head. "Nothing happened, Bob. Do you understand? Nothing happened. You took me home and came over here. You checked the inside of the cabin and then lay down on the couch. You were very, very tired."

He yawned. "Yeah, I'm very tired. But if I'm sleeping, why am I here with you..."

"A dream, of course. I was never here with you."

You dropped me off at my cabin and came here by yourself. Go lie down again and sleep."

I led him over to the couch and laid him down. There were no blankets with which to cover him; I'd taken them for Elly earlier. But I smoothed his hair back and kissed the top of his forehead. "Sleep now, Bob. And remember, I was never here."

He muttered the words back to me and fell asleep. I checked his pulse one last time. He would live.

I moved out of the door, closed it and started down the front porch steps, phasing into the Cat as I did so, with only one thought in my mind. "Home. I am coming home."

CHAPTER TWELVE



Something was wrong. The Cat paced around outside the cabin, uneasy, sniffing the night air. It smelled wrong; the other's scent was still here, but not strong; neither the man's, nor the Wolf's. Instead there was a sickly sweet smell, different and new, but not unlike the scent in that other place we had been. The Cat wailed, its tail thrashed and its ears flattened on top of its head.

I concentrated on calming and suppressing the Cat; recreating my human form in its place. Shivering and naked, I walked up the steps, opened the door and started to call, "Hi, honey, I'm..."

The cabin was empty. And not just empty of life and Mitch; there was nothing there. The kitchen cabinets hung open, with nothing inside. The furniture, the rugs, the draperies were gone. I stared for a while in disbelief and then climbed the stairs, checking on the other rooms. The towels and toiletries were missing from the bathroom; only a slight moistness in the air showed that this room had been used recently. The bedroom had been stripped as well, and on opening the closet I discovered that even my clothes were gone.

I leaned up against the wall and began to laugh. It had a hysterical sound, echoing through the rooms. That he had left was perhaps not surprising, given the recent content of his dreams. But to take everything? Even down to the draperies at the windows? It made no sense.

Then again, he wanted me dead. And this would most certainly do it. Mitch had to have known that I'd be forced to assume the cat form, and he knew as well as I the hazards inherent there. He had left me naked, cold and with inadequate protection from the coming sun.

"Cruelly done, my love." I slid along the wall, sat down on the bare wood floor and began to cry, quietly and desperately. With nothing and no one left to me in the world, all that was left to do was to wait for the dawn.

I must have sat for hours, hunched over in my misery, weeping bloody tears, expending the precious energy stolen what now seemed a lifetime ago. Eventually, though, I ran out of tears and a deadly calm took over. I got up from the floor, opened the window shutters and looked out on the night. Dawn was no more than an hour or two away.

I almost expected to see the Wolf come loping through the trees and up to the door, like so many nights before. Or to hear Mitch's voice call from another room. Despite the physical evidence, his leaving was hard for me to believe. There must be some explanation, my heart insisted, some reason for him to do this. How could I have been so wrong about this man? I knew him so well, I thought, I knew his mind and his heart and his soul. The Mitch I knew would never have done this.

And yet, was he the Mitch I knew? I had taken him away from all he valued. His son died because of me. To say that his life had changed drastically because of me was one of the century's greatest understatements.

I had let my love and need for him rule me. I realized now that I was a fool to think that our love was great enough to surmount the impossible obstacles. I'd made him into a monster, turned him into a feral hunter. And then I'd locked him up here, and taken away even the bitter pleasures of our kind.

"Of course he left," the Cat scoffed. "It is right that he left. He did not love us. He did not know us. And we will survive without him."

"Perhaps you are right, my pet," I soothed, managing to hide my inner thoughts. I did not want it to interfere with what I had planned. "We will leave soon," I said, "but first there is something I must do."

I padded down the stairs and into the kitchen. He hadn't taken everything, of course; some of the drawers still contained valueless junk: candle ends, corks from wine bottles, bits of papers, matches. I pulled out a pack of the latter and gave a hard little laugh. "The Ballroom of Romance, again, I see. But Max would be happy, no doubt, to be a part of this last act."

Stacked in the corner of the kitchen was a pile of newspapers. And yes, under the sink, he had left the cans of kerosene, something Sam had brought in each and every delivery, along with matching lamps the first time, thinking we might need it should the power go out. "Thank you, Sam. Although I fear you will find nothing much of value on your next visit."

Starting upstairs, I crumpled up sheets of paper and placed them along the hallway, on the outer walls of the bedroom and bathroom, in the closet. Then, area by area, I splashed some of the kerosene onto the paper and tossed a few matches onto the piles. The flames were slow to catch at first, but I spilled more kerosene onto the open flames and walls. Soon the fire burned brightly and fiercely, licking at the walls. Lovely flames with such wonderful warmth, burning away the deceit and lies that lingered in Mitch's absence.

I laid a path of fire down the stairs, and repeated the same process on the ground level. Almost, I wanted to stay and let the fire take me, but by this time, the Cat was in a state of near-panic. I soothed it again, and went outside to watch the cabin burn.

As I'd hoped, the entire structure was quickly engulfed in flames. I was surprised, though, when I heard

the sirens. It should have taken them longer to respond. I pulled back deeper into the woods and watched the trucks pull up in front of the cabin, followed by a familiar red convertible. Bob flung his door open and began to yell at the crew. "Someone's in there. Or was in there. Did she get out in time?"

"Haven't seen anyone," one of the police answered. "Besides, they left town. That Greer fellow stopped by the station last night sometime and said they'd be gone for a while and asked if we could look out for things until they get back."

Bob shook his head. "You must've heard him wrong. I dropped the woman off here earlier this evening. Around ten or so."

The cabin shuddered, and the roof fell in. "You'd better be wrong, Bob, because no one's going to be walking out of that. I just hope we can keep the trees from burning—a fire like this can take out acres. Wonder how it started."

"Jesus." Bob took a step toward the cabin, his voice rising in panic. "She has to still be in there. Otherwise, she'd be standing out here."

"No one in there, Bob. In fact, there's nothing in there at all. Some moving van came in and packed up all their stuff today. They stopped for directions is how I know. They moved out, so far as I can tell. You know how it is with summer folk."

"But she was here. Earlier this evening, she was with Elly at the hospital. How can she have moved out?"

The police officer shrugged. "I'll tell you what I think, Bob. I think he left her. Moved out while she was with Elly, lock, stock and barrel. I do know there was a woman with him when he stopped by the station. Couldn't have been her, I guess, from what you say. So here's the picture: Greer's got himself another woman and they go off together. And she gets home and realizes what happened, she gets mad and starts the fire herself, then heads out somewhere else. Won't be the first time a woman did something crazy when she got rejected."

Another woman? I wanted to come out of the woods and question this man. But what did it matter? Mitch was gone and I was alone. I turned my back on all of them and headed deeper into the trees, phasing into the Cat as I ran, letting it carry me where it willed.

I woke the next evening, shortly after sunset, safely tucked up into a cave. Human once again, or as close to human as I would ever be. Naked. But alive. The Cat had more self-preservation instincts than I'd ever expected. I probed its mind, deeply embedded in mine. Revenge burned close to the surface; it had kept us alive because it wanted Mitch dead. I knew that feeling. Thoughts of revenge had kept me going for almost a century. But the Cat did not remember the regret and the high price that came with the goal. I did not want Mitch's death. I wanted an explanation, a reckoning. Most of all, I wanted my life back the way it had been, when I had been his love and he had been my reason to exist.

"The one certainty in the world, Cat," I said as I crawled out of the cave, "is that once changed, life is never the same. But it does go on."

Our cabin was now nothing more than a few charred timbers standing in a pile of ashes, all cordoned off with yellow police tape. By now they'd have discovered that the fire had been set deliberately and that I did not die inside. I suspected with a bitter laugh that there would be a warrant out for me.

I needed to get out of this place, out of this state. Cadre headquarters in New York seemed a long way away, but it was my only refuge now. From there I could rebuild what was left of my previous life. But I could hardly make the entire trip as the Cat. I needed clothes, at the very least, to get to some other town where I wasn't known, where I wasn't wanted by the law. I would need access to my bank accounts.

First things first, I told myself. I remembered that I'd left my backpack at Elly's cabin; tucked inside it was a change of clothes and my wallet. "We will start with that."

Elly's cabin was locked, but that was no obstacle for me. I chuckled to myself. According to the old legends, you could not keep a vampire out of your house once you'd invited it in. Apparently that old legend was true. I broke the lock and entered, closing the door behind me.

I found my pack and put on my clothes: a pair of jeans, a tank top, a flannel shirt. Unfortunately, I'd lost my favorite pair of boots while phasing into the Cat. I walked up the stairs and into Elly's bedroom. Her boots were a little too large for me, but I borrowed a couple of extra pairs of socks to pad them. The clothes, after all, were for disguise, not for my comfort. Naked or clad, it was all the same to me.

As I laced up the boots, I heard the sound of tires on Elly's gravel driveway. Had they come looking for me this soon? Someone knocked on the front door. "Hello?"

The voice sounded familiar, but out of place.

The knock came again, harder this time, and the door swung open. "Hello, is anybody home? I'm looking for the Greers."

I almost laughed out loud with relief. This was the first lucky break I'd had in a while. "Sam?" I stepped out into the hallway.

"Deirdre?" He looked up at me, his handsome face creased into a smile. "Thank God you're all right. I saw your cabin and I feared the worst."

I moved down the stairs and gave him a small hug. "I am so very glad to see you, Sam, you have no idea."

"What the hell happened? Your cabin is gone, burned to the ground."

"Yes, I know. I torched it; it was a lovely fire."

"Deirdre? Are you okay? Where's Mitch?"

"Mitch is gone, Sam."

"Gone?" His voice sounded slightly hysterical. "He was in the cabin?"

I shook my head. "No, I didn't burn the cabin down around him, Sam. He is gone. That's all. He packed up everything he had and everything I had and left town. No note, no warning, no reason. Just gone."

"But why would he do that? Why would he leave you? That makes no sense."

I shrugged. "Sense or no, Sam, that is what happened. And so I burned the cabin down. Hell hath no

fury, you know."

"Okay. That I can understand." Sam was ever the psychiatrist, and a small smile crossed his face. "I'm glad to see you're in touch with your anger. But, Mitch? Leaving? There must be some reason. Could he have been forced?"

"Forced? Mitch? Who in this world could force him to do anything he did not want to do?"

"You could. But other than you, no one, probably."

I nodded.

"Maybe he felt there was some threat? Something that might harm you if he stayed around?"

I shook my head. "There is only one creature in the world who wants me dead, Sam, and that is Mitch himself."

"And so he left to protect you. See, that's the best reason in the world."

"Oh, yes, indeed. He wanted to protect me enough that he packed up all of my clothing. He took the curtains from the windows, took all the furniture and everything else in the cabin and moved it all to God knows where. Then, to protect me again, I suppose, he stopped by the local police station, with another woman waiting for him in the cab, to tell them he would be leaving town for a while. Good protection, that."

He started to speak and I laid a hand over his mouth. "No, Sam, I do not want to talk about it. Not now. Not ever. He is gone; let us leave it at that."

"Fine, Deirdre. You're the boss. But what now?"

"Now," I said, taking the wallet from my backpack and tucking it into my back pocket, "you will take me out of here and back to New York with you. I am a member of the Cadre, if it still exists. They will take me in; they have to." I laughed, a small bitter cackle. "They are family."

"Vivienne will be thrilled to see you again, Deirdre, I'm sure of that. And she will help you."

"I do not want help. I just want a safe place to stay. Preferably someplace where I am not wanted for arson."

Sam laughed. "Never a dull moment with you, Deirdre Griffin."

"On the contrary, Sam, most of my life has been comprised of nothing but dull moments." I took his arm and headed him to the door. "But you are never around to witness them. I would have been perfectly content with another century or so of dullness, if Mitch had not..." I choked back a sob.

"You'll find him again, Deirdre," he reassured me as we got into the car and drove away. "I'm sure of it."

"And when I do?"

"Then you'll know."

"I do not want to know. I do not want to find him." I shook my head and stared out the window. Somewhere deep inside my mind the Cat rumbled. *Yes, we will find him. We will know. And then we will kill .*

PART THREE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I only lingered long enough in New Orleans to attend Moon's funeral mass, held on the ninth day following her death. I'd closed our two bank accounts and converted everything to cash. It wasn't much; even considering my limited experience with money, I knew that a little under two thousand dollars wouldn't last long. Angelo had taken away my biggest worry, that of what to do with our small house, by offering to take over the mortgage payment for me in exchange for being able to live there, at least while I was "off gallivantin' in the city."

I'd gotten used to Angelo by this time; it seemed natural to me that he should pick up where Moon left off. His froggish walk and his squinting eyes became familiar, and before he moved in he brought me gifts and objects that might prove useful to me in my search. Some were vials of offensive-smelling liquid or lotions, all precisely labeled in his small square handwriting. I laughed at first when he started pulling them out of his black medicine bag, but he peered at me so intently that I sobered immediately and listened to what he had to say.

"Now this," he'd say, holding up a particular bottle, "this one keep folks from takin' your money. Put a dribble on your wallet or your bags; they avoid them like the plague." Or: "This baby let you guide some poor man's mind, just a drop in his drink and crash! You inside his head, pokin' around just as if you was at home in there. Now I make some of these extra strong, on account of the power of the folk you be meeting, so be careful if you use them on regular folks." There were oils to hide my natural scent and ointments to confuse the eyes, "like the grease on the lens of the camera that make them models look so good." He chuckled to himself over that one. "I givin' you the best I got, Lily girl. You have faith and believe and you do just fine."

Odd that I couldn't believe. Despite all the strangeness of my life so far, it still seemed unlikely that such power could reside in little jars. But I'd packed them just the same at his insistence, smiling to myself, thinking as I'd wrapped the last of them that at the very least, when I run out of money, I can set up a corner stand and sell them on the street.

Moon's mass was held early that morning; when I arrived at the church, the sun was just rising and the streets still held a trace of predawn haze. I wore a black skirt and a black T-shirt with my heavy boots. The only flash of color was my hair, flaming above my pale skin, and the red bead necklace I'd received at the grave site.

Sitting in the back pew of the church, I rested my arm atop one of the two cases I'd packed. Inside were three pairs of jeans, three T-shirts, assorted socks and underwear and a black leather jacket. The other bag contained what few cosmetics I used, my wallet and money, and 'Lo's "medicines." My

stomach was fluttering and twisting itself in knots at the thought of the journey that lay ahead. But I'd resolved to find my mother. And find her I would.

After the service ended and the congregation filed out, I lingered, wanting to postpone one of the last tasks I had to do. But I had bus tickets and very little time to waste. I sighed, picked up my bags and walked over to the small, dark alcove that held the statues of the saints. I knelt in front of the altar for St. Barbara, dropped a quarter into the box and lit a candle.

"This is for Moon, you understand," I whispered to the statue as I blew out the match. "I don't know you. I don't love you and I don't honor you. But she did. Hold her safe."

Someone came and knelt beside me. "Well done, child," Angelo said. "Now take them beads off and give them to the saint."

I gave him a questioning look, but at his intense gaze, I pulled them off over my head and laid them at the feet of the statue. In the flicker of the candles, they looked like a pool of blood. I shivered slightly, then got up from the kneeler. Angelo remained behind for a minute. I watched him as he lit a candle, held his hands out over the beads and sprinkled them with liquid from a vial he pulled out of his pocket. His lips moved, but I couldn't hear the words. After awhile he nodded, as if concluding a pleasant conversation, and lit another candle. Picking the beads back up, he turned and handed them to me.

"I bought you a little extra protection, Lily child. Just you make sure you wear these all the time. Don't let nothin' happen to them."

I looked at them, balled up in my hand like little crystallized drops of blood.

"Go on, put them on, or at least put them in your pocket. He keep you safe."

"If you say so, 'Lo." I draped them around my neck again and tucked them under the neck of my shirt, and Angelo smiled.

"That's right, Lily. No need to tell the world your secrets."

The bus station was about a mile and a half away, so we walked. The morning haze had burned off while I was in church. Angelo and I moved in silence, passing the corner where Moon and Hyde had been killed. Now, in the bright sunshine, with the street vendors and their colorful wares, with the boys dancing for tourists' money, with the music and the smell of flowers, it seemed like that terrible event had never happened. But underneath all the gaiety, I smelled the scent of death and it hardened my heart.

"Dirty trash town," I muttered under my breath. "I'll be glad to leave."

Angelo grunted. "But you be back, Miss Lily. We all come back."

We arrived at the bus station with about an hour to spare. I went into the ladies' room and changed from my skirt into a pair of jeans. When I came out, Angelo waved me over and we sat for a while on the hard bench, sipping too-strong tea from white Styrofoam cups. Eventually the loudspeaker announced boarding for my bus and he reached into his pocket.

"I just got this this mornin'!" He handed me a small piece of laminated paper, a Louisiana driver's license for one Lily Williams, aged twenty-two. "Figure you be needin' some sort of identification, couldn't send you out there without. No, no thanks for old Angelo. Moon fix this one up; give me the information and

the picture months ago and asked me to hold on to it till the time was right."

I thanked him anyway, gave him a small hug and walked out of the station to board the bus.

The trip took over thirty hours, too long a time to be cooped up in an enclosed space, even when those hours meant less than seconds to someone like me. I spent a lot of those hours studying my fellow passengers, wondering about their lives. There wasn't much else to do.

As the miles accumulated and the scenery changed, the window on which I lay my head grew cooler. I tried to sleep, but the woman in the seat next to me was restless and anxious and the all-too-familiar emotions were contagious. By the time we arrived at our first scheduled stop, I was jumpy and nervous, but I filed into the restaurant with the rest of them, sat down and ordered coffee and food.

"Can I join you?"

I looked up to see my seatmate smiling at me. She was, I guessed, in her late thirties or earlier forties, sort of pudgy, dressed flamboyantly and with no regard for color matching. But she had a nice smile. And I was stuck with her for the next twenty-some hours, so I smiled and said, "Sure, why not?"

She sat down and settled in on the stool next to me. "This ride seems like it will never end and we've just started. Are you going all the way?"

"Just to New York."

"I'm going all the way up to Rhode Island. My sister lives there. Taking the bus seemed like a good idea, to save on airfare, you know. But now I think I should have saved up a bit more money and taken the plane. You have relatives in New York?"

"Yeah, I hope so."

She gave me a questioning look, but didn't comment, absorbed as she was in her own problems. "My sister's married, three kids, a perfect house, a perfect husband, a perfect life. Me"—and she laughed—"I'm a bit of a gypsy. Never put down roots, never had a relationship with a man that lasted more than a year. They think I'm abnormal and they'll parade all of the available bachelors past me for approval. It makes me want to scream just thinking about it."

"Yeah."

"They don't seem to understand that I'm fine just the way I am. And can't comprehend that I'm perfectly content to live alone for the rest of my life. The me my sister thinks I am is a different person. That me is young and in love and happy. But it's not me." She laughed. "You know what I mean?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, I was in love once." Her face softened and relaxed as she thought; I could feel the tenseness drain out of her as if she were reliving the best day of her life. "But that was a long time ago and he's gone. And I'm happy just the way I am."

"Yeah."

She got up from the stool. "Excuse me a second, I need to go to the ladies' room. I absolutely hate the lavatories on the bus, don't you?"

"Yeah."

While she was gone, I pulled out one of Angelo's little vials. Control, it was, and I dropped a bit in her coffee. I'd had enough of a glimpse of her mind to know what to do.

Back on the bus, I sat next to her again and pushed my arm up against hers. Then I closed my eyes and tried to get into her thoughts.

It was easy. She'd opened up in the restaurant and I knew where to look. Buried deep within was the memory of that one day and the man she loved. I sorted through and found it. Oddly enough, it was a gray day, rainy and cold. But there he was and there she was, sitting on a bench, his sweater wrapped around her against the cold. The wind whipped through her hair; she pushed it out of her eyes and looked up at him and smiled.

"Stay there," I whispered to her. "Stay there with him."

Slowly, I opened my eyes and looked over at her. She was sleeping soundly, her mouth slightly open, but smiling. The tight lines on her face had loosened and she looked young and pretty again.

I was tempted to go back into her mind to see what had gone wrong, but I resisted, leaned my head against the window again and slept.

My dreams were not as good as the one I sent her.

Instead, I was back in my grave, digging to the surface to find, not Philomena waiting, but the dead bodies of Moon and Hyde. The dream played in my mind all night, over and over, endless variations on the theme of loss and sadness. I woke with a start and realized it was morning.

The rest of the ride was boring and uneventful. My seatmate had calmed down and seemed content to just sit and stare dreamily out of the window. We spoke about trivial things, but I said nothing to upset the equilibrium she'd achieved. I was nervous and edgy enough all on my own to make up for it.

The weather had changed drastically the next time we stopped. Gone was the bright sunshine of early fall in the South. Now it was cloudy and chilly and unpleasant. I pulled my bag down from the overhead rack, unpacked my black leather jacket and put it on, huddling into it for the rest of the trip.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



It was close to midnight when the bus finally arrived in Manhattan. The terminal was a snarl of people and escalators. I followed the arrows on the signs, swallowed up and carried along by jostling crowds. Eventually I reached the exit, stepped out of the bus terminal and onto the streets for my first glimpse of the city in which my mother lived. My initial impression was of the vastness of this place; my second was

of its sterility and coldness. It had an odd sort of smell, metal and stone and glass, artificial smells that hung in the air as thickly as the exhaust of the cars. I slung my bags over my shoulder and hugged my arms to myself, glad that I'd unpacked my jacket and put it on at that last truck stop.

I had no idea at all where to go. I walked for a long time, aimlessly, letting the streets carry me. Not the best thing, I supposed, for a young girl to be doing in a strange city. Still, I remembered the strength I felt dealing with Moon's and Hyde's killer. I felt practically invincible. "Bring on your worst," I whispered to the streets. "I can handle anything this town can throw at me."

Finally growing hungry and tired, I stopped some fifteen blocks away from the bus station at a neon sign for what appeared to be an Irish pub. Opening the door and peering inside, I saw that it was cozy, not particularly large, but with a few tables, a long bar and a jukebox. There were enough patrons to indicate it was a fairly reasonable place to be, but not so many as to make it a tourist bar. I walked up to the bar and took a seat toward the far end, stowing my bags at the foot rail.

The bartender came over to me and gave me a sharp look. "ID?"

"Excuse me?"

"Have you an ID about you?" He had a thick Irish accent.

"Oh. Yeah." I leaned over and stretched my arm down to pick up my purse, placed it on my lap and fished out my wallet. My shiny new license was there and I showed it to him. "Will this do?"

"And you know it will." He smiled at me then. "So what'll you be having, Miss Lily Williams?"

I thought for a minute. "A Guinness, I guess. And a club sandwich?"

He reached under the bar to get a glass, and pulled me a draft. "The kitchen won't be open right now," he said, shaking his head as he set the glass on a paper coaster, "but I'll see what I can find for you." He left the bar, returning a few minutes later with a small bowl filled with pretzels and chips. "No real food back there and no one to cook it if there were. But we have these. Can I get you anything else?"

I took a sip of my beer, then shrugged. "Probably not. Unless you can recommend a good hotel nearby?"

"That I can do, and easily, too. Right across the street is the side entrance to one of the better hotels in the neighborhood. A grand place, almost a landmark, it is. And being as it's only a Tuesday, they should have a room or two available. When you get there, tell them Michael sent you."

"Thank you, Michael."

"A pleasure, Miss." He set my tab in front of me. "And welcome to New York." He moved away and tended to some of the other customers.

I glanced at the bill and raised my eyebrows. *Welcome to New York, my ass*, I thought. *It's more like put your hands up in the air and give us everything you've got*. I couldn't believe they could charge this much for a beer. I finished my drink, thankful I hadn't ordered more, then gathered up my bags and left some bills on the bar.

The side door to the hotel was locked, but I walked around to the front entrance. *It is a grand place*, I

thought, taking in the lush exterior and the uniformed doormen, *much too grand for my tastes and budget*. But it was my first night here and all I cared about now was a warm bed.

Paying for the room in cash was a complication I hadn't expected. "Yes, I'm quite sure I don't have a credit card," I told the woman at the reservation desk for what seemed like the hundredth time. "And I don't see what the problem is. I have more than enough cash to cover the cost of the room. I don't mind paying in advance."

"But," she said, shuffling papers around, "what about extra costs? And what if there's damage to the room? I need someplace to charge it. I'll have to get somebody to okay this. And at this hour where will I find someone?" She glared over at me. "Are you sure..."

"Look." I took my wallet out of my purse, slammed it down on the counter and pushed it over to her. "Pick it up and look inside. No charge cards. Not a one. But there's money. Take what you need to cover your ass and let me get some sleep."

"Is there a problem?" A large man walked up and stood next to me at the counter. A very large man. He towered over me and the woman behind the desk.

The woman flinched. "Oh, no, no problem, Mr. Adams, except this young lady wants to pay cash and I..."

"Last time I checked, Mary, cash was still the legal currency." He glanced down at me. "She seems a perfectly nice young lady. Take her money and give her a room. I'll authorize it."

She shrugged, took my money and handed me a room key and a receipt. "If you would stop by the desk tomorrow morning, Miss, we'll give you an itemized list of charges. And we can settle up then on anything extra."

"Excellent. Thank you, Mary." The man smiled at the clerk, picked up my bags and took the key out of my hand. "And now I will show you to your room."

The elevators were ornately decorated and extremely slow, giving me enough time to study this man. He was easily over six feet tall, I judged, and probably tipped the scales at three hundred pounds or more. His skin was pale, his hair jet black; his clothes fit him perfectly. In his impeccable and undoubtedly expensive suit, he exuded a heady combination of power and charm. He certainly wasn't the bellboy. "Thank you," I said to him with a smile, "I really am tired and all I want is a hot bath and a soft bed."

"A sentiment," he said, "with which the owners of the Westwood all agree. We are, after all, in the business of providing just that."

"We?"

"Yes, I am one of the owners."

I laughed. "Well, I was pretty sure you weren't the bellboy. But I appreciate you vouching for me." I gestured at my clothing. "Especially since I don't really look like a perfectly nice young lady."

He snorted. "Clothes aren't important. You have a nice face. And a familiar one, somehow." The elevator stopped and he allowed me to go first. "The room's to your right," he said, catching up with me. "But no, you can't be familiar. This must be your first visit to town."

"Yeah, it is. Does it show?"

"You seem a little lost, yes." He stopped outside a door, unlocked it and flipped on the light. "This is a nice one," he said, setting up a luggage rack and putting my bag on it. "These used to be apartments at one time, you know. So each room is just a bit different."

I looked around. It was a lovely room and I said so. He seemed pleased. I reached into my purse, then hesitated. Does one tip the owner of a hotel? He noticed my confusion and laughed. "Save it, sweetheart, and buy yourself a cup of coffee tomorrow morning. Enjoy your stay, be sure to lock the door after I leave, and if you need anything at all just call down to the desk."

I followed him to the door and clicked the dead bolt after it closed. "I'm here," I said out loud. "I'm really here." I tossed my purse onto the bed, and walked across the room. Pulling the curtains open, I looked out onto the city. It was so big. How would I ever get around?

At least I had a place to start, thanks to Angelo. Griffin Designs, just a cab ride away tomorrow morning. She wouldn't be there, of course, since it would be daylight. But maybe I could trade my likeness of her for an address where she would be.

And then?

All of a sudden I started to shake. "What would I do when I finally met her? Kill her? Find her sleeping in a coffin and drive a stake through her heart? I sat down on the bed and unlaced my boots, pulling them off and tossing them across the room. I'd probably just done the stupidest thing I'd ever done in my whole wretched life. I had no plan; all I had was anger and my thoughts of revenge. Those might have carried me this far, but I doubted I could ride them all the way. And what would I do when I ran out of money?

I got up, unzipped my suitcase and pulled out the silk bag that contained Moon's shells. I shook them out into my hand and looked at them. I hadn't washed them after Moon's murder—it hadn't seemed like something I should do—so some of them still carried the stain of her blood. A wave of anger swept over me. One more victim to add to my list of scores to settle.

I cupped the caracoles tightly as I breathed my request for guidance into them. But I didn't drop them. Instead I stood still for a while, listening to the sounds of the city outside. Somewhere out there was the person I was looking for, and the answers to my questions rested only with her. It had nothing to do with Moon or her shells. I was on my own, at last. Small comfort now that this was what I had wanted for many years.

I put the shells back into their bag, noticing as I did that one of them had cut my palm. It wasn't a deep cut, but it stung and I was bleeding. Absently, I put the hand up to my mouth and licked off the blood.

"Ick," I said, making a face and going into the bathroom to wash my hand and to get a drink of water. "I can't imagine having to make a steady diet of the stuff," I told my reflection as I rinsed my mouth. "But maybe you get used to it after a while."

I smiled into the mirror and examined my mouth. Philomena had always been quite strict about not ingesting blood, as if the slightest taste would cause me to grow fangs. "Nope," I said, running my tongue over very decidedly not-sharp canines, "not tonight."

I stripped off my clothes, turned out the lights and crawled into bed. I lay awake and looked out on the night sky, listening to the sirens racing up and down the streets. I forced myself to not think past this particular moment, to not even consider what would happen to me tomorrow. As my eyes closed and my mind started to wander, I seemed to hear Moon's soft voice. "Sleep, child. Tomorrow will take care of itself."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I woke at dawn, having forgotten to pull the curtains closed the previous night. Once I was awake and remembered where I was, going back to sleep was impossible. So I showered and brushed my teeth, then opened my bag and took out a clean set of clothes. I laughed to myself as I zipped up my jeans; at least I didn't have to worry about what to wear, since all I'd brought was black jeans and T-shirts. Opening my cosmetic bag, I applied a small touch of color to my cheeks and eyelids, added a little mascara to my eyelashes. I pulled out the vials that Angelo had given me one by one and lined them up on the glass shelf above the sink, reading the labels and descriptions again. Courage, attraction, disguise, confusion, command and a few others, plus the control that had worked quite well on the bus. He'd been so happy to provide them and so sure of their powers. The very least I could do was use them. But which would be most appropriate for this auspicious occasion?

I picked up the bottle labeled "Command" and read, "Apply to palms of hands for success in bending others to your will." I shrugged and unscrewed the cap. It smelled earthy, a combination of wet autumn leaves and fresh dirt, with a delicate underlay of rotting meat "Yeah, 'Lo," I said, wrinkling my nose, "people will agree to anything you want just to get the smell out." But I took a second sniff and felt myself strangely drawn to the aroma. I dabbed just a bit on the palms of both my hands, rubbed them together and cupped them around my nose. Like so many perfumes, it had a different scent when applied to skin. "Not too bad," I said to my reflection. "Let's see if this one works as well as the other."

The Griffin Designs offices turned out to be not that far from the hotel. "You might still want to take a cab," the woman behind the desk advised. "It's easy to get turned around unless you know your way." I'd made arrangements to keep the room for at least one more night, and paid in cash again. There'd been no problem this morning, perhaps because of Mr. Adams's endorsement from last night. She'd had to answer the phone in the middle of our transaction, so I glanced around the lobby, then walked over to peer into the hotel restaurant. It was quite elegant, white linen cloths on the tables, flowers in tiny little bud vases and cut-crystal and silver salt and pepper shakers. "If you want breakfast," the woman said as I walked back over to the desk and she handed me my receipt, "don't eat here." She looked around to make sure she wasn't overheard. "Leave this place to the rich tourists. There's a perfectly good diner one block over. And they won't charge you New York rates for eggs and coffee."

"Thanks."

I followed her instructions and found a plain place with more of a homey feel than the hotel's restaurant. Sitting at the counter, I felt more comfortable with the glass and chrome shakers and the cheap green-speckled Formica counter. The waitress, I realized with a pang, reminded me of Moon, so I ordered a cup of coffee, deciding that my normal morning tea might make me homesick. I also ordered

two pieces of toast, more to give myself something to do than to eat.

I poured as much cream into the coffee as would fit in the cup, made a show of putting jelly on the toast. But I wasn't particularly thirsty or hungry. I was nervous. Why on earth did I come here?

"More coffee?" The waitress gave me a tired smile. "That's a pretty ring you have on, honey. It's a lily, right?" I looked down at my hand and nodded, suppressing the wave of sadness and anger I felt inside.

"You get that around here somewhere?"

"No, it was a gift. From someone back home."

"That's nice. Must've been from a young man, I figure, seeing as how you're such a pretty young thing. He come with you?"

"No, he's dead."

"Oh, Lord, and didn't I just put my foot into it? I'm sorry, honey, you're awful young to be carrying such a sorrow."

"It's okay," I said, pulling a bill out of my pocket and putting it on the counter. "I'm not all that young. And I'm glad you mentioned it, actually, since I was just wondering what the hell I was doing here. Now I know—I'm going to meet my mother. And she'll balance the account."

I walked out onto the street and hailed a cab for Griffin Designs.

"I'd like to see Ms. Griffin." The receptionist looked up at me with no recognition and no enthusiasm.

"Ms. Griffin?" She held up a finger while she picked up the ringing phone. "Griffin Designs, may I help you?" She paused for a second—"Just one moment, please"—pushed a button on the console and hung up the phone, turning to me again. "Sorry," she said, "the phones are hell right before a show. Who did you say you wanted to see?" The phone rang and she sighed. "See? They're hell."

I waited. "I'd like to talk to the owner," I said when she looked back at me again.

"Oh, I see. She's not here right now. Did you want to wait for her?"

"Will she be in?"

She shrugged. "As far as I know she will be." The phone rang again and she answered it.

I shook my head when she'd finished. "Man," I said with a smile, "I'd hate this job."

She shrugged. "It's not so bad. I've had worse. Anyway, I guess she'll be in. At least no one's told me differently. Do you have an appointment?"

"Well, no, but I'm sure she'll see me. We're, um, old friends."

She nodded, looking me up and down. "Okay, then, have a seat. But I've got to warn you, she hardly

ever hires anyone off the street. And you're just a little bit too short."

"Too short?"

The phone rang and she stopped again to answer it. I really would hate to have her job. You never even got to finish a sentence.

It didn't seem to faze her, though. She switched from phone to conversation without so much as a blink. "Yeah, short for a model. Otherwise, you've got the build for it."

"Scrawny, you mean?"

She laughed. "Here we prefer the word sleek. Or lithesome. Or whatever the hell the fashion industry is pushing down our throats this week."

"I'm not looking for a job."

"Okay, whatever. Suit yourself. I just happen to know for a fact that *she* doesn't have old friends. Or any friends."

I smiled. "Now, that's not much of a surprise at all."

"You do look sort of familiar, though."

"I'd guess I would. I'm her..."

"Shhh." The receptionist seemed to spring to attention. As if on cue, the elevator doors opened behind me. I didn't turn around at first. "Morning, Lucy." The voice was deeper and more harsh than I'd expected, clipped and quick. "And what do we have here?"

"She wants to see you. But she doesn't have an appointment." The phone rang again, and Lucy seemed happy to return to it. I had the feeling the owner made her nervous. *Not surprising*, I thought, *considering what the owner is*.

"Another one?" She sounded annoyed. "Well, turn around, girly, and let me look at you."

I turned and came face-to-face with a total stranger, who obviously didn't think I was one.

She beamed and enveloped me in a hug. "Oh, it's so good to see you. And much earlier than you normally get about. What's happening? How've you and that handsome hubby of yours been getting along?" She stepped back and took a long look at me. "Damn it, Deirdre, every time I see you, you look worse than before. What the hell have you been doing to yourself? And where did you get those god-awful clothes? And that horrible haircut?"

I ran my hand through my hair. "Excuse me?"

"Forget it." She linked her arm in mine. "Send some coffee back, Lucy. And some Danish, I think." She moved me through the inner door and walked me down the hallway. "I do hope you have time for a good gossip, Deirdre. It's been so long."

We reached an office at the very end of the hall. She entered first and then beckoned me on. "Come in,

come in. No need to be formal. Something must be going on with you or you wouldn't be here. You'd be cozied up in that little cabin with that detective. So sit down and tell me all about it."

I sat as ordered; she was such an imposing woman.

"Well?"

"Who are you?" I asked.

She laughed. "Funny, very funny."

"I'm not joking. Who are you?"

She stopped for a second, gave me a critical look, blinked once and moved closer to me. "Jesus." She shook her head; her heavy earrings made a clacking sound. "You aren't Deirdre, are you?"

"No, I'm not her. I'm Lily Williams, her daughter."

"Daughter? You're her daughter?" She took me by the shoulders and looked into my eyes. "There's no question about the resemblance, although now that I look closer, I see a difference. It's your eyes, I think." She cocked her head to one side. "They're not as deep. Deirdre has always had eyes you could fall into."

I disengaged myself from her hands. "I don't want to be rude, but who are you?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. Betsy McCain." She reached out to shake my hand, obviously an instinctual reaction, since we'd already had more than enough body contact for politeness' sake. "I bought Griffin Designs from your mother a couple of years ago. She didn't tell you?"

"Ms. McCain, I have never spoken with my mother; I haven't met her. I didn't even know where to find her until a few days ago."

There was a knock on the door, and Lucy came in with a plate of pastries and some coffee, setting it on the large desk. "Thanks, Luce. And hold my calls, will you?" Lucy nodded and left, closing the door behind her.

Betsy walked around to the desk. "She must have had you when she was very young, I suppose." She poured herself a cup and motioned me to come over.

"Here, fix it yourself," she said, shoving a cup into my hands. "I'm not very domestic."

"Not all that young." I poured half a cup and topped it off with creamer. "Far as I can tell, she was twenty-eight at the time."

"And you're what? Nineteen? Twenty?"

"Twenty-two, actually," I said, remembering the age printed on the ID Angelo had given me.

"So that makes Deirdre..."

"Much older than she seems. Yeah."

Betsy put her head back and laughed. "I knew it She's had cosmetic surgery. She'd never admit it, but I had my suspicions. No one looks that good for so long. And so when you were born she put you up for adoption?"

"Close enough. Ms. McCain, what can you tell me about my mother?"

"Betsy, call me Betsy. I get enough of the Ms. stuff around here to make me crazy. I haven't really known your mother all that long, but I'll tell you what little I do know."

She knew plenty, enough to fill about another two hours of conversation. Lucy had been right, this woman had no friends. She wouldn't have latched on to me quite so tightly if she had. And she wouldn't have pursued the one friend she used to have, my mother, with as much determination.

The picture she painted for me was quite clear. Deirdre Griffin was beautiful, talented and rich, leading an exotic and full life, including a whirlwind courtship and marriage to a handsome man who adored her. In short, she possessed everything while I had nothing.

And then there was the question of the mysterious deaths, one of which happened in the private apartments located off this very office. They were, Betsy maintained, just unfortunate coincidences in which my mother had accidentally become involved. "It was almost as if death followed her around," Betsy said, a sad, understanding look on her face. "She's had her share of hard luck, no doubt about it."

I tried not to laugh out loud. I wanted to jump up from my seat and scream, *Of course death followed her around, you stupid woman. She's a fucking vampire*. I kept my thoughts to myself. This was fascinating stuff.

"But," Betsy continued, "she rose above all of it. And now she's hopefully enjoying the sort of life she deserves. I can only think of one thing that could help complete that life. Meeting you."

I smiled my sweetest smile while seething inside. *I'll help complete her life, you bet your ass I will.* "Thanks, Betsy. So you'll help me find her?"

"Of course I will. What are friends for? Besides, I happen to know exactly where she is. It's not much of a secret."

She moved to her desk again and opened up a file on her computer. "Here we go," she said after pressing a few keys. "I'll print it out for you."

She went over to the printer and pulled off the sheet of paper. "It's this awful little one-horse town in Maine. God only knows what they were thinking. But it shouldn't be too hard to find."

I took the paper from her, folded it up and put it into my purse.

"Now," she said, looking at her watch. "What do you want to do for the rest of the day? I propose a shopping trip and a nice meal."

"I guess so."

"You only guess so?" She put her hand under my chin and lifted my head up. "What kind of twenty-two-year-old girl doesn't jump at the chance to go shopping?"

"A twenty-two-year-old girl who has no money?"

"Lily, sweetheart, you are the only child of Deirdre Griffin. You certainly aren't poor. I'll foot the bill and take it out of my payments for the business at a later date. She won't miss it one bit; she's good for it."

I thought back to all the lean years and all the hardships my life had brought upon my caretakers; the decades of just scraping by, all that moving, all those extra expenses, the way Moon would get a wounded look in her eyes just thinking about paying monthly bills. I gave a hard little laugh. "She'd better be. I'm about to develop expensive tastes."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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Betsy McCain was true to her word. We splurged that day and she returned me to the Westwood Hotel a totally different person. She'd even rushed me into one of the fanciest salons in the city for a total makeover including hair extensions, a three-hour ordeal that cost twice as much as I'd brought with me. As a result, the woman who stared back at me from the mirror in my hotel room had long hair and wasn't quite me. I looked like the few photos of my mother that Betsy had been able to show me. It was frightening, almost as if I had come to New York to find her, only to end up being her.

But, I thought, as I struggled with the back zipper of the long black sheath dress Betsy had picked for me to wear at dinner, Deirdre Griffin had enjoyed life longer than any creature had a right to. It was my turn now. I slid on a pair of high-heeled sandals, sorted through the bags of clothes and found the sheer embroidered shawl we'd gotten to go with the dress. I'd never felt so elegant. And the fact that my mother would pay for it all made the emotion much sweeter. "This is just the first installment, my dear mother. There will be many more to come."

I wrapped the red crystal bead necklace around my wrist a couple of times and wore it as a bracelet. Betsy had been appalled that I was wearing such a "tacky" piece, and made me promise not to ruin the neckline of the designer dress with it. But I wanted it with me; it served as a reminder of why I was here. Revenge.

I stopped in the bathroom before going to the lobby to meet Betsy, checked my makeup and hair one last time and flipped off the light. Turning to go, I stopped and turned back, deciding to try another of Angelo's medicines. Not bothering to read the labels this time, I smelled each of them and picked out the one that was most like perfume. It gave off a sweet but musky smell, seeming to envelop me in glamour and mystery. When I looked into the mirror one last time, I felt that I was my mother. I smiled, only mildly disappointed that my teeth were still even and straight.

Betsy took me to a restaurant called The Imperial. It was, she said, one of my mother's favorite places. "Not her very favorite, though; she far preferred The Ballroom," she explained in the cab. "But that wasn't much more than a pickup joint. Your mother inherited it from the former owner, Max Hunter, but sold it to a woman she knew. It's now a fetish bar, Dangerous Crosses or something. Lots of chains and whips and weird folks all dressed up in leather and plastic with nothing much better to do than torture each

other in public." Betsy shook her head. "I like sex as much or better than the next person, but I prefer to torture my friends in different ways." She laughed and nudged me. "As you well know, Deirdre."

"What?"

"Damn it. I meant Lily. But you are so much like her. It must be the clothes. Or maybe the perfume you're wearing. What is it, anyway?"

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "I just threw some on as I was walking out of the room. A friend of mine in New Orleans gave it to me."

"New Orleans is a wonderful city."

"To visit, maybe. But to live there? New Orleans is a city of death."

She gave me a hard glance. "It's not just your looks, you know. You think like your mother."

I shrugged and turned my head to look out the cab window. We were halfway through dinner when her cell phone rang. Betsy scowled and swore and dug into her purse, flipping open the phone in annoyance. It had been a festive meal up until then, unlike any other meal I'd ever eaten. I knew that other cities I had lived in had similar restaurants, but I had never been privileged enough to dine at them. While Betsy talked to her caller, I wondered briefly what Moon would have thought about all of this, then squelched the thought. I knew well enough what she'd think, so well I could almost hear her. "Damned rich folks spending hundreds of good dollars on food that won't do them no good and other folks are starving on the streets right in front of them."

"It's just not right." I whispered the thought for her.

Betsy's voice grew louder. "All of them? All of them? How can that be?"

She paused a second. "So I've got a show coming up in two days and you're telling me that every stinking model is sick? How can that be?"

She listened for a minute more and rolled her eyes. "Stupid little bitches. Okay, fine. I'll be right there."

Clicking off the phone, she shoved it back into her purse. "I'm sorry, Lily, but I've got to get back to the office. Turns out that every model at the Aspen Agency is suffering from food poisoning. Bad tuna or something. What a goddamned disaster." She stood up. "Anyway, you stay and finish the meal. I'll sign for the bill now, but I'll let them know that as long as you stay, you can run a tab. Will you be okay? Do you have cab fare to get back to the hotel?"

I nodded. "I'll be fine, Betsy."

She shook her head again. "I can't believe this, I really can't."

"Good luck," I called to her as she hurried out of the restaurant.

I picked at the food that remained on my plate, then pushed it aside. The waiter came over to remove it, refilling my wineglass before he did so. "Shall I bring the dessert cart over?"

"No, thanks. Can you set up a tab for me at the bar? My friend said she'd cover it."

"Already taken care of, Miss. You can go over any time you'd like. And enjoy the rest of the evening."

"Thanks." I stood up, stretched and smoothed the tight dress over my hips, wishing I had worn my jeans. Then again, I thought, as I caught the admiring gaze of a few of the men in the room, no one ever looked at me that way while I was wearing jeans.

As I sauntered to the bar, I felt their eyes follow me. Is this the way my mother acquired her victims? Did she lure them with sex and beauty? I ran my tongue over my teeth, wondering how it would feel to be her, to choose anyone I wanted, to drain them of their lifeblood and leave them for dead. Who would I pick for the night?

I found myself a small table in a shadowy corner of the bar area, sat with my back to the wall to better observe the people. The waiter came over and I ordered more of the red wine we'd been drinking at dinner. He disappeared for a second, then returned with a full glass. "This is all taken care of, Miss," he said as he set it in front of me.

"Thanks." After he left, I continued the game of choosing a victim for the night. So many people, so much blood to be had.

No, not that one, I thought, avoiding the stare of a man at the end of the bar, *he's too obviously influential. He'd be missed and that would not be good for me*. But he was handsome, older than me, physically at least. I'd have said he was distinguished, but that conjured up images of gray-haired, cigar-smoking old gentlemen in waistcoats. He certainly wasn't one of those. And there'd been something about his eyes. I glanced back to the end of the bar and he was gone.

Well, I thought, we didn't want him anyway. Pick someone else.

The trick was, I supposed, to find someone healthy and robust, but not too beautiful. How would I do it? Call them over to my table and share a drink or two with them? "Hi," I would say, "my name is Deirdre and you look like you need a friend. Join me?" I would turn the full force of my power on them and they wouldn't refuse. And we would talk and laugh and become friendly. Then I would take them home and drain them dry.

I shook my head. "This is really lame, Lily," I said to myself. "And it isn't getting you anywhere." I drank my glass of wine in one gulp and got up from the table, bending over to pick up my purse and my shawl from the other chair.

"Leaving so soon, Miss Williams?"

I jumped, I hadn't heard anyone come up on me. Turning around, I came face-to-face again with my benefactor from the Westwood Hotel. "Hi. It's Mr. Adams, isn't it?"

He smiled. "Yes, how nice of you to remember. And don't you look lovely, all dressed up? Surely you can stay for a little while longer and brighten up an old man's evening."

I blushed. "Well, I guess I could stay. I was just leaving because I was bored."

"We can't have that, now, can we? Come join me at my table. And call me Claude, there's no need to be formal." He took the shawl from my hand, wrapped it around my shoulders and tucked my hand into his arm. "That's a lovely perfume, by the way. Where did you get it?"

"A friend of mine in New Orleans gave it to me."

"Ah. And what does this friend of yours in New Orleans do for a living?"

"Why, he's..." I hesitated. What did Angelo do? "He's a bokor."

"Indeed. I could have guessed that And based on the results, a fairly good one. So, did he tell you what this particular scent could do?"

I blushed again. "There's a label, but to be honest, I didn't read it. I picked this one because I thought it smelled different."

"Different. Yes. You have a discerning nose. I suspect you have good instincts. Still, you should give your friend a little advice my mother once gave me."

"And what's that?"

He put his head back and laughed. "'Voodoo don't pay the bills.' So I took her advice, came to this city and made my fortune. Now come with me, my dear. There's someone at my table who wishes to meet you."

We crossed the room, my hand still tucked into his arm. I felt the eyes of most of the people there follow us; I suppose we looked a fascinating couple. Claude was so very large, so very powerful, and I was so small next to him. And yet, I was not without power. Gone was the girl from New Orleans; she was a woman now, and one who could choose to be anyone she wished. And tonight I chose to be Deirdre Griffin.

The man who sat at the table did not glance up at our approach. He was, I judged, in his mid-forties, with dark hair only just faintly salted with gray. A full glass of red wine sat in front of him, untouched and unnoticed. Except for the fact that he was tracing circles on the surface of the table with his forefinger, I'd have taken him for a statue, a wax figure: elegant and cleverly designed, but completely without life. My companion touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Victor"—it seemed to me Claude said the name with more deference than affection—"this is the lovely Lily Williams, a fair flower traveled here from my former hometown. Miss Williams, this is Victor Lange, a very old and dear friend."

Victor Lange's gaze lifted from the table where he had been watching the tracing of his finger. He was the man I had seen at the end of the bar. But his eyes were empty now, with no spark of life or thought, barely focusing on my face. Then they widened ever so slightly, studying me in great detail. I remembered something Betsy had said in the cab on the drive here—about my mother's eyes and how one could fall into them. Victor had eyes like that. When he smiled at me, I took in a small gasp of air. And I knew what he was.

He stood up gracefully and pulled out the chair next to him. "Sit here, Miss Lily Williams, and let us get better acquainted. My dear friend Mr. Adams will go to the bar and get us some of the good wine, won't he? None of this slop they brought me earlier." Victor picked up the untouched glass and handed it to him. Their eyes met, and for a moment or two there was silence.

Claude cleared his throat, looking nervous for the first time since I'd met him. He seemed to shrink in on

himself, and gave a small nod. "Well, I suppose I could. I wouldn't be away for too long."

Victor waved his hand. "Stay away as long as you need to, friend." Sarcasm dripped heavily from that last word. "And Miss"—he looked at me and winked—"ah, Williams and I will be here when you get back."

"I don't know," Claude hesitated. "I'm not supposed to..."

"Go."

It was just one word, one very little word, but uttered with such command that Claude turned instantly and walked away.

"Sit," Victor said to me, in much the same tone of voice, and I sat. "Now"—he seated himself next to me—"now we can talk for a little while without supervision. They keep me under a very tight watch, did you know? They think I'm not right."

"Not right?"

"Not right as in damaged in the head. And I suppose it is true. I have times when I am not myself. But just the sight of you brings me back." He reached over and touched my hand. "Deirdre."

I jumped, almost as much from the coldness of his skin as from the name. He didn't seem to notice. "Why are you here, Deirdre? Under a different name? Are you in trouble?"

I wanted to laugh out loud. He thought I was my mother. What an amazing bit of luck. And what couldn't I learn from this man.

I played along. "Yes, Victor, I'm in trouble."

He smiled again, not a pleasant smile. "And you have come to me for help. How ironic. Where is Mitch?"

"Mitch is not here."

"Ah, I see. I never liked him much anyway. For what it's worth, I always thought you were better off with Max." His eyes glazed over a bit, losing some of the life and depth they'd had. "Max," he said in a whisper, "then Ron. So many others. All dead. You have caused me much grief, Deirdre. But, for Max's sake and the love he bore you, I will help you. Stay until Claude leaves again." His eyes spotted the large form crossing the bar with a bottle and glasses. "We will go someplace private and you can tell me your story."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I was in over my head, I knew. Way over my head. Although Victor might not have had all his faculties, he certainly had enough to be a real threat to me. If I'd been smart, I'd have turned and run back to New

Orleans. But I'd become obsessed with learning as much about my mother as possible, and Victor Lange certainly had more information than Betsy McCain. Even if he'd been the devil himself, I'd still have gone with him.

A plan began to form in my mind. It was vague and shadowy, an outline only, with none of the substance filled in, but it was a plan. If I could convince her friends that I was her, then I could take her life away from her. And leave her with nothing, the way she'd left me.

Claude returned with the bottle of wine and showed it to Victor. "Perfect," he exclaimed. "You'll like this, my dear. It's the best wine the cellar of The Imperial has to offer." He held the bottle out to me so that I could read the label. As Lily, I knew only that it wasn't Mad Dog 20/20. As Deirdre, though, I had to concur with Victor's pronouncement and nodded. "Very nice indeed. Thank you, Claude."

He poured three glasses and handed one to Victor, one to me, and picked up his own. "To friends, old and new," he said, but the power of his voice was dimmed. Claude drank, giving Victor and me a few uneasy glances, noticing that, in his very short absence, the dynamics of our threesome had switched. He was now the outsider and the visitor. I smiled at him and sipped at my wine.

He took my smile as encouragement. "So, Lily, tell us about New Orleans. It's been some time since I've been there."

I shrugged. "It's New Orleans. And probably hasn't changed one single bit since you've left. It's still sinking into the swamp, it's still dirty and it still stinks of death."

Claude laughed. "Ah, I know it well. Home sweet home. I miss it still."

Victor had gone silent. His glass was empty and he was back to tracing on the tabletop again. "Victor?" I placed a hand on top of his and he brushed it away.

Claude leaned over and whispered to me. "Don't worry about it, Lily, he does this sometimes. He is, well, different. You mustn't mind him."

At this statement, Victor's mouth seemed to stiffen into a grimace, and I caught a glimmer of anger in his eyes as they quickly darted to me, then back to the table, but he said nothing.

Claude didn't seem to realize that Victor was not quite as unaware as he seemed. His actions were like taunting a tiger at the zoo. But in this case, the bars were made of paper and only the tiger knew. If Victor ever gained full control of his mind and situation, I had a feeling that Claude would be quite dead in a matter of seconds. I should have been frightened. Instead I felt a rush of excitement. And with that rush, I also felt Victor's knee very purposely brush up against mine. He was not as out of it as they all thought. Whoever they were.

Claude kept talking about his boyhood days and nights in New Orleans; I made an effort to listen and respond appropriately. We talked of Mardi Gras and blues and the bars of the Quarter. The bottle of wine was emptied, and Victor woke from his trance enough to ask Claude to get another.

When he had gone, Victor looked up at me. "Ten minutes after I leave, excuse yourself for the ladies' room. Next to that door is a door marked 'Employees Only.' " I craned my head a bit to see where it was. "No." He touched my hand and I looked back at him. "You can't see it from here, but it is there." He pressed something into my hand, a key. "This will open it. Take the stairs to the very bottom and follow the hall to the very end. This key will open that door also. I will wait for you there. You'll

recognize the place when you get there." I nodded.

"I needn't tell you that you must be unobserved."

"No, you needn't tell me. But I'll be there."

"Good." He smiled at me one more time, gave my knee a quick squeeze and then turned back to his study of the tabletop just as Claude came back. More wine?" asked Claude.

He started to pour, but Victor looked at him and shook his head slowly. "Not for me, Claude. I think I shall retire now."

He stood up, and Claude motioned to the bartender. I watched as Victor crossed the room; when he reached the doorway, another man approached him and walked him out. A very tight watch.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Victor?" Claude's nervousness fell from him as soon as Victor was out of sight. He was once again self-assured and powerful. "He lost some very dear friends a few years ago, in a nasty series of even nastier murders. It was as if his mind became unhinged. I didn't know him then. But I understand he was dynamite. Ran things with an iron fist and forget the velvet glove." He laughed and filled my wineglass. "A real tiger. He owns this place, did you know that?"

"No, I didn't. Still, it's sad."

"Mmm. So how do you like the wine?"

I held my glass up and admired it in the light. "It's good. I'd hate to have to tell you the brand of the last wine I drank. But this stuff, it makes that other seem like swill." I gave a little giggle. "Okay, it really was swill. But then as my friend Hyde would say, 'Drunk is drunk no matter how much you spend.' " I checked the clock over the door. Time to go. "Speaking of which, I really must make a visit to the little girls' room. Where is it?"

He pointed it out to me and I collected my purse, holding it to cover the key in my hand. "Be back in a bit," I said, and walked off, deliberately staggering just a little.

I did stop in the ladies' room first, to check on my appearance. I ran a hand through my hair, and marveled again at how amazing it was that they could do such a thing. Then I opened my purse and pulled out the little vial of scent. This time I did read the label. "Disguise," it said. "Wear this to confuse the eyes of others. Will mold your appearance to your thoughts."

I didn't really believe in it. But I dabbed some more onto my neck and my wrists, just in case. My heart was pounding; I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, attempting to calm myself. "I am Deirdre Griffin," I whispered, opening my eyes and focusing on my reflection. "I am Deirdre Griffin."

Then I exhaled the breath and stepped outside. The key fit the lock and I went in quickly, shutting the door behind me quietly. It clicked solidly, regardless of my care, and I turned the knob, suspecting and then realizing that it was locked from this side also. With no way to open it again.

"Great" My voice echoed loud in the landing. I looked down at the staircase. It seemed to go on forever. I sighed, took off my shoes, hooked the straps over my fingers and started down. No sounds filtered in

from the restaurant, and the only light came from the fixture at the exit. Step after step, I plunged deeper into darkness and silence. After two full flights, my legs started to shake. After three, though, I could see what seemed to be the end of the stairs. *Only one more flight now*, I told myself. When I reached the bottom, I leaned up against one of the walls; it was cold and damp. There were no lights in this hallway, just the slight glow from above and the tiny crack of light under the door at the corridor's end.

It occurred to me as I started down the hall that this was perhaps one of the stupidest things I'd ever done—masquerading as a woman I'd never known to meet in secret with a vampire who, by his own admission, was not quite himself.

"No," I whispered to myself, "stupid doesn't even come close to describing this."

But I had no choice now. There was no way out of this place, except with Victor's help. And so I would continue the game. Still, when I inserted the key into the lock, I saw that my hands were shaking.

I paused, took a deep breath and opened the door.

Victor was sitting calmly in what appeared to be a waiting room. It was a room one would expect to find in an institution or a hospital; the difference between these surroundings and the lush interiors of The Imperial was shocking. But Victor seemed quite unaware of where he was; he still exuded elegance and power. Smiling, he rose and gave me a small bow. "Right on time, Deirdre." He crossed the room, took my hand and kissed it. "You were always so socially responsible, so dependable. True to your word. I do apologize for the surroundings, but this is my home now. Or rather, the next room is my home." He beckoned to me and opened a door. "We can be a bit more comfortable in here, at least."

I preceded him; this room was even more bizarre than the first, containing a few chairs and two large glass tanks. One of these tanks was completely empty, the other was filled with antique furniture: two large wing chairs upholstered in burgundy velvet, a mahogany end table between the chairs, a large armoire and a single bed with mahogany posts. "They so very graciously allow me something a little less institutional in my chamber. I'd be more thankful, except that this entire organization only exists because of me. The blood-sucking Cadre should be thanking me."

I nodded, suppressing a shiver. What was this place?

"The Cadre's holding pens, of course. As you should remember." He gave me a shrewd look and I smiled knowingly. He had picked that thought right out of my mind. I would need to be much more careful.

"Of course I remember, Victor. How could I forget?"

"How indeed. So let us sit and be comfortable."

I walked into the glass tank and chose one of the burgundy chairs. He followed closely behind me and opened the armoire, pulling out a bottle of wine and two glasses. "They even allow me a few vices now and then. What harm can it do? My dear concerned friends in the Cadre do not know that I can get out, you see." He laughed and sat in the chair next to me. "I won't tell them how I do it, of course, even if they find out. I must keep a few secrets for myself. And I trust you will keep this one as well."

"Of course, Victor."

"So"—he handed me a glass of wine—"what is happening, Deirdre? What were you doing in New

Orleans? I thought you and Mitch had settled into that little love nest in Maine. And how do you come to be without him? The man who swore to protect you for all eternity let you out alone?"

I laughed, hoping it didn't sound too nervous.

"There are all sorts of jails, Victor." This, at least, I could talk about with authority. "Maybe I got tired of being held and protected."

"Understandable." He drank his wine and studied me. "And so you came here to me. Why?"

I didn't know how to answer him; this was not going well. "I don't know. Maybe I should just leave." I got up from my chair and started for the door, but he was quicker than I and blocked the exit.

Putting his hands on my shoulders, Victor looked down at me. "No need to explain, Deirdre, my love. You came to me because you couldn't stay away for too long. We have always been such good friends." He said the words caressingly, lovingly. "Yes, such good friends, you and I. For what it is worth, I have missed you, too."

Before I knew he had even moved, he'd wrapped his arms around me and was kissing me. Softly at first, then harder and more demanding. I wanted to push him away, but it would blow my cover. So I relaxed and kissed him back, realizing halfway through that it was no longer an act. I liked having him kiss me. I liked the way he held me, I liked the way he smelled, the way his solid body seemed to melt into mine.

He broke off the kiss and looked down into my eyes. I couldn't even begin to understand what lay behind his glance. I blushed and tried to look away. "Ah," he said, "I see it now."

"What do you see, Victor?"

"I see the girl you are."

Victor had changed and I was afraid. But caught in his gaze, I couldn't escape; all I could do was continue the bluff. "Deirdre?" he asked, his voice almost a whisper.

"Yeah?"

He didn't answer, but I felt his body tense. He picked me up and carried me a few steps, dumping me unceremoniously onto the bed. I reached my arms up to pull him down to me. "I've missed you so, Victor."

He smiled down at me, the tips of his canines obvious. "Have you really, Deirdre?" Then he caught me by the wrists, pulled me to my feet and put his hands on the sides of my face. I could smell the wine on his breath, caught the scent of blood.

"Who the hell are you?" His eyes were wild with rage. "Because you sure as hell are not Deirdre Griffin. You can't even know her, or you would know that she's no friend of mine, having been responsible for the deaths of those I loved."

I gave a little whimper and tried to pull away from him. "Oh, no, you are not leaving. I will give you five minutes to explain what sort of game you are playing and why. And no lies. It has been a while since I've killed, but I assure you I still know how."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



"I'm her daughter." My voice sounded very small and very scared.

"Deirdre's daughter?"

I nodded, biting my lower lip. "Yeah. I came to the city to find her."

"Why?"

I looked away, and he tightened his grip on me. "No lies, girl. Why are you looking for your mother? And why should I care?"

I looked him in the eye. "She left me for dead. Abandoned me at birth, buried me and walked away. Over one hundred and fifty years ago and I still remember the moment I woke, fully aware, in my coffin; I still remember the fear and the stench of death; I can still taste the dirt of the grave in my mouth."

"Ah." He dropped his hands and stepped away from the door. "That seems reason enough, I suppose. And your name really is Lily Williams?"

I shrugged. "Close enough." And since it looked like he would not kill me, I laughed. "At least it's probably as close as Victor Lange is to your real name. Can I have another glass of wine, please?" I turned my back on him and walked over to the table, refilling both glasses, then curling back up into the chair.

I held out his glass to him. "Victor, I have a proposition for you."

He looked at me, unbelieving at first. Then his mouth twisted into a smile and he started to laugh, long and hard. When he could speak again, he shook his head.

"Oh, you really are her daughter, I'll grant you that. Other than the obvious resemblance, you have her courage. Her strength of purpose. I admire your spirit as I always admired hers." He took the glass from my hand.

"Sounds patronizing to me."

"Of course it does. You are talking to a creature, my dear, who would be quite content to rip you apart limb from limb and lick up the remains. Allow him to patronize you. Besides, I meant it as a compliment. You could do worse than to take after Deirdre Griffin. She is a formidable woman."

"I thought you didn't like her."

He sat in his chair and set his glass down. "I can dislike her and yet still admire her finer qualities. You may have been born one hundred and fifty years ago, but you are so very young. What sort of upbringing did you have?"

"A sheltered one."

"No doubt. You are an interesting creature, Lily Williams. Not a full vampire and not a full human. But we have little time for physiological discussions." He looked at his watch. "In a little over two hours my keepers will be here to check on me, to secure me for the day. And you must be gone before they arrive. What sort of proposition did you have in mind?"

I took a deep breath and started in. "Victor, you said earlier that Deirdre has caused you a lot of grief, and you just now said she is not your friend. And I certainly have no reason in the world to love her. Will you help me get revenge?"

"What do you want to do? I am reluctant to agree to her death."

"I don't want her dead." The lie dropped convincingly from my mouth. "I just want to strip her of everything she has. And leave her with nothing, the way the bitch left me."

"And how do you hope to accomplish that?"

I sighed. "I don't know."

"You don't have a plan?"

"Well, no, not really."

Victor smiled, picked up his wineglass again and clinked it against mine. "I think we can do better than that, Lily. Children these days have no idea how to do anything at all. So let us make some plans."

Before I left he handed me another key. "This one will let you ride the elevator. You can't get back through the stairway door."

"Yeah, I know."

"And still you came? Not knowing what you would find here? You are amazing."

"No, Victor, I'm a realist. Once the door shut, what other choice did I have?"

"True enough. Now, when you are going back on the elevator, do not stop on any of the other floors. Do not. I cannot guarantee your safety. And there are others who might recognize you as your mother, and these have even less reason to wish her well. Plus, the warmth of your body calls to us. You are only alive now because I find the attraction of your person greater than your blood."

I shivered slightly.

"You do well to be afraid. But come back to me tomorrow during the daylight hours; we will have more of a chance to talk uninterrupted and you will have less of a chance to be discovered."

That night I called Angelo. "Miss Lily, I so pleased to hear your voice again. You been okay in that city?"

"Been doing great, Angelo. More than great, actually."

"You find your mother?"

"I'm going to fly to Maine soon, 'Lo. That's where she is. Now, listen. In a day or two, you'll get an envelope in the mail. It's filled with a list of things I need you to get for me before I return. Along with plans for something you'll have to have built for me. Can you handle it?"

"Depends, Lily child, on who got the money."

"Don't worry about the money, 'Lo. By the time you get the plans, there'll be an account for you to use for all of this. All the information you need will be with the rest of the stuff. It should be more than enough to take care of what I need and repay you for your trouble."

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"Angelo? Are you still there?"

"I hear you. Just it been so long since I hear the words 'don't worry about the money.' And I never expected to have them fall out of your mouth."

I laughed. "Yeah, me neither. It's nice, isn't it? It turns out my mother is very wealthy and has some very helpful acquaintances. But that's not important right now. I'll call you again later on in the week to make sure you can get everything ready."

"You be careful now, Miss Lily. No money in the world can replace you."

"Thanks, 'Lo. I'll be okay."

I spent the next two weeks under the rather erratic tutelage of Victor Lange. He taught me many things about my mother and her lover, many things about the nature of vampires. "We are most susceptible during daytime sleep," he explained early on, "and there are ways in which our minds may be manipulated then. Dreams, especially, are powerful weapons. I have paved the way for you already, by invading Greer's dreams, an easy enough trick if you know how to do it. Especially easy for me, since I've done it to him before. Come, I will teach you."

He took my hands and pressed them up against his temples, then put his hands on mine. "Here," he said, "relax a bit. Open your mind and I will show you his."

It was like the experience I'd had with the woman on the bus, but much more intense. And Victor knew exactly where to go. He had indeed already planted the dream, my dream, the one of my grave and death and the hatred of one woman. "Pour yourself into him, Lily," Victor whispered. "Take all your hate and all your anger and make him feel it."

We both felt his panic, his fear. When he woke the contact was broken, but Victor smiled. "Well done, Lily. You are a natural."

I'd brought my entire stock of Angelo's medicines with me one day and we tested them on Victor. Some turned out to be totally useless, but others worked well enough to be added to my arsenal. We already knew that the disguise potion worked fairly well, and the scent-killing one was determined a success when a blindfolded Victor couldn't detect me. And I'd done some of my own testing, sneaking a few drops of the control liquid into his wine. He'd sipped and smiled. "But I have already agreed to help you, Lily. Surely this kind of coercion is unnecessary."

Victor thought, and I agreed, that the best route to my mother was through Mitchell Greer. He laughed about this. "Love is one of the most dangerous emotions a vampire can permit herself. It gives your enemies power over you. And no matter what you may say of her, your mother loves. Not wisely, perhaps, but with her whole being. It is, to be honest, an emotion that has mostly evaded me. With one or two exceptions." Victor's eyes clouded over, as they often did when he would allow himself to think of the past.

His pain in this became my pain. I had lost so many people I had loved, and somehow the blame for them all ended up transferred to my mother.

At the end of the two weeks, I knew much of her life and hated her more than I ever had. Victor admitted that I was probably as well prepared as I would ever be. He'd managed to work a little financial magic as well, by arranging to have all of my mother's accounts transferred to accounts that I could access. "In some cases," he said, "this would have been impossible. But your mother has never been cautious with her money; it was never an obsession with her. Max had been involved in so many of her financial deals, and therefore the Cadre had full access as well. And I am not without friends outside these hallowed halls; I was able to call in a few old debts. As a result, you are now an extremely rich young lady and your mother is totally destitute. For some, this would be revenge enough." He cocked an eyebrow at me. It was my final test.

"For some, yeah. But if money doesn't matter to her, I haven't accomplished anything, have I?"

He smiled. "I think you are ready, Lily. I am, in a way, rather disappointed that you proved such a good student. I will miss our meetings. You have brought renewed life to this old man."

I looked at him. "Old?" As ever, he was impeccably dressed and exuded a power that was almost palpable. I crossed the room and stood in front of him. "You aren't old, Victor. You're just temporally challenged, like me."

He laughed at this. "Oh, such a politically correct answer from my young rebel." He kissed my forehead and on impulse, I threw my arms around him and kissed him on the mouth.

I was unprepared for his reaction. And mine. During the time we'd gotten to know each other, he had been teacher and I had been student and there was no crossing that line. We'd had no physical contact past that first time when I was pretending to be my mother.

But now, there was no pretending, no mistaking the complicated emotions of the two people caught in this kiss. Now, no obstacles stood between us, for he had been inside my mind as I had been inside his. I pressed myself closer to him and deepened the kiss, uncaring of the fact that his canines had grown, caring only that I was here and with him. A rush of hunger emanated from him. And something else, something more important, something I didn't understand.

Then he slammed a wall over his mind and the kiss ended. I staggered back from him, breathing heavily,

wiping my bloody lips with my hand.

"Damn it, Lily, why did you do that?"

"I wanted to, Victor. Besides, you wanted it too. You can't deny it; I felt it."

"Forget about it, Lily. It didn't happen. I can't allow it. What we have is nothing more than a business deal. I've helped you and you've helped me. Don't expect anything else."

"But..."

"No. Listen to me. Go and do what you have to do. Just don't get yourself killed, little one. For that death would be on my shoulders and I couldn't bear it."

"I won't die, Victor. I promise. Besides, I'm not sure I can."

He pushed me away gruffly. "Don't get too self-assured, Miss. Everyone can die."

I began to walk away. "Wait, Lily," he called after me. "I almost forgot to give you these."

He held out his hand, showing me two small capsules.

"What is it?"

"Amitriptyline. It'll stop any vampire cold. But don't use it unless you need to, emergencies only. I'd rather no one knew that I knew about its effects." He smiled as I took the pills and stashed them in my pocket. "Remember, it doesn't pay to reveal all your secrets. Ever."

"Good-bye, Victor." I kissed him on the cheek. "And thanks."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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I didn't bother to pack any of my new clothes; instead I had the hotel box and ship them to New Orleans. If all went as Victor and I had planned, I wouldn't need them. All I needed was what I'd brought with me. And two sets of plane tickets. One to get from here to Maine. And two seats on the privately chartered jet from Maine to New Orleans.

As I settled into the seat in the first-class cabin, I sighed and smiled. This flight was a far cry from the bus trip to New York. I owed Victor a great debt of thanks for all of this. That he insisted his motives were not out of care for me, but out of hate for my mother, didn't bother me. He'd been useful and I was thankful.

I wrapped myself up in the airline blanket, leaned back against my pillows, closed my eyes and attempted to touch Victor's mind, as he had taught me to touch Mitch's. Contact was made almost immediately. He was sleeping and I smiled. Our two weeks together had been incredibly intense, and I realized now that he had come to mean a great deal to me. I was more than just a little bit infatuated with

him, and still rather annoyed at his brusque dismissal of me our last night together. I wanted to prove that I could move him, that I'd been worthy of his attentions. So I entered his mind. It was easy. I knew him.

I wake him with soft kisses on his face and mouth. His eyes open and fasten on me, first in shock and then in understanding. "Yeah," I whisper, "it's only me." I put my hand to his mouth. "No talking," I say. I feel his smile under my fingers and I crawl under the covers with him. He's totally naked, his skin flawless and smooth. I don't mind the coldness too much; I'm warm enough for both of us. I cover him with my body and give him my warmth, with my mouth and my hands and my soul, until he cries out my name and rolls me over onto my back. He straddles me then, staring at me with those deep fathomless eyes. Quickly shifting the lower half of his body, he enters me without hesitation and I gasp. Victor smiles and shakes his head, working his way deep inside me, filling me completely. He is so cold and I am so hot and we fit together perfectly, just as I'd imagined we would.

And when he bends his head down to pierce my flesh with his teeth and drink at my breast, I shudder as the orgasm shakes my body. Victor laughs, blood dripping out of his mouth as wave after wave of ecstasy washes over me.

And I woke.

"Damn it, Victor, don't do that." I said it out loud, getting a few curious glances from the other passengers. "Who the hell cares," I said to the closest passenger. "It's none of your damned business anyway." I threw off the blankets in a huff and went into the rest room. Bending over the sink, I splashed cold water on my face, then stood up and looked in the mirror. I was flushed and looked dazed, I'd been sweating profusely and the hair was matted around my neck. My hands shook, and I lifted up my shirt to see where Victor had fed during the dream; there was nothing there, of course. It had only been a dream. But it felt so real.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard his laughter, blushed and then smiled. On impulse, I kissed my reflection in the mirror. "For you, Victor," I whispered. "Thank you."

By all accounts, my mother and her husband were living in relative seclusion in a fairly small town northwest of Portland. I'd arranged for a rental car to be waiting at the airport; thanks to Victor's financial arrangements, there was no problem with credit or cash. I simply signed the forms and they handed me the keys.

I showed the young man behind the counter the paper Betsy had given me with my mother's address. "Can you tell me how to get to here?"

"Yeah, that's right easy," he said. "It's about sixty-five miles or so. Maybe take you an hour and a half. Nice drive, too. Scenic. Just take 495 to 95—there's signs when you leave the airport for these—and follow that until you get to 202. From 202 you go, oh, I dunno, maybe about twenty miles or so, and then you turn on to..." He stopped a minute. "No, wait, I think it's more like thirty miles. And then you..."

"Right easy?" I smiled as I interrupted him. "Do you have any maps?"

He did and I thanked him. The car was waiting at the curb, and I put my bags in the back and got in behind the wheel. It had been a while since I'd been able to drive, but I had countless years of high school and driver's education training. "Nice to know," I said with a laugh as I pulled into traffic and turned on the radio, "that some of that uselessness is finally paying off."

It was a pleasant ride, and I only got lost twice. The town itself wasn't quite as small as I'd imagined it would be. There were even a couple of different motels to choose from. I checked into the one closest to the road I'd need to take to my mother's cabin. Once again there was no problem with credit, and in no time at all I had my room. I stayed long enough to use the bathroom, and then went back into the car and got back onto the road.

The cabin was not nearly as easy to find as the town. I hadn't wanted to ask for directions, even had the motel desk clerk been able to give them. After driving past the road about four times, I finally glimpsed the small sign that announced their road. Parking the car on the side of the main road, I walked down the dirt road, looking at the few cabins that lined it. The first three were easy to eliminate; two had children playing outside and one was completely boarded over.

I walked further in, deeper into the woods. The road was overgrown now with weeds and was getting rougher. I spotted one cabin, way back into the woods, and followed the path until I saw a woman picking something out of a garden. Not this one, I thought, but from there I saw the roof of another cabin, in a much more secluded area.

I approached it warily, looking for signs of life. That it was occupied was obvious, but either the inhabitants weren't home or they were sleeping. As I moved closer, I saw the name on the mailbox. And smiled. "Bingo. I've found you."

I used the ointment Victor had suggested to hide my natural body scent, smearing it over my skin and clothes. Then I found a tall sturdy tree and climbed up as far as I could and still keep under the cover of the leaves. I settled my back into the tree trunk, straddling a large branch, and swung my legs back and forth. All I had to do now was wait for the sun to set.

While I waited, I concentrated on the cabin, searching, as Victor had taught me, for the minds of the two inside. And there they were, sleeping, entangled in each other. I probed a little harder until I could distinguish between the two and separated them slightly. The obviously feminine one I pushed aside. The masculine one I surrounded with a feeling of discontentment. Even from this distance, I could sense his small insecurities and past disagreements that could be fueled and fired. Mitch's mind was much less protected than I'd expected, his thoughts more chaotic, and the seeds that Victor and I had endeavored to plant during our training had grown and twisted.

Then the sun set, he awoke and I was instantly thrown out of his mind. It felt like I'd been doused with cold water; I shivered and renewed my grip on the branches of the tree.

About an hour later, just as I thought they weren't going to leave the cabin that night and I'd resigned myself to sleeping in my tree instead of a nice comfortable motel bed, the door opened.

Holding my breath, not daring to move, I watched them come out of the cabin. I caught a flash of pale naked skin and then saw them transform. It was not the painful transformation I'd seen countless times in movies and on television, but a quick and sharp change, a rapid casting off of one garment in favor of another. It was beautiful in a way, beautiful and terrifying. Although Victor had warned me, I was still unprepared for the sight of a silver wolf and a large tawny feline where their human forms had been.

As they loped under my tree, the cat form hesitated. I saw the twitch of her tail, the gleam of her eyes. Huge paws with tearing claws caught at the base of the tree, a tremor seemed to run under her skin and I feared she had scented me. But she merely shook herself and ran out into the woods to follow the wolf.

I gave them time to get far enough away and then I breathed. "She didn't notice me," I whispered to the trees. "She couldn't smell me, she didn't know I was here."

I allowed myself a victorious smile, and quietly climbed down out of the tree. Walking lightly on the grass growing alongside the gravel driveway, jumping at every sound in the woods, I found my car where I'd left it and drove back to my motel. Tomorrow morning I would be back.

On the way back to the hotel, I stopped off at a fast-food drive-through and took the bag back to my room. It wouldn't do to show my face around town too much. Someone might recognize me. And for all I knew, they could be in town as well, scouring the streets for victims for their inhuman hunger.

Victor had explained to me that vampires did not need to kill for blood. "A small amount will do just fine," he'd said. "Only the very newest and most inexperienced of us kill. And those that do, do not survive long. The rest of us have learned that moderation is the key to long life." Even knowing that, I couldn't get away from the image of my mother as murderer. She had worn that title for as long as I'd known of her.

"She's evil," I'd said to Victor once, and he'd laughed.

"Evil is in the eye of the beholder, my dear. And I doubt that you would find too many people who would agree with you. But have it your way. She's certainly caused me enough grief for me not to dispute you."

I made a few phone calls before I got ready for bed. One to the moving company to make sure that they were set up and ready to go for the day after tomorrow. And one to Angelo to tell him that I'd be arriving tomorrow night. No one picked up at my house. Moon's voice was still on the greeting of the answering machine and when I heard it, I felt my mouth tighten in anger. I left a short message, hoping Angelo would get it in time.

Then I set the motel alarm clock for four in the morning and lay down to sleep, trying to calm myself by counting off the red beads on my necklace.

I burst through the cemetery dirt. All around me lie the bodies of people I have known who have died. They are laid out in a straight line, the feet of the first corpse close to the head of the next. I follow the trail of loved ones and acquaintances, all dead. Some I have all but forgotten, but seeing their quiet pale faces brings them back to me. And with each new face and each new body, I grow angrier. I can't cry, I can't turn away. All I can do is follow the path. And look at their faces. I begin to walk faster, then run, but the supply of bodies seems endless. I have quit looking at their faces; I have quit counting them; they seem to stretch on past the horizon.

But suddenly, the line is ended with the body of Hyde. And just past him, in a clearing, is my mother's cabin. I can hear her inside with Mitch. They are laughing, they are talking and laughing. And they are making love. I hate her. And I will make her pay.

CHAPTER TWENTY



I woke with the alarm, determined to do whatever I needed to do to drive my mother and her lover apart. I showered, covered my body with the scent-disguise ointment and dressed once again in black jeans and shirt. I rubbed my hands over my clothes as well, in case they had picked up what Victor'd referred to as "human scent." Lacing up my boots I felt a rush of excitement. Today was the day. "Wish me luck, Victor," I whispered to him.

I almost heard his mocking laughter. "You will need it, my girl. But hold to the plan and you can't fail."

I tossed the leather jacket over my shoulder, collected my bags and checked out of the hotel. "I want to get an early start." I smiled at the tired desk clerk, who'd been sleeping when I showed up.

"Early?" He pushed a receipt to me to sign. "It's not early, it's too early for that. It's late."

"Whatever. Thanks."

I dropped the car off at the rental agency's office in town, pushing the keys into the night slot. Then, because I found one open, I stopped at a convenience store and purchased two large thermal jugs. After filling them with coffee, I was ready.

Even with all the errands, even after walking to the cabin, dawn was still an hour or so away. And although I could see the light of a fire inside and seemed to see movement, I decided I would be safer if I hid my bags and climbed the tree again.

Not more than two or three minutes after I'd settled into the same branches I'd occupied the previous morning, the cat form that was my mother ran past. She didn't stop this time, but raced for the front door. There she phased back into human form. I held back a small gasp; even though I couldn't see her face, I could see that she and I could be twins. Her skin was probably slightly paler than mine, her breasts a little more full, but I could pass for her. I was sure of it.

She opened the door. "Hi, honey, I'm home," she called, and I rolled my eyes. *Just like some stupid sitcom on television*, I thought. Then the door shut and I was alone in the woods.

They talked for a while; I couldn't hear the words, but the murmur of their voices carried through the trees. I concentrated on the mind of Mitch as I'd found it that morning; he seemed apprehensive and edgy. I pushed myself into his head just a little harder, and the door opened. I could see the glow of his eyes, peering into the night, searching for me. Then he shook his head and closed the door.

I smiled. "Yeah, you sense me. But you can't possibly know I'm here. Besides, it'll be dawn soon and time for all good vampires to be in bed."

Just like in the dream, they laughed. And they made love before they slept. I could feel the passion in his mind; I could feel the love the two of them shared. It was strong, so very strong. And quite beautiful. *And*, I thought with a twisted smile, *sosoon to be gone*.

When the sun finally rose, I relaxed slightly, since now there was no fear that either of them would spot me. Even to open the shutters slightly would mean death.

Mitch fell asleep; I could feel his mind drifting. My mother, though, was awake. And upset. "Good," I said to myself as I climbed out of the tree, retrieved my bags and quietly approached the front porch, "I want you upset. And you'd better get used to it, bitch, 'cause it's only going to get worse for you."

I sat up against the door, leaning the side of my head up against it so that I could better hear what was happening inside. She was moving around, making coffee, it sounded like, talking to herself about being hungry. Fretting, I knew, about the man who lay asleep upstairs. The man who was about to dream what I wanted him to dream.

Seeing them together hadn't changed my mind; it had only emphasized to me what she had and what I lacked. So I turned the dream on full power, pouring into it all that I could remember of my escape from a premature grave, filling it with the despair of that moment, the total despair of all my subsequent years. The deaths, the tears, the wasted lives and the anger: I channeled it all into Mitch's sleeping mind. And most of all, I sent him complete and utter hatred of the creature known as Deirdre Griffin.

"Kill her," I whispered. "Kill the bitch who made me what I am." Realizing, as I said the words, that I had lied to Victor. I did want her dead.

"Kill her." I burrowed deeper into his mind, still hissing words of hate and anger. "Kill her. She deserves to die. Kill her!"

When I heard my words in his voice, I knew that I'd succeeded. Now all I had to do was wait for her to leave. Victor had assured me that she'd leave. "What else would she do?" he'd said. "Not that she'd fear that he'd kill her, although that thought will occur to her. After all, she killed her creator." He'd stopped for a while, then continued, his eyes harder. "No, what she will be most upset about will be that he doesn't love her. That will drive her away. She will be devastated and she will run." He'd laughed then, and I'd laughed with him. "As I've said before, love is an emotion a vampire can't afford."

The day stretched before me, gloriously bright. Mitch's sleeping mind was still troubled, fretting over the images and emotions I poured into it repeatedly. Most gratifying, though, was the total and utter despair that radiated from my mother. She cried and, feeling the heat of her tears on my own face, I smiled and laughed. "It worked, Victor," I said. "We did it." I remained curled up next to the front door of the cabin, reveling in my success, until movement within sent me back up the tree.

The sun had barely set when the door opened and my mother came out. She was dressed in jeans, a flannel shirt and heavy hiking boots, a backpack hanging from her arm. She looked pale and thoroughly miserable, stopping only once to stare back at what used to be her happy little love nest, before disappearing off into the woods.

I climbed down from the tree for the final time and followed in her path. When she knocked on the door of the closest cabin, the woman let her in. I gripped the beads around my neck. "Keep her there," I ordered the woman. "Give me an extra day to get away. I don't care if you have to break your back to do it. Just keep her there."

Then I headed back through the woods and walked into the front door of the cabin. "Hi, honey, I'm home." I breathed the words, and stepped into the kitchen. Taking a mug from the cabinet, I filled it with coffee from one of the jugs, then added a dash of Angelo's control liquid. I sniffed at it; it smelled like

coffee. I dabbed a little more of the disguise ointment on my hands and my hair. Then I quietly went up the stairs.

Mitch was still sleeping. I took a minute to look at the man that my mother loved so desperately. He was attractive, I thought, his face was rugged but handsome, and what part of his body I could see looked well-formed and firm. But his hair was totally gray. I wondered about this, since he didn't look old enough to have gone this color. It can't have been his age. Victor was far older than Mitch and his hair was dark.

He moved then and opened his eyes. They were steel blue and, had I never stared into Victor's eyes, I'd have thought them the most intense thing I'd ever seen. But these eyes smiled for my mother when they smiled at me. I held my breath. Would he recognize the difference as Victor had? I'd have to keep away from him physically and emotionally. Fortunately, I had a diversion already planned.

"Dressed already, Deirdre?" His voice was smooth. "Going to go over and play with your toy again?"

I smiled. "No, my love. Something even better." I handed him the mug and he took a long sip.

"Ugh," he said, making a face, and I tensed, worried that he tasted the potion. "I'd forgotten that we were out of cream." But he took another sip anyway. "Thanks. That's exactly what I needed. But tell me, what could possibly be better than playing with your toy?"

I smiled, reached my hand over and stroked his cheek. "I have a surprise for you. How does a second honeymoon in New Orleans sound?"

"Sounds wonderful, actually. I've been getting kind of bored lately."

"Gee, thanks a lot." I forced a smile. "But I know exactly what you mean, Mitch. And I can promise that this trip will be anything but boring. So drink the rest of your coffee and get ready. I've made all the arrangements and we don't have much time. Our flight leaves at ten."

"That soon?" He tossed the blankets back. "I guess I'd better shower, then, and get moving. Care to join me?"

I turned away and walked over to the dresser. "No, not this time, my love. I'll get us packed and call a cab for the airport."

"Great." He hesitated in the doorway for a minute, then shrugged. "This is a wonderful idea, Deirdre. And just what we needed."

I turned and watched him head into the bathroom, heard the water turn on. "No, Mitch," I whispered with a smile, "it's not at all what you needed. But it works for me."

PART FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



"So," Sam said as we sped down the main road out of town, "aren't you going to say something about my car?"

I looked around at the interior: leather seats, complicated dashboard with more dials than anyone could possibly want, pretty decent stereo system. "It's nice?" I ventured. "Is it new?"

Sam laughed. "I should've remembered, Deirdre, you're totally unimpressed with cars. Yeah, it's new. A birthday present from Vivienne."

"Ah." I ran a hand over the seat. "A very expensive present, no doubt. And how is Vivienne these days?"

"She's fine. Or at least I guess she is; she's been in Paris the last couple of weeks."

"Paris? How lovely."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. Cadre business, of course. She asked me to come along, but to be honest, I didn't relish the thoughts of being the only warm body there." He gave a bitter laugh. "It's not always comfortable being used as arm candy."

"Arm candy?"

"Yeah, you know, sort of like a trophy wife."

"Ah."

"And the meetings? God, I thought psychiatrists were boring. You have no idea. The tracing of the various houses, who bit whom and when, catching up on hundreds of years of small talk. I just couldn't stomach it. So I figured it would be a perfect time to visit you and Mitch."

I winced at the name. "Your timing was excellent, Sam."

He glanced over at me. "And you still don't want to talk about it? Are you sure? It's what I'm good at, after all. And maybe I can come up with some insights..."

"No." I interrupted him and laid a hand on his arm. "Just drive."

"But..."

"Just drive, Sam. I want to be as far away from here as possible by dawn."

"Oh, yeah, dawn. I guess I'd better think about finding you a place to spend the day."

"Or not" I turned away from him and looked out the window.

"You're not allowed to talk like that, Deirdre."

"Advice from the doctor?"

"No. Words from a friend." He reached over and gave me a small punch on the arm. "Besides, if you burst into flames in my new car, I'd never forgive you."

I permitted myself a small wry smile. "I will try to keep that in mind, Sam. At the very least, I promise to get out of the car before I spontaneously combust."

Sam kept driving for hours, humming along with the songs on the stereo. His voice had a peaceful sound, comforting somehow. I concentrated on the night's scenery flowing past my window and felt the miles accumulate behind us. He stopped for gas once, but said nothing, sensing that I wished no conversation. He pumped his own, paid and got back behind the wheel without a word. And still we drove, his sleek car eating the miles. Every minute carried us further away from the cabin and my previous life, until there seemed to be no previous life, there was merely the car and the road and the endless night.

At one point, I turned away from the window and glanced over at him; he was relaxed at the wheel, totally in control, and if the smug smile on his face was any indication, he felt pretty good about the situation. I thought about Bob the previous night; must be that white-knight syndrome, I thought, they all want to be rescuers. Even Mitch fell into that trap. But no, I was not going to go there. Not now. I sighed and stretched my legs out in front of me. Elly's boots looked so large on my feet; I clacked them together and laughed.

"What?"

"I have clown feet."

"Oh. I see. You don't exactly look like the Deirdre I'm used to. So what's going to happen when we get to New York?"

"First I am going to buy some new boots that fit."

"Yeah. And after that? Seriously, Deirdre, what will you do?"

"Sleep. Feed. Repeat as necessary."

"There's more to life than that."

"And what exactly would that be?"

He shrugged. "You used to know." Then he reached over and flipped open the console between the seats. "Cigarette?" He offered the pack to me.

"No, thank you. Those things will kill you, haven't you heard?"

"I've heard the rumors, yes." Sam smiled and knocked one out of the pack for himself, then pushed in the cigarette lighter on the dash. "But I don't smoke that much. Most of the time. Only when presented with a particularly tricky problem."

"And what exactly is the problem this time, Sam?"

He reached down, pulled out the lighter, lit the cigarette on the glowing coils. "You, of course."

I took the lighter from his hand and blew on it as it cooled, watching the glow grow dimmer, then wink out completely. I stuffed it back into its little compartment. "Why am I a problem for you, Sam? It has nothing to do with you."

"But I was best man at your wedding. And you two are so right for each other."

"Were. Were right for each other."

"No, you *are* right. There has to be some explanation. And I can't believe you are just going to let him walk away. How can you do that?"

"I have to, Sam." I looked at the clock. "For now, though, we had better find a place to stay at the next exit. If only for the sake of your car upholstery."

"There must be some mistake," I said to the clerk at the hotel desk. "Run it through again."

"Sorry, I've run it through twice and called. The card is declined; apparently the account has been closed."

"Closed? How can it be closed?" I felt the panic and anger begin to rise within me; I reached over the desk and caught hold of his shirt, pulling his face close to mine. The Cat within stirred and growled. "As if it was not enough of a blow for him to take everything, he closed my account also?"

"Miss, I, um, don't know what to say..."

Sam came up behind me then and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Steady," he whispered to me, and I let go. He handed the clerk a card. "Here, this one should work fine. We'll still want the two rooms, adjoining if you have them."

"Closed?" I paced around my room, trying to calm myself and the Cat. "What sort of goddamned explanation can there be for that, Sam? He left me first without shelter and clothing, and now he's left me without money. Do you have any idea how much was in that account?" I spread my fingers out wide, stretching them as if they were taloned, then relaxed them and gave a humorless laugh. "Hell, how could you? Even I do not know how much was in there."

"Deirdre, this isn't good."

"Really, Sam? Really? Don't you have any words of wisdom for me right now? You want to tell me again how right Mitch and I are together?"

He shook his head. "The sun will be up soon."

He pulled the curtains back just a bit to peer at the sky. "Will you be okay in here during the day?"

I walked over and felt the material at the window. "No, actually, I won't. These are too flimsy. But I can

sleep in the bathtub, I suppose. And I can put a blanket under the door to keep any stray light out."

"Can I get you anything beforehand?"

"You mean like a bottle of wine? Or a good book? No, I don't think so."

He walked over to his room and came back with a large cooler. "I unloaded these from the trunk while you were, ah, checking us in." He lifted the lid, picked out a plastic bag and tossed it to me. "Will this help?"

I turned the bag of blood over in my hand. "It certainly cannot hurt. Now, if I only had a few of Elly's candles, I would be all set."

"Elly's candles?"

"Not important. I will be fine, Sam. Thank you."

I gathered the pillows and blankets from the bed, went into the bathroom and locked the door behind me. The room was totally dark except for a small sliver of light shining in around the door. I blocked the light under the door with a towel; there was not much else I could do.

I turned the lights on long enough to heat the blood under hot water. Then I tore a corner off the bag and drank. I remembered the first time I had fed out of such a bag. Mitch had still been human then and had not known what kind of creature I was. I could clearly remember the look of disgust mingled with sympathy on his face when he caught me in the act. But I had not wanted his pity or his understanding. All I had ever wanted was his love.

I dropped the empty bag into the toilet and flushed it away. "I should have known then," I said to my reflection in the mirror as I stripped off my clothes. "I should have known." I splashed some water on my face, dried off and made my bed in the tub, turning out the lights and settling in for the day.

I lay for a long time, silent, but not sleeping, eyes wide open, staring at the darkness. Searching for an answer, any answer other than the obvious one. And found nothing but lies and deceit and a wide gaping emptiness where I had once felt love.

"You arrogant bastard, Mitchell Greer, I growled, hearing the Cat's approving rumble. "How dare you do this to me? Damn you to hell."

I closed my eyes and took a long deep breath, forcing the anger deep inside. He was already in hell, I knew. And I knew who had put him there.

"Let us kill him," the Cat said. "We will find him and kill him and then we will be free."

I mentally smoothed the hair on its back. "Not free, pet. Just let him go."

"Never," said the Cat. "We hurt and we will make him pay."

It was a long day. Only the thought of how much it would upset Sam kept me from opening the door and walking out into the sunlight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



I knocked on Sam's door at sunset.

"Are you ready to go, Sam?"

I heard a muffled "Come in," and opened the connecting door. Sam was in bed, and apparently, from the vacant stare he gave me, still mostly asleep.

He groaned. "Is it morning already?"

"Not morning at all," I said, "or I'm in trouble."

"Just an expression of speech, Deirdre. Must you be so literal in the morn—er, whatever?"

"How'd you sleep?"

He scrunched up his face and scratched the back of his head. "Like the dead. And you?"

I gave a little laugh. "like the undead."

"That's better, right? The sleep of the undead is the ultimate rest?"

"Quite the contrary, actually. Hasn't Vivienne taught you anything at all?"

He looked away. "Yeah, she has. I'd hoped maybe it was different for you. Do you dream?"

"Yes. Which is why I prefer not to sleep any more than necessary. And I have been up for about five hours, waiting for the sun to set. I will go in search of coffee for us and let you get ready. How do you like yours?"

"Cream and sugar, please."

I started for the door. "Deirdre, hold on a second." He crawled out of bed, barely managing to cover himself with a sheet. The good doctor slept without the benefit of pajamas; the bed was rumpled and sweaty, the room reeked of human scent. I took in a quick breath, trying not to remember the taste of his blood.

"What?" I said.

He hopped over to the chair on which his pants hung, took out his wallet and handed it to me. "You are going to need some money."

"Oh. Money. Yes, that's right. I have no money. Thank you." I tried to keep the anger out of my voice, but failed.

"There's got to be an explanation, you know. I wouldn't give up hope."

"Hope? That is a human emotion. I am not human, Sam, and I have no hope. Do not ever use that word around me again." I slammed the door, cut through the motel parking lot and walked into the restaurant across the street.

Sitting at the counter, I realized I was shaking. Either with anger, sadness or hunger; I could not really tell the difference. I picked up a menu and glanced at it while waiting for the waitress. Sam would probably want breakfast before we started back driving.

"What'll you have?" The woman behind the counter wiped it off with a wet cloth and set out silverware and a napkin.

"Coffee," I said. "Two cups. And"—I looked back at the menu, thinking what the hell, I could order it even if I couldn't eat it—"the three-egg breakfast."

"Bacon or sausage?"

"Both."

"Bread?"

"Oh, yes, please."

She looked at me and gave me a tired smile. "No, what kind of bread? Toast, muffin or biscuits?"

"All three?"

She shrugged and wrote it down. "It'll cost you extra, honey, but it's not my bill. You must be awfully hungry."

"You have no idea," I said. "I am starving to death. But, unfortunately, the breakfast is not for me, but for a friend who will be joining me. I can't eat anything; I'm on a liquid diet."

"Suit yourself." She pulled two mugs out from under the counter and poured coffee, pushed a pitcher of cream over to me and moved away.

I picked up one of the mugs and sipped at it, savoring the warmth. It felt familiar in my hands; the coffee smell taking me back in time to when I used to serve coffee in a place like this.

"If only," I whispered.

"If only what?" Sam sat down next to me. I hadn't even heard him approach.

"If only I could eat the fabulous breakfast I just ordered for you." I smiled at him. "I'm sorry, Sam, I should not have lost my temper just now. None of this is your fault and you are only trying to help."

"You ordered me breakfast? Really?"

I gave him a smile. "Well, you are paying. It is the very least I could do."

He poured cream and spooned some sugar into his cup. "You don't like having to depend on anyone, do you?" He took a drink of his coffee.

"No, not at all. I am used to making my own way."

"And you will again. But for now you need a little help. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. And everything. It should not be this way. And what would have happened had you not been here to help me?"

"You'd have found another way." He took another sip of his coffee. "This is good stuff," he said. "Just what the doctor ordered."

"Here you go." The waitress set a plate down in front of Sam, heaped with food.

"This is great, thank you. But who's going to eat it with me?"

I shook my head; the smell of the bacon and sausage and eggs was making me nauseous. "You're on your own, Sam. All I can do is order." I reached into my pocket and handed him his wallet. "Take your time. If you give me the keys, I will wait in the car."

He made a move to hand them to me, then pulled them back. "You okay?"

"Fine."

"If you say so." He dropped the keys into my extended hand. "But no joyriding without me."

"That's probably another word we should avoid."

"Deirdre..."

"Never mind, Sam. I will survive. I'm damned good at that."

I had barely opened the car door and sat down when Sam came out of the restaurant.

"You could not possibly have eaten, Sam," I said when he climbed in and started the engine.

"I'm not hungry. I'll pick something up a little later and eat while I drive. And I didn't like the thought of you being alone."

I laughed. "I have been more alone than you could ever imagine, Sam, for most of my life. Fifteen minutes sitting by myself in your car can hardly make a dent in it."

"Even so. Let's just go." He pulled the car out onto the street. "I'm anxious to get home."

I sighed. "Yes, let's go."

He remained quiet until we reached the turnpike. "So, what will you do when we get to the city? With Viv out of town, I'm not sure I can get you into Cadre headquarters. Do you have any other place to stay?"

"No. They will let me in."

"And then? To be honest, Deirdre, I can't see you living like the rest of the Cadre. They are leeches."

"No, they are vampires, although I will grant you that it's a delicate distinction."

Sam snorted. "You know what I mean."

I shrugged. "I'll have to do something. Betsy McCain asked me to work as a consultant last time I was in town. I could do worse, I suppose, than going back to Griffin Designs. To be honest, I miss the excitement of the business. Now, at least."

He nodded. "That sounds like a good plan. And I'm sure that when Vivienne comes back, she'll make sure that you have enough to live on until you get back on your feet."

I looked over at him. "It is not the money, Sam, it really isn't. It is just the way he did it. Callously and calculated. If he wanted me dead, a stake through the heart would have been kinder, cleaner. Damn it, you have got to understand. Mitch was all I had. All I lived for. I would have let him kill me. No, I should have. It is the way it works, after all."

"The Mitch I knew would never kill you."

"No. But I'm beginning to think he was never the Mitch any of us knew."

"But why do you think he wants you dead?"

"Because he said so. Period."

"So that's why you don't want to see him again? Because you think he'll kill you?"

"Either he will kill me or the Cat will kill him. There seems to be no other alternative."

"The cat? What the hell is the cat?"

"My alternate form. You surely must talk about these things with Vivienne."

He nodded. "Ah. The inner animal. Yeah, she mentions it every so often. But it's a metaphorical creature. No one turns into an animal. It just isn't possible."

I snorted.

"Really, Deirdre. I'm a doctor and a scientist. There's no way you can change into a cat. Of any size. So when you say the cat wants to kill Mitch, you really mean that deep down inside you want to kill him. And that's understandable considering the circumstances. But I don't for a minute think you'd act on that impulse."

I gave a bitter little laugh. "Well, I am glad that there is at least one of us who is sure. And you are the doctor and you know best, whereas I, apparently, do not know anything."

"I didn't say that, Deirdre."

"You did not have to. Forget it. As far as I am concerned we have reached the end of this discussion. I have no desire to go through it all over again. Turn on the stereo and sing."

We spoke only a little on the rest of the trip. Traffic got heavier the closer into New York we came. Sam's relaxed attitude was replaced with grim determination; his humming had stopped. He gripped the steering wheel now like a lifeline.

"I hate traffic," he muttered under his breath. "These people are crazy." But when we emerged into the city itself, he managed a smile. "Almost there," he said, "and not quite midnight. Where to first?"

"The Imperial. Let's see if the Cadre is in the mood to entertain prodigals this evening."

"If I remember correctly, they should welcome you with open arms. You and Mitch did save them from Larry not too long ago."

I gave a small laugh. "That is true, I suppose, in theory. Except I was the one who created Larry. Some might think I was merely cleaning up my own mess."

"But you must have some supporters in the group?"

I thought. "No, not really. If I hadn't killed Max, of course, he would welcome me. Victor has no good reason to love me. Ron Wilkes is dead. Even Fred, who would have let me in just to cause trouble, is dead. Other than Vivienne, there is no one to whom I can turn. It is rather ironic, in a way. For all those years, I never even dreamed of their existence. And when I finally did discover them, I went out of my way to make enemies of the whole lot. Never thinking that someday I would need their support."

He pulled his car into a parking garage. "Well, most of them know me. Or should. And Vivienne is still leader, so I have some small power, if only because I can whisper in her ear." His voice grew tense. Was this how Mitch had felt, I wondered, when he'd still been human?

Sam shrugged off his resentment. "They are a self-serving crowd, there's no doubt about that. But if we're lucky, Claude will be watching the door tonight."

"Claude?"

"He's new. Originally from New Orleans, I gather. Mostly, he gets stuck with the jobs no one else wants to do. New man and all that. Lately he's been guarding Victor."

"Guarding Victor?"

"They've been keeping him under lock and key, in the basement somewhere. Whether to stop him from wreaking havoc on himself or them, I've never been able to ascertain. He's apparently gotten senile. Or so they fear."

"Poor Victor. And there's one more thing for which he can hold me accountable."

"I don't think he's capable enough of reasoning it out that far. The few times I've seen him, he was barely able to focus his eyes."

Sam found a parking space and stopped the car. I did not move from my seat.

"You know, Deirdre, if you don't want to do this, you can stay at my place. It's quite safe, I promise you."

"I am sure it is, Sam. But it's not that." I opened the car door and slid out. "Shall we?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Sam misunderstood my reluctance. I had no fear of my welcome from the Cadre. Regardless of the bad blood that had flowed between us, they had to take me in. Kinship meant a great deal to those whose real families had died centuries ago. For most of them, this organization was all they had. And I knew that I could hold my own with all of them, should I have to force my way in.

No, my problem was not with the Cadre. It was this place, so fraught with memories and ghosts of love. *Damn it*, I thought, as we got onto the elevator to the restaurant, *how the hell can less than five years with one person make such a difference? Five years was nothing to me. Five years was a mere blink, a moment. And yet, that minuscule portion of time defined me, baptized me. Mitch had washed me clean with his blood and his love.*

And now he is gone, the Cat growled within me, and we will be better without him.

"Never."

Sam gave me a curious look as the elevator doors opened. "What?"

"Nothing. Just having an argument with myself."

He smiled. "Let me know who wins, okay?"

We entered the bar of The Imperial, and Sam spotted a table in a corner. "Why don't you go sit down and order us a drink of something? I'll see who's around."

I crossed the room, feeling horribly out of place, dressed as I was in jeans and flannel shirt. But when I sat down, I took off the shirt. At least the tank top underneath was moderately fashionable and mildly sexy. I laughed to myself as I motioned to a waiter. My clothes did not matter, my self-image did not matter. No one ever saw the same person I saw in the mirror. They only saw the vampire mystique.

"Good evening," the waiter said automatically, then actually looked at me and smiled. "Oh, hi, you're back. Nice to see you again. You drinking wine tonight?"

"Excuse me?" I studied his face and had no recollection of ever having seen him before.

"Wine? Are you having wine?"

"Wine would be fine, thank you. Two glasses, please, and I prefer red, if you would be so kind."

He laughed. "Like I could forget the kind of wine you drink. Be right back."

I watched him walk away. I suppose it was possible that I'd had dealings with him at some point. But it would've been over a year ago and I should have remembered.

Then Sam waved from the other side of the room and began walking in my direction, accompanied by one of the largest men I'd ever seen. For all of that, the man remained distinctive and powerful, and I guessed that this must be the Claude of whom Sam had spoken.

His face creased in a smile of recognition, mounds of flesh narrowing his eyes. Pushing Sam aside, he surprised me by leaning over the table and kissing me first on one cheek, then on the other. "*Ma cherie*," he said. "I am happy to see you back so soon. But without your perfume. And how is our friend, the bokor?"

I pulled away from his unwelcome attention. "Excuse me? Do I know you?"

"But of course you do." Then he stopped and stared deep into my eyes. "Oh. My. You aren't Lily, are you?"

I held his gaze until sweat began to form on his forehead. Then I dropped him. "No, I am not Lily. I am Deirdre Griffin. Or Dorothy Grey, if you prefer. Of the house of Alveros. And you?"

He relaxed and took out an embroidered handkerchief to wipe his brow. Stashing it back inside his vest pocket, he made a little bow and gave my hand a small kiss. "Claude Adams, newest member of the house of Courbet. Miss Griffin, I do apologize for my untoward familiarity."

"No matter, Claude. I see Vivienne has taught you proper manners at least." I smiled at him. "Now, why on earth would you think I was someone called Lily?"

"I met a charming little woman-child about two weeks ago. She was staying at my hotel—I own the Westwood Hotel, Miss Griffin, and should you ever need a room, we would be most happy to serve you."

"Thank you. And the woman?"

"Oh, it is just that the resemblance is so striking. I see little differences now, of course, and I knew at the time that she wasn't quite one of us. But she could be your twin. She'd come to town from New Orleans, she'd told me. And since I was from the same city, well, we sort of had a bond. She came here fairly often, for about two weeks, I think. And then she was gone without even a good-bye. We shipped some boxes for her at the hotel, to an address in New Orleans, so she must have gone back. I never did find out why she was here; perhaps it was a familial matter."

"And her name is Lily?"

Claude nodded. "Lily Williams, yes. I would remember anyway, even if we'd never had any further contact outside the hotel. She had been paying for her room in cash at first, and there was some problem with that at registration. You can't get anywhere these days without a credit card, you know?"

I gave a rough laugh. "Yes, I do indeed."

"Although, now that I think about it, she checked out with a card. Funny, after that scene at registration, when she swore up and down she hadn't one."

The waiter came over and brought us our wine. "Thanks, Bobby," Claude said. "Bring another glass for me, if you will. And put it all on my tab."

I sipped my wine and nodded. "Serving the good stuff, I see."

Claude laughed. "Bobby must think you are Lily also. She managed to develop very expensive tastes while she was here. After confessing to me that first night we all sat down together that the last bottle of wine she'd drunk was swill, I found the change interesting. But looking back, I think now she was merely trying to impress Victor."

"Victor?" I choked. "Victor met this woman?"

"Yes. He was quite adamant about being introduced to her, as I remember. It had been a while since he'd shown any interest in anything, so I obliged him."

Sam cleared his throat. "If Victor didn't comment on the resemblance, Claude, it can't have been all that great."

"No, I swear, Sam. They are almost identical. But Victor"—Claude shrugged and made a small motion to his head—"well, he's not quite right, so perhaps he does not remember Miss Griffin."

"For Victor to not remember me, Claude, he would have to be dead." I shook my head. "And this whole affair is all very strange. A woman arrives here from New Orleans; my identical twin, but with bad taste in wine. She stays at your hotel and befriends you to the point where you bring her here and introduce her to Victor. Who doesn't recognize the resemblance. She runs up huge bills, which she manages to pay with a previously nonexistent credit card. Then vanishes again, supposedly for New Orleans. A rather hard-to-believe story, I think."

"But it's all true, Miss Griffin." Claude dabbed his forehead again, this time with one of the cocktail napkins. "Except for my bringing her here. She was just here, having had dinner with one of our regulars."

I sighed. "Which one of your regulars?"

"Betsy McCain. Do you know her?"

I jumped up from my seat, managing to knock into the waiter who was bringing Claude's wine. The glass fell to the floor and shattered at my feet, splashing the legs of my jeans with wine. "Great, just bloody great. And so appropriate that I go stained to this meeting."

"Deirdre?" Sam stood up and touched my arm. "What is it? What meeting?"

"I need to see Victor. Right now."

Claude rolled his eyes. "I don't think that is possible, Miss Griffin. He's not supposed to have visitors. He is, as I have said..."

"Do not try to tell me again, Claude, that Victor is not right. He is the oldest And the most powerful among us. If he chooses to have you all think that he is senile, then that is what you will think. And I

would be willing to bet my now-nonexistent fortune that he's been having at least one goddamned visitor. A charming little woman-child by the name of Lily Williams."

Claude shook his head. "Even so, I cannot take you to him."

I reached over and touched his hand, not so gently sinking my nails into his skin. His eyes rose to meet mine. "But of course you can, Claude," I said, smiling. "Of course you can. In fact, it will be your great pleasure to do this. Isn't that true?"

The expression on his face changed from reluctance to eagerness. "Of course, Miss Griffin. We can go right now if you'd like."

"Yes, I would like, Claude. Thank you so much."

He got up first, and Sam and I followed him. "What is this all about, Deirdre?" Sam whispered to me as we headed for the private elevator that led to Cadre headquarters.

"Victor is about as senile as you, Sam. The old bastard set this whole thing up. Found a woman who looked enough like me to be me. Taught her. Financed her. With my money, I suspect, but that does not matter at this point. Then sent her to Maine to seduce Mitch away from me."

"Maybe not seduce," Sam started to say, but Claude interrupted him.

"Sam, I'm sorry, but you at least have to stay here," he said. "Vivienne will have my hide if you set foot past the restaurant without her."

Sam glared at him. "I'm looking after Miss Griffin's best interests. I should be there."

I gave him a small hug. "No need for you to get further involved, Sam. I will let you know how it all turns out."

"But who will protect you?"

I looked at him for a second, my mouth twisted into a half smile. "The Cat, of course. As she always does."

The elevator door opened; Claude made a courtly gesture with his arm. "After you, Miss Griffin."

"I will be fine, Sam. Go home, get some rest. I'll call you tomorrow sometime. And thank you." On impulse I leaned up and kissed his cheek. "You'll always be my white knight."

Claude had a smirk on his face as the doors closed.

"What is your problem?" I demanded.

"No problem. You seem pretty free and easy with Miss Courbet's human, though. I'll have something to trade her if she gets angry about this visit to Victor. I shouldn't be taking you. Why am I taking you?"

"Because I asked you."

He patted his forehead with his handkerchief again. "Yeah, that's why."

The doors opened onto a maze of gray halls and a gray floor. I'd forgotten how bleak this place was. Elly's boots made a horrible racket on the concrete floor. The last time I was here I was barefooted and the occupant of the cell was Larry Martin.

I shivered, and Claude looked over at me. "Chilly down here, isn't it?"

I laughed, trying to hide my nervousness. "Someone should start a fire; it would do the place a world of good."

Claude inserted his key into the outer door. The waiting area had changed a bit. The sun lights were dimmer and the partial wall that used to screen the tanks had been converted to a full wall with a door.

"It's in here." Claude moved over to the door that led to the holding room.

"I know where it is, Claude. I have been here before, although it has changed a bit."

"We redid the area. For Victor, you know, so he would be more comfortable."

"That is admirable. Although how this place could ever be comfortable..." My voice trailed off.

"Miss Griffin?"

"Pardon me, Claude. Bad memories. You may go now."

"Oh, no, I'm not that crazed. I'm staying with you. I like having my skin on my body."

"Fine," I agreed, thinking I would need what little strength it would take to convince him to leave for this meeting with Victor. I took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

The tanks were bigger than I remembered. And Victor was getting first-class treatment, it seemed, since he sat in a burgundy velvet armchair sipping on a glass of wine. His room was lavishly furnished, but it was still only a cell. Not for the first time, I felt a wave of sympathy for the creature inside.

Claude flipped a switch on the wall and I heard the whoosh of air within the tank. It still gave me the chills.

"Hello, Victor," I said, and he turned around and saw me.

His face grew softer and he smiled a tender smile. "Are you back so soon, girl? I lose track of time in here. How did it go?"

"Victor?" I moved closer to the thick glass wall so that he could see me clearer. His eyes opened wide and he smiled again, a different smile this time, cynical and intelligent. He was no more senile than I. And I had no doubt he was quite capable of pulling the unbelievable stunt I'd managed to piece together.

"Victor, who the hell is Lily Williams?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



"Open the door, Claude," Victor ordered, ignoring my question, "and let me greet my dear old friend Deirdre."

"I can't do that, Victor. You know I can't." Claude looked at me pleadingly. He was totally out of his element here. And had no choice, caught as he was between me and Victor.

"Open the door, Claude," I ordered, "and I will make sure you come to no grief with Vivienne as a result."

He looked back and forth between the two of us. Then he threw his arms up into the air. "I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. But since you two are here and Vivienne is off somewhere else, I'll open the goddamned door."

He stomped over to the cell door and unlocked it, then walked to the door of the outer room. "I'll even be a sport and give you some privacy."

Victor pushed open the door and watched until Claude left. "Don't tell him, my dear, but I can actually get out anytime I want to. They expanded the cell with my full approval and from my plans. Of course, this was before they decided to put me away. But I knew it was coming. Did they think I was crazy enough to tell them the truth?"

"They think you senile, Victor. It was all Claude could talk about. Sam, as well."

"And what do you think?" He bent over and took my hand, raising it to his lips and kissing it.

"I think you are as sane as you ever were, Victor. For what that is worth. Are you going to answer my question?"

He laughed. "You were always so direct, Deirdre, even to the point of rudeness. Here, come in, let me offer you a glass of wine."

"My question, Victor?"

"Patience, Deirdre, patience." He took me by the arm and led me to one of the armchairs. "Sit," he said, then went over to the armoire and pulled out an extra glass.

He settled into the other chair and poured my wine. "A toast to you, Deirdre. And congratulations."

I raised my glass, then stopped. "Congratulations? For what?"

He looked at me and laughed. "You really do not know, do you? Such a deliciously convoluted situation and you have no idea. If only Max were here, he would appreciate the richness of the joke. But Max is not here"—his eyes narrowed and he scowled at me—"as well you know."

I drained my glass and helped myself to another.

"Is that what this is all about, Victor? Revenge for Max's death? I thought we had settled that score

years ago."

"And we did, Deirdre. I bear you no ill will, really."

I raised my eyebrows. "Forgive me if I say I find that rather hard to believe. For bearing me no ill will, you have certainly caused me a lot of pain."

"Pain? You dare to talk to me of pain?"

I looked away from him. He was right. "I am sorry, Victor, I should not have said that."

He nodded. "Apology accepted. It's old business, Deirdre. Let's let it go. But why don't you tell me how you think I have caused you pain?"

I took a deep breath, feeling stupid and clumsy. "I think you found someone who looked like me and trained her to be me. And you sent her to Maine with instructions to seduce Mitch away from me so that I would be left alone."

"Then you know nothing, Deirdre. I did no such thing. And speaking of the devil, where is the intrepid Detective Greer?"

"Gone. Packed up everything and left me. I can't help but think it has something to do with this Lily Williams."

Victor shrugged. "Or could it be that you are grasping at straws and trying to find reasons in a situation where there are no reasons other than the obvious ones? Is it so impossible to think that Mitch got tired of you and took off? It wouldn't be the first time in history and certainly won't be the last. Weren't you the one who once told me I shouldn't count on constancy in love or friendship among vampires? Why must it have anything at all to do with Lily?"

I bit my lower lip. He was right, unfortunately. I had been willing to take any explanation, no matter how far-fetched, in lieu of the truth. I felt tears form in my eyes and put my face into my hands.

"Then again," he said, and there was an edge to his voice that made me drop my hands and look up at him, "you may be close to the truth. With only the characters reversed."

"Reversed? What do you mean?"

"Simply that I did not find Lily Williams, she found me. With the express purpose of finding and hurting you. I will admit to helping her, but she asked so nicely. And I always had trouble resisting a sweet-talking redhead."

"But why, Victor? Who am I to her that she should go to all this trouble?"

"Who indeed? How much do you remember of your transformation?"

"I remember all of it as if it only happened yesterday, Victor."

He nodded. "And how many months pregnant were you?"

"Seven."

"And the blood that flowed through your veins also flowed into the baby?"

"Well, yes, of course, it had to."

He nodded again. "And?" he asked, for all the world as if I was a slow student constantly missing the question.

And then I realized I was missing the question. The question and the answer.

The world stopped for me in that second. Unthinkable, I had said to Elly, and so it was. Unthinkable, but not impossible, "The baby?" My voice was less than a whisper, more like a gasp of pain. "My baby was alive?"

"Not at first, no. She lay dormant for a while, how long exactly she wasn't sure. No more than a few years, I would guess. But she had enough of Max's blood in her veins to sustain her, and she woke up in the grave and dug her way to the surface."

"Oh, dear God."

Victor chucked his head to one side, a smug expression on his face as he handed me my glass and clinked his own against it. "And so you see, congratulations really are in order, my dear. You have a daughter. And I, I suppose, have a granddaughter. Of sorts. It is a complicated situation. I grew quite fond of her, poor little motherless waif." He chuckled. "Although I daresay she'd hate that description."

"But why did she come to you? Why didn't she come to me?"

"I told you it is a rather complicated situation. Lily is unlike you and me. She ages and develops and grows, but very slowly. I would venture a guess that her physical and mental development is no older than twenty, despite the fact that she was born in 1860. She was found in the cemetery by a woman by the name of Philomena, a runaway slave skilled in the arts of what we now call Santeria. Fortunately, this woman recognized Lily for the hybrid that she is and passed the care of this special child to her daughters, But the last caretaker did not marry and so when she died, quite recently murdered as a matter of fact, Lily had no one."

"And she came to New York looking for me?"

"Scraping together a pitiful amount of savings, she walked to the bus station and ended up here, yes. She followed an old newspaper article to Griffin Designs, met Betsy McCain. They dined at The Imperial the evening I met her." He smiled and his eyes softened. "She's a brave one, Deirdre. She came all the way down here to meet me knowing what I was. And she had me fooled for a while; I truly did think she was you. She's good. She's damn good. The amount of power that girl has stored up within her is amazing."

I nodded. "It all makes sense, now that you say it. But I should have known. Or Max should have known that such a thing was possible."

Victor shrugged. "Familial virtues were rather wasted on Max, Deirdre. You of all people should know that. He did what he wanted and the rest of us could be damned. To be fair to you, though, there is no way the situation could have been foreseen. Lily is unique."

I remembered, though, all of the tears I had wept for that stillborn child and the way the pain of our

separation never dissipated. "No, Victor, I should have known." I sipped at my wine, staring at nothing.

"Perhaps it is a mother-and-child bond," Victor said softly. "I am no better than Max was at such things."

"But why didn't she come to me, Victor? I would have helped her, would have told her or given her anything she wanted."

"There is a simple answer to that, Deirdre. Very simple. She is a child still, a confused and angry child. Imagine the hurt she felt; the cruel fact of knowing that your mother abandoned you, birthed you and buried you and left you to rot. Intensify that by all of the years she spent in a less than desirable home situation, being cared for out of duty and not love. I grant you, this is not any more rational a reaction than your guilt, but it is just as real. You left her for dead and she hates you for that."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



"So how does Mitch fit into all of this?" Victor put his head back and laughed. "Quite uncomfortably, I would think. One day Lily will let down her guard or even grow bored with the game, and he will wake up next to someone other than his beloved wife. Imagine his horror when he realizes that this is not just another woman—it is his wife's daughter, his stepdaughter." He laughed again, harder this time.

"Victor, you are a sorry son of a bitch."

"Thank you, my dear, I do try. So I suppose you will be going after them now?"

I sighed. "I do not have a choice, now that I know who Lily is. If she had been anyone else, merely another woman, I could have let it go. I would have had to let it go."

"Had to let it go? I would have thought you'd be angry enough to track them down and kill them."

"I am. And therefore, I could not. You have an animal form, do you not?"

He blinked. "Actually, I have several. But it is not something we discuss readily. That form is a reflection of our inner instincts; it is often not complimentary or pretty. We are, after all, monsters under our human skins."

"Just so. I will not ask what form your baser instincts take." I gave him a sharp look and then a small laugh. "I probably do not want to know. But have you ever had your animal form angered by another?"

"To the point of wanting to kill? Of course."

"And what was the outcome?"

"They died. And the problem is?"

"I do not want Mitch dead. I will gladly live the rest of my life without him before being responsible for that. But the Cat is not of like mind."

"Ah. I see. You face an interesting dilemma, then. I have never been at odds with my inner form. It must be uncomfortable."

I laughed. "I always seem to be fighting something or someone, Victor. At least this time the enemy is easy to see."

"But not easy to eliminate. For what it is worth, Deirdre, I am sorry for your conflict. You must truly love him."

"Yes, I do. And for that, I am sorry." I got up out of the chair and drained my wineglass. "I should be going now. New Orleans?"

"Yes, that is where she should be."

"I will find her. Thank you, Victor."

He rose and walked to the door with me, kissed my hand again. "Why are you thanking me? If not for me, none of this would have happened."

"If Lily is as determined as you say, it would have happened regardless. At least you told me the truth. You will, however, give me back half of the money. As soon as possible."

"Only half?"

When I didn't answer, he smiled. "Of course, half of the money. I'll have it taken care of tomorrow. And I will let you know when it is done."

I shook my head. "Victor, you are not senile. I will tell them if you want."

"Later, perhaps. I don't mind the confinement as much as you'd think. I am comfortable, at least. And I am old, Deirdre, so very old. And so very tired."

"Walk softly this night, Victor."

I started toward the outer door. "Deirdre?"

Turning around, I was surprised at his grief-stricken expression. Even more surprised to see bloodstained tears streaking down his face. "Yes?" I said.

"Go easy with her. She is a child. A beautiful child."

"I will try, Victor."

"See?" He wiped at his eyes in annoyance. "I really am an old man. But Lily—oh, she made me feel young again. Bring her back to me."

I nodded to him and opened the door. "Lock the cell again, Claude," I called. "We have finished our visit. And no harm done."

"Thank you, Miss Griffin." He hurried into the room; I heard the air turn off, heard the click of the tank

door as it closed and shivered again.

"What did you do to him?" Claude's voice was a combination of accusation and awe. "I could swear he was crying."

"It has nothing to do with me, Claude. Now, can you show me to a room in the Cadre quarters? I need some rest."

"I had them get your old suite ready while I was waiting."

"That will do just fine. Thank you."

It was the same set of rooms, but it seemed different somehow. "No roses?" I asked Claude after he opened the door and handed me the key.

"Roses? You want roses? I can get you some."

"No, I don't want roses. May I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead, Miss Griffin."

"First thing, please call me Deirdre. And how long have you been, ah, a member of the Cadre?"

"Six and a half months." His answer was immediate and exact.

"Well, when Vivienne gets back in town, you should get her to fill you in on recent history. I doubt there are too many old-time members of the Cadre who would want to see you walking down the hall bringing me roses. But thank you for the offer. And thank you for getting the room put together for me."

"Miss, er, Deirdre? Did you need anything else? I notice that you have no place to sleep."

"There is the bed, Claude. That will be fine."

He looked horrified. "But, what about your coffin?"

I laughed and shrugged. "I do not have a coffin. And I do not need one."

"But, what about protection?"

"Claude, do you actually think a coffin gives you protection? Keeps you safe? What's to stop someone from opening the lid? The sanctity of vampire sleep? I doubt it."

He shook his head and gave me a wry grin. "It gives me the creeps to think about sleeping in the open."

I smiled and pointedly walked to the door, grasping the knob. "And it gives me the creeps, as you say, to think about sleeping any other way. Good night, Claude."

I locked the door after he left and turned the dead bolt. A useless gesture, I knew, against creatures that could turn into a mist and drift right in. But for the most part, Cadre members were painfully polite. I had

no fear of them interrupting my rest.

Stripping off my clothes, I went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. As the water warmed, I looked into the mirror. "You have a daughter," I whispered to my reflection. "A daughter." And I smiled.

The hot shower was relaxing and soothing. I toweled myself dry, flipped off the lights, pulled the heavy red brocade spread from the bed and crawled in. Despite all of the events and revelations of the past few days, I knew I would sleep. And sleep well. Everything would eventually work itself out, I thought, even with Mitch. *The Cat will forgive. And I will find my daughter and make her understand.*

"Yes, the Cat will forgive and it will all work out," I assured myself as I drifted to sleep. "I have a daughter."

I am not sure how he got into the room. But suddenly, here he is, next to me in the bed. Oh, the dear familiarity of that body and those hands. My heart rises up within me and I start to speak his name. "No." He lays his hand over my mouth. "Don't speak. No words." And so I lie silent, listening to the sweet whispers his lips give to my flesh. He kisses my face, my neck, gently and slowly tracing the slope of skin from breasts to belly, his canines lightly grazing, testing, nipping, searching. I gasp and lick my lips as he works his way lower, still probing with tongue and teeth. Then he rears his head back and strikes, his fangs cut into my flesh and I feel the irresistible pull of blood rushing from the center of my being in answer to his need. I cry out, wordless because of his command, unaware of everything but the relentless tremors of my spiraling orgasm.

When the shudders subside, he looks up at me and smiles, blood smeared around his mouth. "Mitch," I say, my voice still soft and hoarse, filled with love, "that was wonderful. But how..."

He puts his hand over my mouth again. "No words, remember? I have missed you." He laughs and his face twists, changing. In the dim light it looks brutal, bestial. He licks my blood from his lips and smiles. "Yes, I have missed you. But Victor is right. She's good. Damned good."

The Cat howls within me and bursts through in fury. Before I can whisper the words to stop, she flings herself onto him. Claws extended, she rips the smile off Mitch's face; blood spurts all around us, driving her into a deep frenzy of slashing and tearing. His skin hangs in tatters, and his smile now consists only of teeth and gore, frozen in place.

I leap on top of him, front claws digging into his neck, back claws raking open his stomach and groin. Burrowing my muzzle deep into his chest, I search and find the ultimate reward, his steaming-hot and beating heart. I shake it from side to side, tearing it away from the anchoring arteries, ripping it free from his cold, betraying body. I savor the taste of him, bite down hard, chew and swallow. When the last morsel is gone, I jump down and settle onto the floor, leaving his grinning corpse on the bed. Methodically and fastidiously, I go about grooming all the blood from my fur: a delightful task for his blood feeds me like no blood ever had before. I take my time, what is time to me? I am free of love and honor and conscience, free finally of the other.

A few more strokes of my tongue, and I am totally clean. I jump back up on the bed, and push the covers over him, rolling him closer to the edge, nudging him with my head until he falls with a sodden thump. I lie down again and close my eyes. A deep contented rumble vibrates through my body, my tail twitches once or twice, I yawn. And sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



"Jesus Christ!" I sat straight up in a cold sweat and looked around me. No blood, no body, no Cat. "So much for forgiveness," I said, and swung my legs over the side of the bed, shuddering slightly at the remembrance of Mitch's body lying there on the floor. The dream had seemed so real; even now the taste of him lingered in my mouth. And his blood had been so sweet, his death so satisfying. I shivered and went into the bathroom to splash cold water onto my face.

"I can hardly wait to hear what Sam has to say about all of this," I said. Checking the clock at the bedside table, I saw that it was nearing 4:00 P.M.. I had slept a good long time, but felt weary and drained. "A little more sleep and a lot less dream would have been good." Worse, the dream of blood had awakened my hunger; I would need to feed soon, if only to have the strength for my next task.

I had to find Lily as quickly as possible. There was no way I could make up for her feelings of abandonment and hatred, but I had not known of her prior to this. Whether I should have known, whether I had suspected her existence somewhere deep in my mind, was unimportant now. What was important was that I find her.

Hopefully, when found she would be alone, having released whatever hold she'd had on Mitch. I did not want to see Mitch. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. The dream had been awful enough. I had no desire to repeat it in real life.

I sighed, picked up my clothes and promptly dropped them back to the floor. They were travel-worn and stained with wine; I crinkled my nose with distaste at the thought of putting them back on. On impulse, I threw open the door of a heavy armoire and found to my delight a heavy terry-cloth robe hanging there. I wondered briefly, as I wrapped myself in it, whether the Cadre provided these much like the higher-class hotels, or if it had been forgotten by the last occupant and ignored by the cleaning staff. It did not really matter; it was clean and fresh. As I was tying the sash at the waist, there was a soft knock on the door.

"Who's there?"

"Deirdre? I'm back; let me in, sister."

I smiled, I should have recognized the knock. I flung open the door and Vivienne threw herself into my arms, hugging the breath out of my body and depositing a warm and lingering kiss on my lips.

She laughed, that soft metallic giggle I found entrancing and annoying at the same time. As I often found her.

"I heard you were here, *ma cherie*, as soon as I woke up. These long flights, you know how it is. It has been so long; you are a bad sister for staying away so long. But oh"—and she gave me another hug and kiss—"it is so good to see you. I also hear that Mitch, he is not with you. So we will have the time for a nice long girl talk, no?"

"Well," I said, putting the robe back to rights and tightening the sash again after her enthusiastic hugs, "I have some time. But first I need some clothes. I came away in a bit of a hurry, you see, and did not pack much."

She gave a little disdainful puff. "You are always in a bit of a hurry, Deirdre. Never having time for anything. But come along to my room; I can give you clothes. And then we will go out together, yes? I am famished."

She grabbed my arm and dragged me down the hall to her room. Claude struggled in with about ten suitcases, setting them very carefully in a row on the floor. "I brought these in as soon as I heard you were awake, Miss Courbet."

"*Merci*, Claude. This is my sister, Deirdre." She threw an arm around my neck. "You are to give her extra-special treatment."

Claude nodded. "I have already had the pleasure of meeting Miss Griffin. I trust she slept well."

"Well enough, Claude. Thank you."

"Will there be anything more, Miss Courbet?"

"Not now, Claude, I must get my sister dressed. And after that we shall be going out for a bite."

She winked at me. "Perhaps you would like to join us?"

He looked back and forth between the two of us, then pulled out his ever-present handkerchief and patted his forehead. "I have already eaten," he said, "but if you need me to come with you, I would of course be delighted."

"No, no, Claude. That is not necessary. And how is Victor these days?"

He jumped guiltily. "He is fine. Just fine." He looked over at me. I shook my head and he relaxed. "You know how he is; he has good days and bad days."

"As do we all, *mon petit chou*."

"So, if there isn't anything else?"

"No, you may go." She walked over to him, stretched up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Have a good evening, Claude."

He gave us each a small bow and walked out the door, shutting it carefully and precisely behind him. We heard his heavy footsteps move down the hall, heard the elevator bell ring.

"I know," she said, her voice soft, but filled with laughter. "You must be thinking, 'What was she thinking?'"

"Not at all, he seems nice. And you certainly can't fault his manners. But after Sam, you must admit that he is rather an odd choice."

"What does Sam have to do with it? It is none of his business who I choose to..." She stopped short

and put her hand up to her mouth. "Oh, you think that Claude and I are lovers? No, no and no." She giggled again. "Although I do think that it might be an intriguing possibility. But no, Deirdre, he was here to protect my interests while I was in Paris. He is very loyal to me."

"Are you sure?"

"I am the only one who treats him like he is a member here. The rest of them avoid him, as if being overweight were contagious. One would think that after centuries, they would look less to outer qualities and more to the inner virtues." She shrugged. "And Victor likes him."

"No doubt."

"Victor gets out of his cell all the time," she informed me with another giggle. "The other house leaders do not know. They fear him, you know, as well they should, since they put him there."

"But aren't you in charge of the Cadre?"

She rolled her eyes. "In name, yes. And they defer to me; but we are ruled now by council decisions. And so Victor was put away."

"He does not need to be there."

"No, you are right. But that was not a question, you have seen him?"

I told her the story as she unpacked. During the process, Vivienne would throw a dress or skirt at me and have me try it on for her. As I finished explaining why I had to go to New Orleans to find Lily as soon as possible, she nodded and removed one final piece from her suitcase. "Here, here is what you should wear tonight; it is perfect for you and you will feel more comfortable appropriately dressed. And yes, of course you should go to New Orleans to see your daughter. But tomorrow. I will help you with the arrangements. Perhaps I should even send Claude with you? Yes." She nodded again and tossed me the garment. "He will be able to help you, I'm sure."

I looked at what she had chosen for me. It was a shiny black vinyl bodysuit. "This will make me more comfortable?" I smiled. "Are we going scuba diving?"

"No, silly. We are going to my club. Dangerous Crossings. Now go and change. I want you to look magnificent tonight."

As I dressed, I thought about Vivienne. While she called me sister, we were not related by anything other than Max's insatiable hunger. He had found her in a brothel in Paris, she'd told me once, and changed her life forever. "That bastard. It is not that I resented him for that, *mon chou*," she'd explained. "I had a life that could only be improved. But he was just so distant and superior. Oh, you knew how he was. He made me want to scream and tear his hair out. I was so very happy when he died."

I remembered how she'd come over to my side during my trial for Max's death. And how we'd spent time together watching movies while Sam experimented on us like research animals, searching for the drug that could paralyze vampires.

I also remembered, less fondly, that she was the one who had trained Mitch how to transform into

animal form. Mitch, in turn, had tried to train me. But I could only transform to the Cat under duress, and had never been particularly at ease with the concept, preferring instead to stay in my human shape.

Perhaps, though, I thought as I zipped up the front of my outfit, she could train me how to control the Cat. I would ask her.

Looking in the mirror, I scowled. The bodysuit fabric was thin and it fit over my body like a second skin. I felt naked, and wondered again how this would make me more comfortable. But I did not have much time to worry about it for the door opened and Vivienne came in, looked me up and down and clapped her hands together. "Perfect," she said. "But let us do something different with your hair." And she proceeded to slick it back and roll it into a tight bun at the nape of my neck, pulling jeweled pins out of her own hair to fasten it. "There, now you are perfect. Let's go."

If I hadn't known the way by heart, I would never have recognized our final destination. Dangerous Crossings was what Vivienne had made of the Ballroom of Romance.

"Did I not tell you I was going to renovate the whole place?"

I looked around in disbelief. "You may have mentioned the fact. But this place looks like a dungeon."

The walls had been covered in heavy stone and cement and were decorated with implements of torture. And crucifixes. "It is very nice," I said, knowing that she would want me to say something. "Unique."

Vivienne laughed. "Deirdre, my sister, you are not a good liar. Very nice? It looks like a nightmare one might have about the Inquisition. But they do not care; we have a waiting list for the next year or so. I do not understand. One would think that the world is full of more than enough torture for humans. And still they pay hundreds of dollars to get in, hundreds of more dollars for special scenarios. Not to mention the exorbitant liquor prices we charge. It is worse than a nightmare; it is a sin." She laughed again, and the metallic peals echoed in the empty room. "Then again, it serves a purpose. For all concerned. And I get no complaints."

"So, if this place is so popular, where is everyone? By now the Ballroom would have been so crowded you wouldn't be able to move."

"But this is not the Ballroom, Deirdre. And it is early yet; we don't really open for another hour or so. It is an off night, tonight; weekends are really our best times. We'll get enough people here, though, to give you a feel for what we are. And easily enough to offer a good selection of choices for the evening's meal."

"You feed off the customers? Is that a good idea?"

She put an arm around me and began to lead me across the room. "It is a wonderful idea." Giggling as she opened the door that led to the private offices, she leaned over and whispered in my ear, "For that, they pay extra."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



The area behind the club had changed as well. "Private rooms," Vivienne explained. "I had to give them all the dungeon feel as well. But this next you should find amusing, at least." We stopped outside an office door that now displayed a small but ornate brass plaque embossed with the words "Max's Office." It hung off center, just a few inches too many to the right.

"It's crooked," I said.

"But of course it is." She opened the door. "It had to be to cover the hole."

I gasped when I saw what she meant. "But this is the original door." I reached over and felt the splintered hole. "This wasn't here when I owned the place."

"No, I had it taken down for you. I thought you'd feel more comfortable that way. But now I own the club. And I like the reminder."

"Reminder?" Shivering, I moved my hand from the door and held it out in front of my face, as if I could still see Max's blood. "For what do you need a reminder?"

"That our lives, no matter how long they are, can always be ended. Abruptly and violently. And often by someone we trust and care for. Maybe even someone we love."

I looked at her in surprise. I had never known her to be so serious about anything. "It is a very good thing to remember."

She laughed then. "It is a morbid thing to remember, you mean. Sam says it gives him the creeps. But he will be joining us here soon, a special occasion because you are here. He does not care for the club all that much."

"That does not surprise me."

"And I can tell that you do not either, little sister."

"I did not say that I did not care for it. It is certainly different than I expected..."

She shrugged. "It does not matter to me whether you like it or not. You have always been more puritanical than I ever was. I find the place amusing is all. And when it stops being amusing, I will sell it and move on."

"Fair enough, Vivienne. I was not sitting in judgment of you."

"No?" She gave a little flip of her hand. "I felt that you were. But, let us not talk of that. Wine?"

"Yes, please." I settled in on the couch and she went over to the bar and opened a bottle. "I notice that you didn't redecorate the office to match the rest of the place." I ran my hand over the floral chintz upholstery. "Why not?"

She gave me a bright smile and handed me a glass of wine. "I did not want to work in a dungeon, you see. There is enough torture to have to sit with the accountants and lawyers."

"I can certainly agree with that"

The door opened and Sam came in.

"Good evening, ladies." Dressed in a tuxedo, he looked incredibly handsome, a fact not lost on Vivienne, whose face lit up.

"Oh, *mon beau morceau* ! It has been too long." She threw herself into his arms and seemed to melt all over him. I got up from the couch as they kissed, and walked over to look out the office window, feeling totally unnecessary and out of place. I'd have been better off had I never left this city, had I stayed with Max and never met Mitchell Greer. But even as I thought it, I knew that last was a lie. I might have to choose to never see Mitch again, but I was glad he had been in my life.

"Deirdre?" Sam stood next to me. "Vivienne tells me congratulations are needed."

"Yes. 'Congratulations, you have a daughter. And condolences, she hates you and has done everything within her power to make you miserable.' "

Sam laughed. "From what my friends with children tell me, this is not very unusual. Although I see what you mean. And what will you do?"

"I have to find her. I will leave for New Orleans tomorrow evening, I suppose, provided arrangements can be made in time."

I glanced at Vivienne, and she nodded. "Time is no problem. I have asked Claude to take care of everything, Deirdre. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"And what about Mitch?" Sam asked. "What will you do about him? It's entirely possible, you know, that he left with her believing she was you. That seems to have been her plan. In that case, it was not a betrayal of you. I told you there had to be a good explanation, and there it is."

I nodded, agreeing. "And I can accept that, Sam. Understand it, almost. But the Cat is not so forgiving."

"The cat again? You take it so literally, Deirdre. This cat creature is merely a subconscious expression of the anger and the instincts with which your human side can't deal."

"You think so?" I knew there was only one way to win this argument. But I hadn't the strength to transform and control the Cat this evening.

Vivienne began to laugh. "Sam, darling, you aren't listening. I'm crazy about you, *mon cher* , you know that, but sometimes you can be so—oh, how do they say it now?—yes, clueless. Deirdre's cat is real."

"I know she sees it as real. As I know you talk about your alternate forms as being real. But it's impossible for a human body to transform into another creature."

Vivienne threw her hands up into the air. "Sam, we have been over this ground a thousand times. Perhaps I will just show you."

"But you always said you couldn't show me. Now you can?"

"No, I said I preferred not to show you. There is a difference. And so"—she began to undress, right there in the office—"I will change my preference. And my form. *Voilà!*"

When she stood naked in front of us, she closed her eyes and clasped her arms around her shoulders. A shadow seemed to come up from the floor to cover her pale skin as she crouched down. Her neck craned out from her body; as it thinned and lengthened, she shivered. The shadow continued to grow and become more substantial, until her body was completely covered in black lustrous feathers. Her human face disappeared, she stretched her arms out and wings developed.

Sam gasped. I smiled. And in less than a minute, the transformation was complete. Where Vivienne had stood, now was a huge, beautiful black swan. She made a crooning noise and walked over to Sam, rubbing her head against his leg, stretching her beak up until it touched his lips. Then she shivered again, spread her massive wings and dropped them back down. The feathers seemed to flow back into the floor and the human Vivienne was back.

She held on to Sam for just a minute, wearied by the rapid transformations. Then she laughed and started to put her clothes back on. "Here, after all this time, Sam, you thought I had run out of surprises."

He had backed off from her slightly. "I should have known better. And I should have believed you. How many more forms do you have?"

She shrugged as she fastened her bustier. "Two more, but I choose not to show them. To you or to anyone. The swan is at least reasonably attractive. I am so vain, don't you think?" She smiled shyly and fluffed her hair. "And you must understand our alternate forms are private things, Sam. We keep them secret if we can. Except from those who train us and from those whom we train."

"And Deirdre's cat?"

Vivienne finished his sentence. "Is just as real as she is. And more dangerous, for a variety of reasons. But enough of the serious for tonight. I am ready for some play. And Deirdre must have something to eat before her trip."

The club had filled up while we'd been in the office. It was not as crowded as the Ballroom would be, but then, it was quite obviously not the same place. I looked around me in disbelief. It was like I had landed on a distant planet. The people seemed to be dressed in costumes, some even wearing masks and capes. There were women and men wearing collars and cuffs being led around like trained animals, people wrapped up in what looked like cellophane, people in various forms of disarray with just scraps of clothing covering their genitalia. Others were completely dressed from head to toe, except for cut-out portions over their private areas. I saw tattoos and piercings in places I could not even begin to consider. Some people were being waited on by slaves; others were being whipped or spanked or tickled. I had never even imagined that this scene existed so openly, and breathed a silent thanks that Vivienne had made me wear this ridiculous bodysuit. I would have been appalled and embarrassed in any case, but at least my dress conformed.

That Vivienne found the entire situation amusing was not surprising. When we had emerged from the back rooms, she'd been greeted with a small burst of applause. Everyone knew who she was; everyone wanted to be with her. As we walked through the crowd, hands reached out to touch her, faces leaned

over to kiss her. They adored her.

I looked at Sam and raised an eyebrow. He smiled at me, put an arm around my shoulder and whispered, "I don't mind. She enjoys this so. And it's certainly more enjoyable than Cadre functions. Once we get to the table, they all pretty much go about their business and leave us alone."

"Doesn't she worry about people finding out who she is?"

Sam laughed. "Vivienne doesn't worry about anything. You should know that by now. She's like a child, accepting all that life gives her with wonder and delight. To worry would detract from the enjoyment. And it seems to work for her."

Our table was situated on a high platform, roped off from the rest of the area. Facing the club, three chairs were set up behind a long narrow table. On the wall behind us hung a large tapestry depicting the symbol of the house of Courbet. I felt hideously conspicuous, seated between Sam and Vivienne, my every movement on display for the crowd. But Sam was right, we were ignored for the most part, except for occasional glances and whispers.

Vivienne poured us each a glass of champagne from the setup to her right and giggled. "Isn't this fun?" she whispered to me as a man dressed in a black leather jumpsuit and chains called her name from below the platform and threw her one red rose.

She caught it, sniffed it and smiled her thanks. "I always wanted to be royalty," she confided, "and this is as close as I've ever been."

"The problem with playing Marie Antoinette, though, is that one often loses one's head."

"It is sweet of you to worry about me, little sister. But my head is firmly fastened on, *merci*. "

Sam cleared his throat and smiled. "In other words, Deirdre, stay the hell out of it."

I nodded. "I am sorry, Vivienne. That was inappropriate."

"No need for apologies. We are family."

Halfway through our bottle of champagne, a waiter came to the edge of the platform. "Miss Courbet?"

"Yes, Jules? What is it?"

"All is ready."

Vivienne jumped up and clapped her hands together. "Marvelous. Please see that Doctor Samuels has everything he needs while we are away." She reached down and pulled me to my feet. "Come, Deirdre. Here is the best part."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



"How many, Jules?" Vivienne asked as we went back into the private area.

"Full house, Miss Courbet. All eight rooms are occupied."

"And how are they?"

Jules smiled. "The same crop as always. Room Five is a bigger tipper than most. And Room Seven seems to have changed his mind."

"Ah, poor little lamb. He should have thought longer before allowing himself to be led to the slaughter."

I stiffened at the word. "No, Deirdre, I did not mean it that way. There is no harm here. No one dies. No one even gets hurt. They wish to give their blood, they want the danger and the excitement and they pay well for it. And we take so very little. Isn't that right, Jules?"

"*Oui*, Miss Courbet." He laughed, and I caught the glimpse of growing canines.

"Another one, Vivienne?" I said. "My, my, you really have been busy, haven't you?"

She stuck her tongue out at me. "Don't be such a pig, Deirdre. There is Claude for the Cadre and Jules for the club. Do not ever think me so much a fool to live the life I do without protection."

I nodded. "I see. And now what?"

She laughed. "And now we play. Loosen up a bit, sister. It's only life."

The whole thing was more than surreal. Eight dungeon rooms with eight men, blindfolded and chained to the walls, in various modes of dress and undress. The doors were open, and as we walked down the hall and peered inside, Vivienne made suggestive comments about each. When they heard her voice, they stood up a bit straighter and smiled. "It is apparently an honor to be chosen," she whispered to me. "I do not understand it, but I do not complain. And neither do they."

"All right, Vivienne. You've convinced me. My life has certainly been dreary enough for all of us recently; for tonight, I will try to play."

She deposited a long kiss on my lips. "Your problems will still be there tomorrow and you will face them then. And, I have no doubt, conquer them, as you conquer everything. Forget Mitch, forget Lily and just be yourself tonight."

Once I relaxed and cleared my mind of tomorrow's journey, I realized that Vivienne was right. There was no harm in the situation, and its very ridiculousness lightened my spirits.

"It is rather like a smorgasbord, isn't it?" I said with a laugh as we inspected each man closely.

"Just so," said Vivienne, "and so very difficult to choose." She hesitated outside Room Seven. "This one, I think..." she began, and the man trembled visibly. She winked at me and put her finger to her lips, silently walking up to his side, laying her hand gently on his chest. He jumped and bit his bottom lip. "This one, I think, can go now." The man relaxed, then flinched when she touched her tongue to his neck and

ran her hand along the lower part of his face. "Words to the wise,*mon chou*. One must not offer what one does not wish to part with."

"Yes, Mistress," he said, his voice cracking slightly on the words. "I'll remember. Thank you."

She slapped him lightly on the face with both of her hands and giggled. "Jules," she called, "let this one go. He is unworthy of our attentions."

We walked back out into the hallway.

"And now, sweet sister, we must choose."

I shrugged. They all seemed the same to me. "Pick one for me, Vivienne."

"You take all the fun out of it, Deirdre. But if you insist." She closed her eyes and spun around, pointing her arm, stopping eventually at Room Three. "Dinner is served, Madame Greer."

She gave me a little push into the room and shut the door behind me.

"Hello?" The man chained to the wall craned his head forward a bit, attempting to see beyond the blindfold. "Vivienne?" He was wearing a suit and tie, but the tie had been loosened and his neck was exposed.

"No, I am not Vivienne." I walked toward him, feeling incredibly stupid and awkward.

"Then you are the one with the red hair. I am pleased to meet you. And serve you."

"Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why? Why would you allow this? Chained like a prisoner, blindfolded, waiting for someone to choose you and take your blood?"

He seemed confused. "It's just a game, isn't it? They told me it wouldn't hurt"

I laughed. "And what if they lied?"

"But they wouldn't lie. This place would have to close down."

"Ah. And so here you are. And here I am. Now, what do we do? I could unchain you and take off your blindfold and we could talk. Or I could drink your blood." He gave a sharp intake of breath at that "I am very hungry," I confessed, moving closer to him and breathing the words into his neck. "I am also very angry, not at you, of course, but you are here. And those that I am angry with are not What is your name?"

"Um, they told me there would be no names."

I reached up and grasped his throat." I asked your name, human. Do not make me angrier."

"Kevin," he blurted out. His fear was intoxicating and I felt my hunger grow. The Cat purred deep within

me. "I like this game," it said. "Let us play some more."

"So what is it going to be, Kevin?" I took my hand from his throat and ran my nails down his neck and chest. "Talk? Or blood?"

"I paid extra for the vampire scene, didn't I?"

"I suppose you did. And I promise you I will not disappoint you." I stood there silently for a minute, scenting his flesh and his sweat and his blood. Then I laid my hands on the wall on either side of him, holding him firmly in place with my body. "Turn your head," I said to him, and he did so with no questions. I could feel him tremble next to me; his hands opened and closed uselessly in their shackles; he swallowed hard and gave a small smile.

"When?" he asked, trying to move his head.

I grasped his chin and pushed the side of his head to the wall. "Now."

He jumped when the tips of my fangs grazed his neck, gasped as my teeth penetrated his skin. We both moaned as his blood began to flow. I drew on him slowly, savoring him, enjoying the stolen warmth that rushed through my body. Every mouthful was ecstasy, the shared experience more intensely sensual than any act of sex or love. Each successive sip tasted better than the last, urging me to take it all, drink it all, swallow it all. Drain him dry.

"No." I pulled my mouth away from him and stepped back, wiping my bloody lips on my hand.

Kevin groaned and moved his hands feebly. "Are you done?"

I laughed. "Yes, thank you. I am finished. Was it worth what you paid?"

The mouth under the blindfold smiled. "Yeah. Oh, yeah." He was silent for a while, still smiling. "Thank you. It was incredible. Like someone was dragging my soul through a velvet tunnel. I felt like I could die and not care. How'd you do that?"

I reached up and patted his cheek. "Trade secret, Kevin. I can't tell you. I'm sorry."

"What do I do now?"

"Oh, I expect Jules will be along soon to release you. Perhaps he will even bring you a drink."

I opened the door and walked out into the hallway. All of the rooms but one were empty now. I chuckled as I walked past Room Five hearing deep laughter and higher-pitched giggling from behind the closed door. Trust Vivienne to keep the big spenders happy.

Jules met me at the door to the club. "Everything satisfactory, Miss Griffin?"

"Fine, Jules, thank you. Take him a drink, please, I suspect he is quite thirsty."

He nodded. "But of course. For the rest of the night he can drink as much as he likes for free. It's part of the package."

I shook my head. None of this made any sense to me at all. Not for the first time, I wished I was back in

the cabin in Maine. But the cabin lay in ashes, along with the shreds of my relationship with Mitch, and no amount of wishing could make life different. I sighed. "Tell Sam and Vivienne that I needed to take a walk. I will see them later back at headquarters."

"As you wish."

I walked the city streets until it was close to dawn searching for what I had lost. It was a futile endeavor; what I had lost seemed unrecoverable. Mitch had gone and I was alone. I had a daughter, true, but she had been instrumental in taking from me what I most valued. Perhaps it was fitting. I had left her for dead.

Poor little one, never having a chance for a normal life. My daughter, blood of my blood, closer blood and dearer than any lover I had ever had. Had I but known, I'd have sacrificed everything to have her with me.

But I had not known and I had left her, chasing down love and blood for so many years, finally finding all I had ever wanted in Mitch. And now? Now I had lost everything. I had neither of them. She hated me. And he had destroyed my love by his leaving. It mattered little that he might have left believing her to be me. I condemned him for the same reasons I condemned myself. He should have known.

I sat on the steps outside his old apartment for some time, hoping for a miracle. Hoping that all I had been through was nothing but a bad dream. And that he would come out of the door and smile at me, his eyes glowing with love and promise. I closed my eyes and pretended that all of that was true. That Mitch was only a flight of stairs away. That he would come and call me inside to bed.

Then this would be a perfect world. One in which the Cat's instincts had not been aroused. One in which I didn't have to fear the killing of one I loved. Or fear his killing me.

I sighed and opened my eyes. It was not a perfect world, nor would it ever be.

But there is an easy solution, I thought. I can sit here until dawn . I closed my eyes again, and this time imagined the lovely heat of the sun's rays caressing my upturned face. After all the long cold and dark years, I yearned for the sunshine almost as much as I feared it. Perhaps it was time. And it would not hurt for too long , I thought, and, oh, the warmth would be heaven .

"Miss Griffin?"

I opened my eyes not to the sun, but to Claude's wide face. He looked distressed and anxious.

I snapped at him. "Damn it, Claude, call me Deirdre. Unlike the rest of the Cadre leeches, I do not require your worship or deference."

"Miss Courbet sent me out to find you," he said, glancing uneasily at the late night sky. "It is close to dawn and we should be getting back. Our flight to New Orleans leaves a little after sunset tonight"

"Did Vivienne fear I came out here to greet the sun?"

Claude hung his head and shrugged. "I don't know what she fears, Deirdre. She doesn't confide in me that much. I was just told to find you and bring you back."

"And if I do not wish to be brought back?"

He laughed nervously. "Please don't make that an option, Deirdre. I can't afford to fail."

"Very well, then. I do not need your failure on my shoulders with everything else. And I suppose we should go at that. There is nothing here that matters anymore." I got up from the steps without looking back.

There would be no miracles for me, I knew. Just endless lonely nights falling on top of each other. "And someday," I whispered, "I will greet the sun."

Claude shivered at that. But had no words in response. He took my hand and tucked it into his arm, and proceeded to escort me back to Cadre headquarters.

"How old are you, Claude?"

"Thirty-five."

"Ah," I said, "that is younger than I'd thought."

"I look older, I think, because of my size."

"And you have been with us for six months?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"And tell me, Claude, do you like it? Is the life of a vampire everything you ever wanted?"

He paused and looked down at me with a puzzled expression. "You know, I don't really know. And no one's ever asked me that before. A lot of the life is wonderful, the heightened senses, the power and the strength. I was always a night person—I used to play piano in a blues band in New Orleans—so I would wake with sunset and sleep with the dawn. That much, at least, is the same."

"And the blood does not bother you?"

He blushed. "No, the taking of blood is wonderful. Much better than anything I've ever experienced."

"And so you do like being what you are?"

He puffed his lips out. "Yeah, now that you mention it, I guess I do." He smiled. "And Vivienne is great; she's patient and gracious. And generous. She bought me my share of the Westwood. A birthday present, she said. And I like the work. And you?"

"Me?"

"Yes, do you like being a vampire?"

"It is all I have known for so very long, Claude." We entered the back door of The Imperial and got on the elevator for the Cadre level. "I struggled for years, on my own. No guidance, no training. Had Max stayed around, things might have been different. Things should have been different. But they weren't."

The cycle of life goes on all around me and I remain untouched. I have held on to my humanity for too long, I think."

We stopped outside my door and he unlocked it for me. "And so you don't like it?" he said.

I kissed him on the cheek. "In a word, Claude? No. But I do not know how to let it go. And I cannot stop from hoping that there is some purpose to my life beyond feeding and sleeping and yearning after the sun. Good night."

I closed the door and lay down on the bed. I felt the sun begin to rise, and I cried myself to sleep.

PART FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Looking out the window of the chartered plane, I tried as hard as I could to ignore, without seeming to, the man who sat holding my hand. He was a stranger. And a dangerous one at that.

It had, at first, gone all too easily. From the moment she had left the cabin to the moment her loving husband and I had boarded the plane, I'd been prepared for a fight, a protest, something that would interfere. It had all gone according to plan, and that made me nervous. Deep down inside, maybe I was hoping that it wouldn't go this far.

But he'd accepted me without a question; he'd been happy and loving and trusting. At least until we boarded the plane. It worried me quite a lot; up until now I'd have had a way to escape, should he discover that I wasn't who I pretended to be. Now I had nowhere to run and nothing much in the way of protection. I fingered the beads hidden under my shirt "Please," I whispered. "Please."

"Deirdre?"

When I didn't respond, he squeezed my hand. "Deirdre? Come back."

I jumped and laughed. "Sorry, Mitch. I wasn't paying attention. What did you say again?"

"I said your name." He gave me a sharp look. "Are you feeling all right? You seem kind of edgy."

"Edgy? Me?" I shook my head. "No, I'm not edgy." I paused a second, trying to think of what sort of complaints a vampire might have and settled on the obvious. "I'm hungry."

"You are too edgy. But I know what you mean about hunger. It's been scarce pickings lately. Will we have time to feed after we get there?"

"I'm sure we can manage something."

"Good." He leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "Go back to your window-watching, my love; I know how you are on planes."

He got up from his seat and wandered about the plane, poking into the compartments and bins. While he was distracted, I allowed myself a small look around and a smug smile. This sure beat sitting elbow-to-elbow with sweaty people on a hot, stuffy bus. It was even better than the first-class flight from New York to Maine. "Nice plane, huh?" I called to him just as he called out to me, "I found the bar. Do you want a drink?"

"Sure. That'd be great. I'll have whatever you're having, thanks."

I heard the clink of ice, heard the liquid sound of something being poured into glasses, heard him walk up next to me.

"Did you say something about the plane?"

"Yeah, but it's not a big deal." I reached a hand up for the glass. "Thanks, love. What is it?"

"Scotch."

Victor had filled me in on likes and dislikes for both Mitch and my mother, but there had been so much he'd told me. I'd tried to focus on names and events as being the most important. But I did remember him mentioning Mitch drinking scotch. And so, it seemed natural that he and my mother would both indulge. "Oh," I said, "that's good."

He stood over me. "I know how much you enjoy a scotch every now and then." He took a sip from his glass. "This is a particularly good one, actually. Nothing like a single-malt to bring happy times into proper perspective."

"That's true, Mitch." I raised my glass and clinked it against his. "Here's to all our happy times."

He took a seat across from me this time. I could feel his cold blue gaze on me as I sipped at my drink.

"What is it, Mitch? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Deirdre, my love. What could possibly be wrong? Here I am in the embrace of my loving wife, who has gone to a lot of trouble and expense to plan a surprise vacation for me. I'm thrilled."

I gave him a smile and a nod before turning back to the window. "Anyway, we'll be landing soon."

"And then what?"

"It's a surprise," I said. *Provided Angelo follows my instructions*, I thought, *a very big surprise*. "But"—I looked over at him—"your glass is empty. Let me get you another."

I got up from my seat and went to the bar, feeling his eyes follow every move I made. "This plane reminds me of the one we took from England," he said from his seat. "In fact, it seems almost exactly the same. I guess they build them all the same, but even so, it seems strange. Don't you think?"

"Not all that strange," I said over my shoulder. "It's Victor's plane."

"And exactly how did you manage that? Last I heard, Victor was crazier than a loon. Has been ever since his pretty-boy friend was killed. What was his name again?"

I smiled, my back still to him. Finally, a test. And one to which I knew the answer. I turned around and leaned up against the bar. "Victor may be crazier than a loon, Mitch, but you aren't. And you know the name as well as I do. Ron Wilkes. In fact," I said, remembering another bit of truth to throw into the deception, "he copiloted the flight from England." I laughed and guessed. "You never liked him much, did you?"

My correct answer should have relaxed him. "No, I sure as hell did not. I'm sure you can remember why." He was far from relaxed; his mouth tightened and his eyes bored into me.

I licked my lips and ran a hand over my front jeans pocket, taking small comfort in the three little bulges I felt. "Emergencies only," Victor had said. I thought, somehow, that this would qualify. But I needed to gain just a few seconds without Mitch's sharp eyes watching me.

"Do me a favor, love? Go up to the cockpit and check when we'll be landing. I want to see the city lights as we fly in."

Mitch scowled at first, and then gave a small twisted smile. "You and your window-watching. Okay, I'll check."

As he turned to go, I spun around again and reached into my pocket, pulling out the vial of Angelo's confusion potion and one of the two small capsules Victor had given me. I didn't have time to think. With shaky hands I opened the vial first and then the capsule, pouring the entire contents of both into Mitch's glass, and stuffed the empty containers back into my pocket.

By the time Mitch came back down the aisle, I had finished pouring the scotch and swirled it around a bit. I put the glass up to my mouth and pretended to take a sip, while I sniffed at it. It smelled like scotch. I handed it to him, thankful he didn't prefer vodka.

He took it from me, drank it down in one gulp and dumped the leftover ice into the sink. "The pilot says we'll be there in about five minutes and suggests that we sit down and fasten our seat belts. I'll clean up here first."

I looked at the ice in the sink. Was there a residue of powder? "Don't be silly, Mitch. I'll put this all away."

"Sit." His voice was harsh and commanding. Then he smiled briefly. "I can manage to put away a few glasses without your help. And you wouldn't want to miss your first view of the city, would you?"

I went back to my seat and sat down. Minutes later, he sat across from me. "All done," he said. "Now we don't have to worry about flying glassware during touchdown."

I looked out the window as I was expected to. He stared at me a while, then sat next to me, peering over my shoulder. "It's a pretty sight, isn't it?" His voice tickled my ear and I shivered. "Glad to be back, honey?"

"Back?" My voice cracked slightly and I cleared my throat. "I've never been here before. You should know that." I turned my head and found myself nose-to-nose with him. The expression on his face was that of pure fury.

"No," he hissed at me, his canines growing with his anger, "I know that Deirdre Griffin has never been here before. But you? You are not Deirdre." He grabbed my shoulders with unbelievably strong hands and shook me. "Damn it, you look like her, you smell like her. Enough to make even me wonder. Your voice is right and you give all the right answers. But you don't speak the way she does. I get no feeling for your soul, as if a stranger had crawled into her skin. When I touch you, you don't respond right. And your eyes are wrong." He paused, loosening his grip on me; his eyes glazed over. He shook himself, as if trying to rid himself of the drug, but it was useless. His eyelids drooped; his hands fell from me and dropped at his side. "What did you put in my drink?"

I smiled, offering Victor a silent thanks. "Amitriptyline. It won't hurt you, really, just slow you down a bit."

"And then what do you plan to do with me? Drop me off at a park bench somewhere to watch the sunrise?" He said the words slowly, making a visible effort to control his speech.

"I intend to keep you. Safe and whole. You won't be harmed."

"Keep me? For how long?"

"Until my mother comes for you."

"Your mother? Who the hell are you?"

I laughed at his confusion. "My name is, at least currently, Lily Williams." He gazed at me blankly. "Lily Williams?" I nodded. "That's right, Lily Williams. Beloved daughter of John and Dorothy Grey Williams. Born in 1860. Any of this sound familiar, Mitch?" He rolled his eyes and worked his mouth for a while before he managed the words. "You're Deirdre's daughter?"

"Nice to meet you." I laughed. "Although I guess under the circumstances, I probably shouldn't call you Daddy."

CHAPTER THIRTY

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When the plane finally taxied to a stop and the roar of the engines died out, I called to the pilot. "Can you get me a wheelchair, or a cart or something? My friend is just a little bit disoriented."

The pilot studied Mitch lying limply in the seat. "Should I call for an ambulance? He looks pretty bad."

I shook my head. "No. This happens periodically. Stress or something. Brings on little seizures. He'll be okay after a bit of a rest."

"Whatever you say, Miss. Victor says you're the boss on this trip."

With the pilot's help, I managed to get Mitch into the wheelchair and off the plane. I'd bundled him up in one of the blankets as if he were an invalid, and people naturally accepted him as such.

Angelo was waiting at the gate for me. "Miss Lily." he yelled, walking toward us, "welcome home. And what have we here?"

"This is my stepfather, Mitchell Greer."

"But"—Angelo peered at him closely—"he one of them. How you do this to him?"

"Modern science, 'Lo. Beats that voodoo stuff anytime."

"My medicines didn't work?" His expression was doubtful and pained.

I touched his arm. "Actually, they worked quite well. I just didn't want to take any chances."

"I suppose you get that hair with modern science too?"

I nodded. "Extensions. I'll have them taken out tomorrow. But it's amazing, isn't it?"

Angelo chuckled and took the wheelchair handles. "It's something, that's for sure. So what now?"

"Is the tank finished?"

"Well, Lily, I'm glad you asked. It weren't easy; those are some pretty weird-ass instructions you sent along. And it cost twice as much as you expected—to get them to do it fast and right. But yeah, it done. I don't suspect Moon would care for what we do to her bedroom."

"Moon's dead. That's what started this whole crazy thing." I sighed and leaned over Mitch, touching his hand. His eyes rolled open briefly and his mouth opened and closed. I laughed. "Later, Mitch, we'll talk later. For now, let's get you to your new home."

It took half an hour to find a van that would accommodate Mitch and the wheelchair. And another thirty minutes to get from the airport to the house. I kept checking my watch, nervous as a cat. There was plenty of time until dawn, so I didn't have to fear breaking my promise to Mitch or Victor that there would be no deaths. But I wasn't entirely sure how long before the drug would wear off. And I sure as hell didn't want him loose when it did.

I paid the cab driver when we arrived, and left Angelo to struggle with Mitch while I went inside the house to inspect the holding tank. Even standing in Moon's bedroom, it looked exactly like those in the cellars of The Imperial. It had been furnished with nothing but a cot, fastened to one of the side walls. I inspected the dials, remembering Victor's instructions; it all seemed as it should. I shrugged; I was hardly an expert in the incarceration of vampires. *So*, I thought, *whether it will hold him or not, time will tell*.

Angelo approached with the chair. "Do we just wheel him in and shut the door?"

I shook my head. "I don't want him to have anything around that he can use to break the glass. We'll move him onto the cot and then shut the door."

"He awful cold," Angelo said as he gripped Mitch under his arms. "You don't suppose he dead, do you?"

"His eyes are still open and moving, so, no, I don't suppose he's dead. On the count of three?" I held Mitch's ankles. "One, two, three." 'Lo heaved him up out of the chair and I swung his legs over. We laid him out like a corpse, his arms folded over his chest. Then we pushed the chair back out and closed and sealed the door. I flipped a switch on the control panel, turning on the microphone, so that I could tell when he woke up. Then I checked and locked the shutters at the window, pulled the two sets of heavy curtains closed, turned off the overhead light and went out to the living room.

Angelo was in the kitchen. "What do I do now, Angelo?" I sat down in a chair at the small table and sighed. "I have a semiconscious vampire locked up in a large glass tank in Moon's bedroom. And to be honest, right now I have no idea why I've done this. It made sense at one point, I guess, but now?"

Angelo shuffled over to me and handed me a glass of brandy, setting the bottle on the table in front of me. "You sendin' a message to your mama, is what you're doin'. Can you forget how bad you felt all these years, knowin' she did what she did to you? Buryin' you before your time? Leavin' you to be raised by strangers? Never once wonderin' about you? Never once carin' if you still lived? This all is a message, Miss Lily, and one she won't soon forget. You stole somethin' from her as she stole from you."

"And when she gets the message and comes after him? What happens then?"

Angelo chuckled. "Lord, Lily, I don't know. But it'll be a powerful thing to witness. She not likely to hurt you, you her own blood. Even to such as them, that got to matter."

I shrugged. "I guess so."

"And in the meantime, child"—he leaned over me, smiling in my face—"you give me such a gift That man, he be hummin' with power. I can feel it runnin' along my skin like a river's current."

"But what good will it do you? You can't use his power."

"Maybe not. But I can learn from it. I can study it. That creature in there, he like a living god. He won't never die, Miss Lily, not on his own. Think of it. Even you grow older, even you will die someday. You can count your years if you want. But he will walk the earth after you and I are dust in the eyes of the gods. I want a piece of that, child."

"He is not to be harmed, Angelo. I promised."

"Hush, child, I won't harm him. But we need to think about feedin' him. Just that short time I touched him, I felt a strong hunger."

I finished my drink and poured myself another. "I don't know about that, 'Lo. It doesn't seem like a good idea."

"Well, don't think on it for too long, Lily. Eventually he come out of that cage, one way or another. You want to be standin' in his way when he does? Not me, no, sir, I like the blood in my body to stay just exactly where it is, thank you very much."

I shook my head and stood up. "I can't think anymore tonight. I'm tired and I need some sleep. So you should go now and I'll see you tomorrow."

"You go to bed if you need to, Lily. But I'm not leaving you alone in this house with that creature. I stay

here on the couch. Just in case."

"Whatever." I walked down the hall and stood in the doorway to Moon's room. Mitch was lying as we'd left him, but his eyes followed me and his mouth moved. "You won't be hurt," I said to him, "and when my mother gets here, you'll be free to go. This was never about you."

I sighed, closed the door and went into my room. Lying down on the bed fully dressed, I stared at the ceiling a while and pictured what my mother was feeling right now. Totally alone in the world, abandoned without notice and without explanation. It was possible that she hadn't yet realized the situation, but eventually she would return to the cabin, finding it empty and deserted. "You're lucky, bitch," I whispered in anger. "You, at least, don't have to dig your way up to the surface and go through decades of agonized yearning for someone to return to you."

How long would it take for her to find us? She had to make the effort; everything I'd learned about her pointed to her finer qualities. Her sense of duty and moral obligation. Her compassion for others. Her deep ability to love. I laughed at the irony of the situation. Had she just followed through on all of that with me, there wouldn't be a situation.

I rolled over and looked at the clock. Three hours before dawn and still not a sound from Mitch. If he stayed quiet until sunup, we'd at least have another full day of safety; he'd never attempt to break out in broad daylight.

I got up from bed to check on him one more time. The house was dark now; Angelo had turned out all of the lights, leaving only the candles on Moon's altar burning. I could hear Angelo chanting softly; the sound was musical, hypnotic. The hair raised briefly on my arms and I shivered. I didn't ask what spirits he petitioned; I didn't want to know. He walked a darker path than Moon ever had. One did not become a bokor without the taint of death.

Sensing my presence, he looked up at me, his eyes reflecting the candle flames. He nodded once without stopping his chant, and I left him to his devotions.

Outside of Moon's closed door was a small pile of bones and feathers, a charm Angelo had no doubt left there to keep us safe from what was within. I smiled and left it undisturbed as I opened the door a crack and peered in.

It took my eyes a while to adjust to the darkness, but eventually I could make out the still form lying there. He hadn't moved; his arms were still crossed over his chest. Only the glare of his eyes betrayed his awareness of me. "Good night, Mitch," I said. "See you in the morning."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



"Five days, Miss Lily. He been layin' there for five days, not so much as moved a muscle. We got to do something."

I ran my fingers through my hair, short again now since I had cut off all of the extensions. "I don't know, Angelo, I don't like the thoughts of it."

"It has to be done. We got to feed him; a little fresh blood'll push that drug right out of him. Unless you want to show your mama a corpse when she comes?"

"I don't think she's coming, Angelo."

"Then even more reason to feed him. We can't keep him here forever."

We were sitting in the kitchen again, as we had night after night, day after day. The bottle of brandy I'd bought the second day after my return was almost gone. Resting my elbows on the table, I put my hands over my face. "Let me think, 'Lo, let me think."

"Think all you want, Lily, you know I right."

But I couldn't think. We'd been discussing this issue since that very first night and had gotten nowhere. Angelo was determined to "feed the creature" and I was just as determined not to upset the status quo.

I yawned and moved my hands up to my temples, holding my head, eyes down and staring at the table-top. Then I looked up at Angelo. "It doesn't have to be human blood, does it?"

"I'm no expert, child. I suppose he could make do with cow or dog or even chicken blood. Human be best, of course, but harder to come by. Although"—he stopped and thought for a moment—"there are ways. But no," he said quickly to forestall my objections, "it don't need to be human."

Just the thought of him scurrying about in an alley somewhere, procuring a dog or cat to give blood for our guest, gave me the creeps. Strange, I had no problem picturing a vampire feeding, could even visualize the experience clearly. But this was somehow different. One was a natural instinct; the other seemed furtive and dirty. Then again—I shot Angelo a glance out of the side of my eyes—it wouldn't be the first blood to stain his hands. And probably wouldn't be the last. If putting fresh blood into Mitch's system brought him out of his stupor, as 'Lo argued it would, it was a good thing. And if it didn't, well, we wouldn't lose much for the effort.

He must've felt my determination waver. "Why don't you go out for a bit to clear your head, Lily, and let 'Lo take care of it for you?"

I gave him a doubtful look. "I don't know."

He laughed. "You been saying that for five days now, girl. Let me take care of it for you."

I sighed, drained my glass and stood up. "I could use a break away from here, I guess. And you could be right." I stretched, thinking a nice long walk would be wonderful. "So go ahead and feed him if you can. But make it quick and painless, okay? No torture of dumb animals."

Angelo looked hurt. "I never took any life without the proper respect, Miss Lily. I know what to do. Been prayin' on it since that first night. Don't you worry about it; ol' Bowlegged 'Lo will do the thing right."

For a while I just walked, enjoying the early evening. New Orleans had cooled down a bit since I'd left; it didn't have the same crispness of autumn in New York, but the air here in October was light and sweet,

unlike the heavy mugginess of summer. The smell of death still lingered, though, try as I might to ignore it. Pervasive, it hovered on the streets, haunting the corners and the alleys, pushing me away from any possible solace I might find at The Blackened Orchid, drawing me finally to the cemetery where Hyde and I used to go with his friends. "What's it all about?" I whispered as I sat down on the steps of the mausoleum. I closed my eyes and leaned back. Almost, I was back in that time with the smell of Hyde's jacket, his cigarettes, the cheap wine he drank; I could almost feel the weight of his arm around my shoulders. I hadn't loved him, but he was real and warm and alive. He had kept me rooted in place. He had made me feel human, loved.

As had Moon. She'd been an anchor. Without her, I'd just drifted and allowed myself to be tossed around by the wind and the waves. I'd merely reacted, instead of taking action, falling upon bits of good luck, only to twist them to fit my anger.

And where was my anger now? I tried to find it, tried to dredge it up from the bottom of my empty soul. Sadness and sorrow I found in plenty, but the rage that had kept me striving for so long was gone. I gave a wan smile, remembering one of Moon's favorite sayings. "Be careful what you wish for, child, it usually comes true." She'd said it to me more times than even I could remember. I'd never listened.

But what I'd wished for had come true. The instrument used to bring my mother to her knees in sadness and misery was lying inert in a glass tank in Moon's bedroom. I had won; I had made her feel the anguish of what I felt. And it didn't do me one damned bit of good. I was still here, still Lily, still poised between human and vampire. And more alone than I'd ever been before.

"Jesus, Lily," I said with a laugh, hearing the whisper of my voice in the old tombstones, "you've really fucked up this time. And there's no one to drag you out of it but you."

I could run. I had money, I had identification. I could hitch a ride out of this death-ridden city and never look back. Angelo could deal with Mitch. Or if Mitch ever woke, he could deal with Angelo.

What did it matter to me? Things would eventually sort themselves out with or without my involvement.

In the back of my mind, though, I heard Moon's voice again, just as clearly as if she were sitting with me. And I knew that I couldn't run. "You don't have to say it, Moon." I shook my head and got up from the steps. "I'll clean up my own mess."

The house was totally dark as I approached. I hoped Angelo was still out trying to get blood for Mitch; it would make my task a little bit easier. *All I need to do*, I thought as I unlocked the front door, *is to load him into the chair and get him somewhere else*. I would contact Victor afterward and make arrangements to return Mitch to New York, where his own kind could take care of him. It seemed like a reasonable plan, a safe plan.

The candles were lit on Moon's altar and Angelo sat cross-legged in front of it, chanting. The objects on the table, though, had been rearranged, jostled out of place by something new. Assuming it was probably the remains of the animal he had killed to get blood for Mitch, I moved closer to get a better look.

Not an animal, no, I thought as I approached. It was a sculpture, a representation of a human hand. I wondered what purpose it served. Did it give power of command? Strength? Invisibility?

I reached down to touch it. It was soft and flaccid, made of rubber or latex to simulate the feel of human

flesh. I looked closer, and pulled back in shock when I saw the darkened and thickening pool the object rested in. It smelled of death; it was death. It was real.

"Jesus Christ, Angelo." I whirled around. "What the hell did you do?"

He kept chanting. I leaned down and slapped him hard across the face. His eyes focused on me and he smiled. "He was playin' possum the whole time, Lily. Not drugged, not sleepin'. Layin' there with them electric glowin' blue eyes, bidin' his time. He a smart one, oh, yeah. He was just waitin' for someone to open the door."

"So you cut off his hand?" I screamed at him. "What possible use could that have for anyone?"

"Ain't his hand. It Greg's hand."

"Greg's hand. I see. Now, just who the hell is Greg and where is the rest of him?"

Angelo laughed. "That's pretty funny, Lily. 'Where is the rest of him?' you ask." He leaned his head toward Moon's door. "In there."

"And Mitch?"

"He in there too. Probably had a good meal out of the young Greg."

I started to go to the door, then stopped. "Maybe you'd better tell me what happened before I go in."

"I go out to find a dog or somethin'. Like you told me to. I weren't lookin' for human blood. But I stumble across this young man, Greg. He been drinkin', oh, a good long time. And he say to me, 'You look like you live here, do you?'"

"I figure he wants directions or somethin', so I nod. 'Long enough to help you out, young man. What you want?' So he introduces himself and tells me he's here in New Orleans for the first time. Always wanted to see the place, he say, so he takes off and comes down. But he's tired of the tourist places, he say, and he wants to see something real. 'Real?' I say. 'And what is real?'"

" 'Voodoo or vampires,' he say. 'Either one will do.'"

" 'Well, Greg,' I say, 'it just so happen that Bowlegged 'Lo can show you both—you come to the right man.' "

I looked at him in disbelief. "Or the wrong one. So then what happened?"

"I get the Greg man back here to the house. He pretty drunk still, but he slip me a hundred and say, 'Show me what you have, little man. And if it's good, I might pay more.'"

"I laugh at him. 'It be good, don't you worry about that. Which do you want first?'"

"He thinks. 'Voodoo,' he say."

"And so I do a little mumbo-jumbo for the man. Not the real stuff, he don't get that for what he payin'. But I light the candles and burn some incense, drop a few herbs on the fire. He get all nice and woozy and I make the fumes dance for him. Easy trick to show the tourists. Real impressive."

He stopped for a second and looked at me. "I teach you that one, Miss Lily. You got the power to move the smoke around, I sure."

I shook my head. "Some other time, Angelo. Get on with it."

"So after the smoke dance, he shake his head. 'That's all you got for me? Where're the vampires? Can you conjure them out of the smoke?'

" 'Don't need to conjure them, young Greg. I got one in the next room.'

" 'Cool,' he say."

Angelo looked over at me. "Now, I don't know what he think I goin' to show him—maybe a human dressed up like a vampire. But I take him into the room and he stand there for a while. Mitch, he just layin' on the bed, nothin' movin' but his eyes.

" 'So this is it? This is your vampire? Some old guy with long gray hair sound asleep inside a glass tank? I want my money back.'

" 'Not sleepin',' I say. 'He just waitin' for you to go in.'

"Greg put his hand on the door handle, and I think I see that vampire's eyes glimmer. I think I see his hand twitch. But I open the door and Greg walk in .."

"And then?" I prompted him impatiently.

Angelo started to chuckle. "Then all hell come loose, Miss Lily. I never seen nothin' like the jump that vampire make. Split second or less and he there at the door. I can almost smell his breath. He don't want Greg, no, he don't want the man I bring him. He want me." Angelo rolled his eyes. "No way is ol' Bowlegged 'Lo goin' to end up as a vampire's supper, Miss Lily. So I summon all my strength and all the strength of my spirits and I close that door. Whomp! It shuts. But that Greg man, he try to get out too and his hand get stuck." 'Lo laughed and wheezed. "That old door cut his hand off clean as a cleaver. It flop on the floor and twitch like a dyin' fish. Blood spurtin' all over my feet. And the rest of Greg be in the tank with Mitch. He get all crazy, and start screamin', but Mitch pick him up and he grow quiet. It all grow quiet. And I pick up the hand and hightail it out here to let them both sort it out."

"Is he dead?" I should've known better than to leave the house. The murder of an innocent man now rested on me. I felt dirty and frightened.

"Don't know, Lily. But I expect so."

"How could you not know, Angelo? How can you care so little?"

"He wanted what he got, child. He pay good money to see a vampire. I show him a vampire." He pushed his lips out and shook his head. "You don't ask to see a vampire, 'less you don't mind losin' a little blood."

"A little blood? He got his fucking hand cut off, Angelo. And then you just left him in there to die." I ran my fingers through my hair. "You promised me, Angelo. No human blood, no torture."

Angelo stood up. "Not my doin', Lily. He were a gift. His appearin' when he did and askin' what he asked. A gift from the gods."

"The gods don't give gifts, Angelo. They curse." I sighed and opened the door to Moon's room.

PART SIX

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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As it turned out, there were three of us on the private flight from New York City to New Orleans. At the last moment, Victor decided to go. "I know Lily better than any of you," he said, "and there is a bond between us. Besides, I want to ensure her safety."

"I will not harm her, Victor."

"You say that now, Deirdre, and I believe that you mean it. Now. But she is unprepared for this confrontation. And if the cat gains control, there is no predicting what it might do."

"I can control the Cat"

"Can you? I wonder." The plane began to taxi for takeoff. "I loved Max like a brother. Or a son. But he should never have let you go without training for so very long. You have too much power, Deirdre, and not enough practice in dealing with it" He laughed. "And the rest of the Cadre is so damned frightened of you, none of them would take on the task."

"They are frightened? Of me?"

He nodded. "Except for myself. And Vivienne, who is frightened of nothing. Yes, they are. Terrified." He turned to Claude. "Isn't that right, Claude?"

Claude gulped and pulled out his pocket handkerchief again. Dabbing his forehead, he gave me a weak smile. "That's true, Deirdre. You have a formidable reputation."

I gave a small laugh. "I do not feel formidable. And find it rather strange that others should think me so."

"We have discussed this before, Deirdre," Victor said. "You are a very dangerous combination. A rogue, with sharply honed survival skills. You flaunt the traditions we were all taught, you sleep in a bed, you risk your skin for the sake of others, you are capable of love, deep love, enduring love. And you can kill. And have."

He looked over at Claude. "See what's left in the bar after that last flight, Claude. And let me know what they were drinking."

"That last flight?" I said.

Victor smiled at me. "I'm surprised you can't sense it, my dear. Lily and Mitch took this very plane to New Orleans just five short days ago."

"Scotch," Claude called back to Victor. "A lot of the scotch is gone, Victor."

He nodded. "Interesting. It appears that Detective Greer did not go along with her totally unaware. Let that be a consolation to you, Deirdre."

Claude came back with a bottle of wine and three glasses. "What's the story on the scotch?"

I smiled sadly. "Mitch only drinks scotch when he is angry or upset."

Claude sat back down. "You don't think he'll hurt her, do you, Deirdre? She's rather a special young lady. Vulnerable. But with such a hard inner core of anger. You could feel it radiating from her. It was almost overwhelming."

"She certainly had plenty about which to be angry," I said, frowning. "Her mother left her for dead."

"But how could you know, Deirdre?"

"Damn it, Claude, I should have known. After I realized what I was, I should have dug her up myself or waited by her grave for some sign of life. The real question is, how could I not know?"

He looked away from me. "It will probably all work out eventually. The two of you have all the time in the world to make it up."

I glared at him. "You are so young, Claude. There are some things in the world that time does not heal." Victor nodded at this and I continued. "So do not presume to tell me it will all work out." I tried to keep my words level, but some of the anger I felt gave my voice a sharp edge.

He glanced back at me and dabbed at his forehead again.

"For Christ's sake, Claude, put that damned hanky away," Victor snapped. "You don't really need it; it is a pretense. And annoying."

He shrugged and stuffed it into his shirt pocket "Habits die hard."

"You are right, Claude. They do indeed. And sometimes our habits are the only thing that keep us alive."

Then I turned my back on both of them, ignoring further attempt at conversation, watching out the window for the rest of the flight. Despite the situation, I loved the feel of flying, never tired of studying the night sky and the clouds billowing below us. Somewhere off in the distance, lightning lit up the sky.

I had never been to New Orleans. I noticed, as we waited for the limo outside the airport, that it had a sickly sweet smell, like decaying flowers. Claude, however, sniffed it in as if it were the best perfume, reminding me with a pang of how Mitch always reacted when we returned to New York. "Good to be home?" I asked.

"Always. I miss this place. There's no other city in the world like it. You know how it is."

I thought for a moment and realized that now I had no home. "Not really. Not anymore. So where are we going?"

"French Quarter." Victor and Claude said it in unison.

I laughed. "Are you sure?"

Victor cleared his throat. "Even if I hadn't known that is where she lives, we'd be there. It's the only place to stay. Vivienne made the reservations, Claude?"

Claude nodded. "But of course." He managed a little flip of his hand in imitation of his patron. "Only the best for my friends. Although," he confided as the limo pulled up and we got in, "there really are better places to stay. But this hotel has the benefit of Cadre endorsement and all of the little special touches that go with such an endorsement. Plus, I suspect Vivienne is a part owner."

It was a luxurious place. We had three suites on one of the upper floors, each lavishly decorated in rich hues of multicolored brocade and velvet. The windows were covered with steel shutters and curtains, and each room contained a large ornate chest at the foot of the king-size bed. I opened the lid and peered inside. Not for storing clothes or luggage, I discovered. Instead, it was outfitted with padding and pillows and a lock on the inside. I gave a twisted smile.

"Very nice," I said to the bellboy as he entered with the bag that Vivienne had packed for me. "All the comforts of home."

"We try, Miss Griffin."

"I am sure you do," I said, and gave him a tip.

"Have a pleasant stay." He nodded and left, closing the door behind him.

I opened the draperies and shutters and stared out for a while. Mitch was here. I could feel him quite definitely. But I had not come for Mitch. I had come to see my daughter. Or was that just a pretense for exacting the Cat's revenge? I did not know my own mind anymore, did not recognize my motives. Mitch's leaving had leveled my life to its foundation, and I was not entirely sure that I could build it back up again. Worse, I was not sure I wanted to.

And what of the daughter? We might be tied by blood, but no love existed between us. I remembered only the movements of the baby inside my womb; she remembered digging her way up to the surface from the grave to which I'd consigned her. "Love?" I gave a bitter laugh. "I will be lucky if she does not kill me at first sight."

"Deirdre?" Claude knocked on my door. "Are you ready? Victor's anxious to leave as soon as possible."

"Be right there," I called to him as I secured the window covering again.

It was a short ride to Lily's house. The neighborhood was rather run-down, but the row homes were charming. They all had the typical balconies with wrought-iron scrollwork, and lush vegetation surrounding them. As we pulled over to the curb, an ambulance pulled out and raced away.

"That is her house," Claude said after referring to the piece of paper on which he'd written her address. "I wonder who the ambulance was for."

Victor and I both concentrated on the house. "Not Lily," Victor said. "I feel her still inside."

"And it was not Mitch; he is still here as well."

We sat for a while staring at the house. "I will go in," I said, "alone. She is my daughter and he is my husband and it is my place to go."

"I can't argue that, Deirdre," Victor said. "It seems to be entirely a family matter. But remember, you are not to hurt her."

"And Mitch?"

Victor laughed, an evil sound in the confines of the car. "Rip him to shreds if you like, my dear. I've never liked the son of a bitch. As you well know."

I nodded and opened the limo door, quietly closing it behind me. Beneath the smell of the flowers and the vines was the scent of blood. Fresh human blood. The Cat stirred restlessly within me. The front door was unlocked and I went in. The living room was crowded and cluttered, boxes stacked up and clothes thrown everywhere. On a table on the far wall a small altar had been built; in the center stood a statue of a woman in a crown surrounded by candles. I walked over to it and saw that in front of the saint was a drying pool of blood. I touched a finger to it and put it in my mouth. Yes, it was human blood. And relatively fresh.

Mitch and the girl were in the kitchen. I could hear them, talking. About me. And forgiveness. And dreams.

I heard her begin to cry, and recognized the desperation in her tears. I heard him comfort her. When I pushed the door open, I saw them. Mitch, shirtless, holding and comforting the girl and whispering to her over and over. "It's okay, Lily, it's okay."

Such a touching scene, I thought, as the Cat growled within me. So sweet. A red streak of anger flashed across my mind. Lightning flashed outside. "It is not okay, girl, as my dear husband wants to insist." I felt the Cat rising in response to the rage, and was powerless to stop it. "But we do not want to hurt you." My voice sounded strange, different, caught between human and animal. The last sentence was more of a growl than words. "Move away from the man."

She turned and stared at me for one short second. But I was not concentrating on her. My entire being was centered upon the man who'd betrayed me.

As quickly as I changed into the Cat, he became the Wolf. And we were locked in a deadly embrace. I clawed at his fur; his teeth ripped flesh from my shoulder. He was stronger, but I was angry. And I would win. We rolled and fought, biting and clawing, our wounds healing almost as quickly as they were inflicted. And then we rolled apart I crouched, prepared to spring again, tail whipping. He stood, hackles

up and teeth bared, growling, guarded.

Somewhere out in the street the girl, my daughter, was running away in fear. Thunder rumbled in the distance and rain rushed down the sides of the windows. I heard Victor call her name, and turned as a footstep in the doorway caused us both to jump. Claude stood there watching us. Putting his hands on his ponderous hips, he began to laugh. "I see you are at a standstill. What else did you expect? This battle will not do either of you any good. And neither of you can win. Don't you know that already? Even I know that, and I am, as Vivienne says, such a baby. But fight if you must Victor has gone after Lily."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



"The gods don't give gifts, Angelo. They curse." I sighed and opened the door to Moon's room.

Nothing could have prepared me for the sight I saw. Mitch, shirtless now, cradled the young man like a baby. He'd tied his shirt around Greg's arm like a tourniquet and the bleeding had slowed. But still, the inside of the tank looked like a killing floor. Blood was everywhere.

Mitch looked up at me as I walked in, his pale skin seeming to reflect the light. His lips moved, but Angelo must've turned the microphone off. I threw the switch.

He gasped, pulling air into his lungs so that he could speak. "Open the goddamned door, will you? He's still alive. Barely. But the air is running out. And he's bleeding to death."

My hand reached for the handle, then hesitated.

"Open the door, Lily, for God's sake. You want him to die?"

I closed my eyes for a second. I had no choice. I opened the door.

"Thank you," Mitch said, walking out of the cage, carrying the man. "Now call an ambulance. He may still live."

Not taking my eyes off him, I picked up the phone that used to sit on Moon's nightstand and did as he ordered.

"They'll be here as soon as they can," I said after I hung up.

"Good."

Mitch moved out to the living room and laid the young man down on the couch. He bent over him, holding his face in his hands, and talked to him softly. Finally, Greg nodded and his eyes closed.

"Is he dead?" I asked, my voice small and frightened.

"No. But I made sure he wouldn't remember how this happened. I told him he'd gotten drunk and shut his hand in a cab door. No voodoo or vampires." Mitch smiled, exposing his canines. "We don't need the

publicity. Now, where's the other one?"

"Angelo?" I looked around. The front door was standing open and the hand on the altar was missing. Thunder rumbled, there was a flash of lightning and the wind picked up in the trees outside. "Gone, I guess. Took his gift from the gods and ran away."

"Too bad," Mitch said. "I wanted to have a little talk with him."

"Other than the fiasco with Greg, none of this was his doing, Mitch," I admitted. "So maybe you should have that talk with me."

He nodded. "Good idea," he started to say, but the sound of the siren outside made him stop.

The ambulance pulled up, and hustled Greg off to the hospital with minimal questioning, due to Mitch's persuasiveness. After they'd left, I went into the kitchen and sat down at the table, pouring myself a glass of brandy. Mitch followed me. "I'll have some of whatever that is. It gets awful dry in that fish bowl."

"I'm sure it does."

"You want to tell me about it? Why you did this?"

I bolted my drink down and poured another. "What would you say if I told you that it seemed like a good idea at the time?"

"I'd say that was a smart-ass answer and that it's not going to cut it." He reached over and took me by the shoulders, as he had on the plane. I winced—the bruises he'd left before hadn't healed—and he dropped his hands. "I'd also say that you're so bloody much like your mother, it's uncanny."

We sat in silence for a while.

"So," he said finally, "the dreams I was dreaming were yours."

"Yeah, they're mine."

"And that's why you did it? To hurt her for what she did to you?"

I shrugged. "When you put it that way, it sounds so petty and trivial."

"No, none of it is trivial, Lily. But the damage can be healed."

"Can it?"

"Deirdre will be furious, no doubt about that. But she'll forgive it once she sees reason."

I shook my head. "Reason? If she forgives this, she must be a fucking saint. So far as she knows, you left her with nothing. I had it all moved out after we left. I even had them take down the curtains. Sends a nice message to the one you love, doesn't it? 'I've cleared out, honey, without notice. And I've taken your nice safe home and turned it into a death trap.' She heard the dreams, you know. She thinks you want her dead. Because I did."

"And now?"

I bolted back the brandy. "For all I know, she might be dead. Victor said that might be a possibility. That she'd just wait for the sun one morning and that would be that."

Mitch stood silent for a minute. "No, she's not dead. I'd feel it if she were."

"I'm glad, I guess. If only for you. You're not what I expected. But then none of this is what I expected. I want to die."

Mitch reached over and ruffled my hair. "You're just a kid, Lily. I don't care when you were born. You're still just a girl. Life is always different than what you expect. You'll do okay."

Suddenly, and without warning, I started to cry. The tears I hadn't shed for Moon and Hyde and all the other caretakers in my life roiled up and fell down my cheeks. A lifetime's worth. Or more. It felt good to let them go.

"Lily?" Mitch got up from his seat and came around behind me. "It's okay," he said, patting my shoulder, "it's okay."

I stood up and turned around to face him, still crying. I couldn't seem to stop. He put his arms around me and pulled me close to him, patting my back lightly. "It's okay."

Then I felt him tense up. And heard a slight intake of breath behind me.

"It is not okay, girl, as my dear husband wants to insist. But we do not want to hurt you." In mid-sentence her voice changed, sounding less human and more animalistic. "Move away from the man." I turned to face the speaker.

In the split second it took me to recognize the face, the woman was gone. In her place was the huge, snarling wildcat, terrifying in the enclosed space. Slowly, I backed away from Mitch as he transformed into the large silver wolf.

The cat gathered strength in her hind legs. I saw the tensing of her muscles, felt the burst of air from the twitch of her tail. She sprang upon the wolf, claws extended. His blood spurted out, covering the kitchen floor and splattering the walls.

And I bolted and ran, out of the house and onto the streets.

I continued to run, crying, heedless of where I was or where I was going. Barely noticing the rain and the storm that rose up around me. It only mattered to get away from what I had seen. I ran until I could no longer hear the inhuman screams and growls. Ran until I could no longer smell the scent of blood. She was killing him. I'd felt the rage of the cat and knew there was no way to stop it. So Mitch was wrong; it would never be okay. And I would be next.

I ran for my life.

Even so, after about eight blocks I felt my feet slow. Gasping for air and still crying, I stopped on a corner to catch my breath. I coughed, choked, shivered. I was drenched, sopping wet from head to toe. And the smell of blood lingered in my nose, so thick and strong it was nauseating.

I dropped down to my knees and vomited on the street. The sour taste of brandy and tea washed up over me. People passing by would assume I was drunk and would hurry away. And if they stopped to help, what could they possibly do?

But there were no people. The street was deserted. I vomited again. Like the tears, there seemed to be an unending supply. Weak and shaking, I wiped my mouth on my sleeve.

I heard a deep chuckle behind me. Heard the click of a switchblade being opened. "Lookie here. It's my little hellcat again. I was hoping we'd see each other. Seems to me I got a score to settle."

I swiveled around on my knees and looked up at him, recognizing him. Overcoming another wave of nausea, I pushed up on my hands and forced the words out. "Leave me alone," I said between clenched teeth. "Go away. I killed your friends. I'll kill you too." And as if to punctuate my words, I vomited all over his shoes.

He jumped away. "Fuck, these are new shoes, bitch." Then he kicked me over onto my back. "But shit, I can get more. And you ain't going to be killing anyone no more. Right now I'd say you too sick to even fight, girlie. But I'm not taking any chances this time."

He grabbed at my shirt, catching instead the red necklace. It broke, scattering its crystalline drops over the sidewalk. They shimmered in the falling rain.

I turned my head to watch their flow. And his blade came down. I saw it flash in the rain out of the corner of my eye. Felt it enter my chest. Felt the burning pain as my blood spilled on the pavement, blending with the fallen beads until everything was blanketed in a pool of red.

And then the pain stopped, held in suspension above me along with the tears and the sorrow. The air grew sweeter as the odor of death dissipated. Had it been my death I had always scented?

I realized it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Not the fact that I could feel my life flowing away, or even the fact that the shattered body of my assailant hit the sidewalk next to me. None of it was important now. I was free of the past and of the restraints of my flesh.

A dark shape hovered over me, stroked my face and whispered words I couldn't hear. It didn't matter. I knew him, knew this angel, knew his name and his touch. "Victor."

I let him wrap my lifeless limbs in black velvet wings, let him carry me off to death. I smiled. And my eyes closed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Claude stood there watching us. Putting his hands on his ponderous hips, he began to laugh. "I see you are at a standstill. What else did you expect? This battle will not do either of you any good. And neither of you can win. Don't you know that already? Even I know that, and I am, as Vivienne says, such a baby. But fight if you must. Victor has gone after Lily."

With Claude's accurate summation of the situation, all of the blood lust drained away from the Cat. *Besides*, it thought, *the other fights well and our honor is satisfied. That will teach him not to hurt us again.*

Mitch and I transformed to our human forms at the same time, both naked, both bleeding from slashes and cuts.

"I'm sorry," he said, staring into my eyes. "I didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. And then she drugged me and held me here. I just got out of the tank tonight."

I nodded. "I understand. Now, at least." I reached over and gently touched a particularly deep gash on his neck. "The Cat had other ideas, of course."

He smiled at me. "I know. The cat always does."

Claude cleared his throat, and I blushed. "I need some clothes. I am sure Lily has something that will fit me. But I am not too sure about you."

"I'll look around," Mitch said, "and find something. You go get dressed." He walked up to Claude and extended his hand. "Mitchell Greer. And you are?"

"Claude Adams. I'm pleased to meet you."

"I'll bet."

I left them to their introductions and moved away. It was odd, walking into my daughter's room for the first time. The bed was unmade; I sat down on it and looked around. The room was sparsely furnished, refreshingly so after the clutter of the living room. I studied her books, studied her choice of music, studied the pictures she had chosen to decorate her walls. I repented bitterly the years we had spent apart. I tried to determine why she had chosen a particular book over another by the same author, or why she had collected so many albums from a particular group. But she was a stranger to me. And probably always would be.

I sighed and opened her clothes dresser, found a pair of black jeans and a black T-shirt and put them on. They smelled clean and fresh and reminded me for some reason of Elly. I looked at myself in the mirror, dressed in my daughter's clothes. Held my hair back away from my face. "I am sorry, Lily," I said to my reflection as if it were her. "I did not know."

The words sounded insincere even to me. I gave myself her response.

"Mother, you should have known."

Mitch had found some clothes he said had been left behind by Angelo. The pants were too short for him, and the arms of the shirt were just a bit too long. I looked him up and down and started to give a little laugh.

He reached for the buckle of the belt. "I could take them off again, you know."

"No. Stay dressed. Where's Claude?"

Mitch shrugged. "He said he went out for some air and to watch the storm. That really blew up out of nowhere, didn't it?"

I nodded. He crossed the room to me and touched my cheek. "You, on the other hand, look perfect in her clothes. You are so beautiful."

I pulled away from him. "Do not try to sweet-talk me, Mitchell Greer."

"Ah." He went over to the window and looked outside. "Still mad at me?"

"Not angry, really, not anymore." I went over to the altar and toyed with the image, picking it up and examining it, then setting it back down in its place amid the candles. "But I am hurt. It will take a while to heal, you know."

"I've got plenty of time."

"Good. I am afraid you will need it."

"I hope Victor finds her." He peered out into the night through the curtain of rain. Then he moved quickly away from the window to fling the front door open.

"Jesus Christ, Victor, what the hell happened?"

I turned and caught my breath. Victor was carrying Lily in his arms, her arms and legs limp, her chest covered in blood.

He looked up at me. I knew that vacant stare and my heart fell. "He'd already stabbed her before I got to her. I couldn't stop that. But I killed the greasy little bastard."

"Oh, God." I bit my lower lip. "Is she dead?"

Victor cocked his head at me. "Hard to say, really. She has no pulse and she's stopped breathing."

"Victor?" Mitch's voice sounded strained, angry. "So how does that mean it's hard to say if she's dead? Sounds dead to me."

"You forget her mixed blood, Mitch. She is only part human, after all. And she has died before. This time, though"—he shot me a harsh glance—"there will be no burying."

He carried Lily into her bedroom and laid her down on the bed, smoothing the hair back off her forehead, holding one of her tiny lifeless hands in his. "Claude." His voice was commanding. "Make sure all the windows are covered. We may need to stay here after dawn."

"But, Victor?" Claude's voice was frightened. "How can we stay here? Where will we sleep?"

"The other bedroom is completely secure," Mitch said. "I can vouch for that, having spent the last five days and nights there."

"I don't know," Claude said.

"Damn it, Claude, it's time you learned how to survive without your props." Victor lifted his ravaged face

and stared him down. "Either stay or go. It makes no difference to me. Or to her. But don't bother me now with your choices."

Claude looked ashamed. "I'll stay."

"Good. Now go away, get us a drink. Fix the windows. Make yourself useful."

While Claude prepared the house for dawn, Mitch moved two of the chairs from the living room into the bedroom and placed them on either side of the bed. Victor took one and I took the other. And we waited.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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I let him wrap my lifeless limbs in black velvet wings, let him carry me off to death. I smiled. And my eyes closed.

Even with my eyes closed, I knew this place. I'd been here before. I remembered this halfway place between death and life. I hadn't liked it much the first time, and I sure as hell didn't like it any better now. But at least I knew it for what it was.

This time, though, there was no dirt to dig through. No wooden coffin to stand in my way. I knew that all I needed was the will to surface and it would be done.

I wasn't sure I wanted to go back to that world so full of pain and sorrow and the stench of death. They were waiting for me, I knew, hovering over my body. But here it was quiet and sweet and calm. No storms, no lightning. No pain.

And Moon and her mother and her grandmother and even Philomena were here in this place. I felt them as surely as I felt the others, just out of reach, whispering, comforting, singing. They would take me beyond, I knew, if I asked them. And I could be done with it all.

I stood, silently, precariously balanced, fearing a move in either direction. I heard my mother's voice, whispering over my body. I heard Victor's voice respond. But that way was pain. And behind me was peace.

"And death, Lily child, make no mistake about that." Moon's voice tickled my ear, and I felt the weight of an invisible arm on my shoulders. "We all of us here already lived and it's no crime to die after life. But you ain't never lived. You only existed. Go on, girl, take a chance. It won't be easy and it won't ever be exactly what you expect. But you are a wonder, like the rising of the moon and the setting of the sun. The world needs wonder. That man needs you. Even your mama needs you."

"Don't you need me, Moon?"

"Child, I love you. More than I ever loved another being in that wicked world. You were my life, my reason for living. But I'm dead now. And so, no, I don't need you. Not like that. Not the way they do."

"Moon?"

"You'll be okay, girl. I promise. And I need you to live for me; otherwise there'd be no sense in my life. Move forward, Lily. It's the only way."

I nodded. Took a deep breath. And opened my eyes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



The body lying on the bed took in a huge, shuddering breath. Her eyelids fluttered and opened. "Victor? Are you here?" Lily's voice was soft and uncertain.

"Yes, Lily." The relief in his voice was wonderful to hear. "Welcome back, little one."

"I feel strange," she said, "and scared. Everything looks different. Intense."

"Yes. A lot of things will seem different to you now. I can't say that I am glad for that. Perhaps we should have let you go. I am just an old selfish man, Lily, but I am glad to have you back."

"Old, my ass." She gave a weak smile. "You are not old, Victor."

"No, right now I am as young as I have ever been."

"So," she said, and raised her hands to her face and her mouth, "what does this all mean? Have I changed? Am I like you now?"

"Yes."

"Good. I never liked that goddamned halfway shit. And now you won't be able to patronize me like you used to." She snorted a bit. "So this is what being a vampire is like." She ran her fingers over the blankets on the bed and looked around her room with new eyes. "It's all so intense, so real. Or surreal. I wonder how you can stand it"

He laughed. "Sometimes I can't."

I started to move out of the room. I was not needed here. But then Lily turned her head and looked at me.

"Mother."

Not a question, but a guarded naming.

"Yes," I said, and she nodded.

There was so much I wanted to say to her. So much I needed to say to her. It could wait; it would have to.

The sun rose and her eyes filled with pain. "Victor?" she rasped, turning away from me and reaching out to him. "What is that?"

He gripped her hands. "Only the sun, Lily. Sleep now. I'll be here when you wake."

"Promise?" She smiled at him with such trust and love, it nearly broke my heart. She was my daughter, true, but somehow I knew she would never smile that way for me.

"Promise."

I turned away and walked out of the room.

EPILOGUE

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Victor remained behind after all the others left. "You'll need training, Lily," he'd said. "We don't need another like your mother. And if I go crazy again"—he'd laughed—"at least you have a place to keep me safe."

"You were never crazy, Victor. Were you?"

"Close, perhaps, but not entirely, no." Even so, I look over at him sometimes from my position behind the bar and I wonder. There are still times when the vacantness shows up behind his eyes, when the countless years of his life seem to sag off him like a skin too large. But then he'll look up at me and smile and at that moment, he is all there, alive and vibrant. I don't worry about the occasional blank stare. He's Victor and he's here. That is all that matters.

He bought me The Blackened Orchid. At least, he insists it was for me. My name is on the deed, but he runs the restaurant and takes care of it all. I just tend the bar, moving into Moon's space quite easily, reading shells and palms for the customers on occasion. It adds color, Victor says. And it's good for business.

He takes me out hunting every couple of nights. "It doesn't pay," he says, "to go hungry at first. Hunger, like every other emotion, makes you careless."

The hunger takes some getting used to, there's no question about that. It takes hold, deep down inside, and won't ever let go. And the feeding is incredible. Nothing I ever imagined came even close to that first rush of hot blood. It makes me shiver to think about it.

Victor says that I am a natural. "I have never trained someone as quick to pick up on the whole thing, Lily. If I weren't a tired old man, I'd be frightened."

I have never seen him as old. "You can't be all that old, Victor," I tease. "What's six or seven centuries anyway? Just a drop in the bucket of eternity."

Angelo seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. I picture him sometimes, his curved legs

running in fear from that night, brandishing the hand at a sky filled with lightning and rain. But he's part of my other life. And that's all gone now. There's no room for anything in my life but the hunger and the blood and Victor.

As for my mother, well, the way I see it, we're even. I don't like her much. And I don't understand her. But all of my anger bled out of me that night, rolling away like the red crystal beads on the sidewalk, washing away in the storm with the rest of my human blood.

We didn't speak much while she was here. I was ashamed and she was ashamed. And while we could agree that we'd treated each other abominably, we couldn't seem to get past the walls we'd both erected against each other.

The night before she left, though, we stood, side by side and silently, in front of the mirror in my room, and stared deeply into our images' eyes. After a while, she reached out and touched my reflection. Her hand was shaking and I saw blood-tinged tears begin to streak her face. I reached over and touched my hand to them in the mirror. It was as close as we dared get to each other, I guess. Then, at least. And maybe always.

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