

# **Predators**

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This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

## Chapter 1

I hurry east down Broadway. It stopped raining but the streets, still wet, reflect light off the puddles and damp pavement, making the street seem bright and cheery. I enjoy the early November rain that Vancouver is famous for although many people find it difficult to handle. I called Patty to let her know when my meeting ran long but I feel bad for leaving her sitting in Caffè Barney alone for over an hour. Josh was supposed to join us but he called in the afternoon to say he could not make it. The three of us have tried to meet once a week for drinks ever since we graduated from university. When I called Patty, I could hear her disappointment that Josh bailed on us and that just makes me feel worse for being so late. In my mind, I picture her sitting alone and despondent drinking her wine.

The street light changes as I reach the corner so I have to wait to cross. I see the little sidewalk balcony of the pub and scan the crowd, searching for Patty. Even though it's autumn, the night is warm and many people have opted to sit outside so the patio is packed but I do not see Patty. She must be inside.

While I wait for the light to change, Patty walks out the door and turns to say something to a guy who exits behind her. He is gorgeous; tall, blonde, and rather like a Nordic god. He and Patty turn and walk south on Main Street. I call out Patty's name but she does not hear me. Crap. Why would Patty leave?

I reach into my purse and pull out my cell to call her. At that moment, the light changes and I dash across Main Street, waiting for her to answer her phone. I get her voice mail. On the east side of the street, I pop up onto my toes and peer in the direction they have gone but I cannot see them. They disappeared quickly so that probably means they got into a car but I can't see one starting up. I settle back on my heels and consider what to do. I call Patty once more while continuing to scan the street but I get her voicemail, again. I feel terrible. I wonder if Patty is pissed off at me for leaving her sitting so long but I'm a little confused because she sounded fine when I called to tell her I was running late; she was disappointed that Josh had cancelled but she did not seem upset with me.

Unable to see them anywhere, I peer around some more while I walk up the street a bit and phone her again; still no answer. My meeting left me feeling tired and sitting in a pub alone waiting for Patty to return lacks appeal so, I head home. I call again but this time, when I get her voice mail I leave a message letting her know I am heading home. Since I live just a few blocks away, I choose to walk and continue to phone her. By the time I arrive at my apartment, I have been phoning her without an answer for about 20 minutes. It feels a bit weird that she ignores my calls. She is not normally like this. She must be angry even though she told me she was fine. I decide to apologize to Patty in the morning.

I stand in a dimly lit tunnel. I glance around but cannot find the source of the light. Water drips somewhere in the distance although the air feels dry. An unpleasant smell comes and goes as I stand there trying to determine which direction to walk. Both directions appear dark and dank with no visible way out. I think I hear someone scream but it is right at the edge of my hearing so I am unsure. The walls appear to have vague images on them. I stare at one spot that makes me feel uneasy. There is... something... I examine it from a slightly different angle striving to figure out what is so disturbing. Is that a word? I reach out a hand, reluctant to touch the dirty surface but wanting to know what the writing on the wall means. The wall feels dry but as I brush my hand across it, it crumbles in a way that reminds me of damp earth. Words slowly appear. At least I think they are words; the letters are about three feet tall, making it hard to read while I stand so close. Fear escalates as I brush the wall more quickly, desperate to know what it says. Once I am sure I have uncovered all the words, I step back to read it.

“Long, long ago when wishing could still lead to something”

The words seem familiar. Did I read them before? Again, I think I hear a scream. I peer down the tunnel in both directions but stand rooted to the spot. The words bounce around in my head like echoes in a canyon. ‘When wishing could still lead to something’ I am sure I have heard that somewhere or maybe I read it. Is it something from childhood? The unpleasant smell comes back making me want to retreat but my feet are immovable. I glance down to find out why I can’t move them and then start in horror. My bare feet transform to roots and implant themselves into the floor. I can’t shift them. As I struggle

my legs fuse together and my skin slowly alters its texture into the bark of a tree. The bark climbs higher on my body while I strive to move. Panic surges through me, mounting higher as the bark scrabbles up my limbs. It reaches my waist and I scream!

I awake in my darkened bedroom. Taking a deep breath, I reach out and turn on a lamp. Normally I can just shake off a nightmare but this time I feel the need to get up for a bit. I walk into the bathroom and turn on some lights. Trying to clear the emotional residue of the dream, I turn on the taps and splash some water on my face. I stare at myself in the mirror. I look normal, sort of. My straight blonde hair is not generally messed up when I sleep but tonight it is all over the place, as if I have been wrestling or something. I grab a brush and straighten my hair, wishing I could do the same with my thoughts. I set the brush down and examine my eyes. They are strangely golden tonight. Normally their colour ranges from blue to grey to green but occasionally people have commented that they look yellow. I shake my head. The dream just put my emotions in a strange place and I need to get out of it so I can go back to sleep. I grab a glass of water, go back to bed to read for a bit and shake off the dream.

The next morning, with coffee in hand, I arrive at Patty's place to find the door of her apartment building propped open. A quick glance around reveals a moving van a little farther along the street. I slip in the front door and walk up the steps to the third floor, my stiff muscles protesting every step of the way. I have been sore since I woke up this morning, as if I had gone to the gym yesterday and had some insanely intense work out. As I walk down the hall, I hear the people moving furniture but I can't see them.

I tried calling Patty several times this morning but she never answered so I decided to try talking to her face to face and just walked over to her place. On the way here, the first vestiges of annoyance built within me. After all, I didn't intend to leave her sitting there alone last night and I called to let her know when I was running late. When I started my walk to Patty's place, I was a little annoyed but now, as I walk down her hallway, I also grow a little worried. Patty does not normally react like this so maybe something else is going on. I reach Patty's door and knock. The door swings inward at my touch, increasing my unease. An old joke of Josh's leaps to mind; he calls it the incapable conclusion. In the movies, whenever someone finds a door un-

locked there are only two things it could be; either no one is home or someone is dead. His joke always makes Patty and me laugh when we watch a movie but now it creeps me out. I slowly enter, calling out Patty's name.

Everything looks in order although I notice an unpleasant smell. I take a couple of hesitant steps into her living room, fear twisting around inside me. Glancing around, I leave the front door open. Examining the space, I reflect I have always hated the open floor plan of her apartment, mainly because the door opens straight into her living room area but right now, the openness gives me a feeling of security because I can clearly see that no one is here. The kitchen and dining corner is to the left with the living 'room' to the right. There is an alcove-like hallway across the room from the door. The right side of the alcove leads to Patty's bedroom and the left side leads to the bathroom. Muddy footprints form a path from the former to the latter. I slowly and cautiously walk over and stare down at the prints, wondering why Patty has not cleaned them up. The smell is stronger. I glance left into the bathroom which is a mess, mud splashed all over the place but it's clearly empty. Fingers of dread work their way inside me and replace the feeling of unease as I slowly turn and see the bedroom door is closed. I convince my feet to move and deliberately advance on the door, the smell and my feeling of dread increasing with every step. I reach out my hand to grab the doorknob, fear slicing into me as I touch the cold, muddy knob. Alarm bells ring in my head, trying to tell me the mud is not mud. The door swings open, pulling my hand and my body forward into the room.

Mud is everywhere, splashed on the walls, the floor. Something drags my eyes to the left to discover the bed soaked in mud. Patty sprawls across the bed, naked, dead eyes staring at nothing. My mind screams at me. It isn't mud! Something punches me in the stomach. I fall to my knees and the room goes dim.

My vision clears and I see spilled coffee on a hardwood floor. My left hand sits in the puddle of coffee while my right hand rests on the floor just inches away from a smear of blood. I take a breath to steady myself and attempt to stand but my legs aren't quite ready to work. Something... there is something I should do. My mind seems strangely empty. I try to think but the thoughts keep skittering away from me. A muffled bang and someone curses and suddenly my mind snaps back

into focus. I have to call the cops. I stand up and shake coffee off my left hand while using my right hand to pull out my cell and dial 911. Energy rushes through me now that I have something to do.

“Nine - one - one. What is your emergency?” A woman’s voice calmly asks me.

I don’t know how much time passes as I stand there waiting for the cops to arrive, listening to the movers cursing and banging around in the hallway. I should remember never to hire that moving company; they are not very good at their jobs. Odd thought at this moment. My eyes involuntarily roam about the room and time stretches out. I can feel my mind detach from my emotions and then my emotions pack up and leave. Cold, cold invades me and walls me off from my feelings. I stare at my feet and will them to take me out of the room but they do not move. I stand rooted to the spot. My eyes stare at the smear of blood on the floor to my right. I force my eyes shut but they pop open again.

The moment my eyes open, they begin to move, never stopping in one place, shifting from horror to horror. Patty’s bedroom does not look like a scene from a movie because the blood has dried to a dark brown or, in some places, black. I guess they make the blood red in the movies to make it more horrifying but I find this worse. The browns and blacks make Patty’s death more real to me. Maybe because the colour conveys to me that Patty has been dead for hours for it to change.

Looking around the room I feel that whoever did this enjoyed themselves. I sense a... feeling of abandon in the blood splashed around the room. The bed appears soaked in blood. There is a wound in Patty’s left thigh. My eyes move towards her face but jerk away before I reach her dead staring brown eyes. I cannot look at them again. Instead, I notice her brown curly hair spread across the pillows looks arranged. My eyes survey the room. At first, my eyes move without any thought or motivation behind them until my mind clicks on. I notice that everything appears to be in order, no sign of a fight. My eyes stare at the blood on the walls and dresser and after looking at it for a while, I realize that there is very little blood just drops and spatters. It reminds me of those splatter paintings, as if the killer painted the walls in his art of death. A shudder runs through me with that thought.

“Police!” Someone calls out.

“In here,” I shout back, relief flooding through me. I don’t have to stand here alone any more. The police have arrived. There are people here who know and understand what needs to be done. Someone will tell me what to do next. Maybe they can make my feet move from this spot. Footsteps approach the bedroom door while I stand still, waiting for help.

“Miss?” a gentle voice calls.

I turn and see a police uniform standing in the doorway. A police uniform, that means something. Just a moment ago, it had deep meaning for me. What was it? After a moment, I realize there is a guy in that uniform holding out a hand to me. That is it. It means safety. The wall that went up to protect me from the horror in the room is shaking as if hammers pound on it. The blood, the smell hammers through the wall and nausea hits me. I take a jerky step toward the cop. Sounds like screaming off in the distance hammers through the wall and hits me with pain. I stare at the uniform, safety there is safety. I watch him holster his gun and move slowly towards me. My vision blurs, I smile then feel something hot slide down my face. He places his hands on my shoulders and I sob. His arms go around me and I cry harder. I feel, rather than see, him lead me out of the bedroom. I lose a sense of time and space, again.

## Chapter 2

I breathe deeply, wiping the tears off my face then stare at the hanky someone has given me. I wonder if cops always carry hankies. Is it something they are instructed to carry with them? Do they really take sensitivity training that prepares them with hankies and cups of coffee to hand to distraught victims? I lift my head and look around the room. Officials are everywhere, snapping pictures, measuring things, and talking to each other. The weight of a hand on my shoulder and I turn to look at the owner. He is beautiful. Not good at gauging height, my guess is that he is six two or maybe six three with shoulders to match. Black hair, blue eyes, and hard cheekbones gave him a strong look yet there is a softness to the smile that suggests kindness. He looks like a Hollywood version of a cop who accidentally walked into my bizarre, horribly real, crime scene. Maybe he is on the wrong set. Next I will be accused of Patty's murder; isn't that what happens in the movies? I give my head a shake, trying to jettison the crazy thoughts floating around in there.

"How are you feeling?" he asks gently.

"Like crap," I reply and then laugh, a bit hysterically.

"We need to ask you some questions."

"I figured that." I respond and wonder where my saviour is. He wore a uniform. I do not see a single uniform in the room. What did he look like? Would I recognize him?

"Why were you here?"

I explain about the night before and why I stopped by to see Patty.

"The guy you saw her with, had you ever seen him before?" he inquires.

"No," I answer and I notice there are a couple of uniforms at the door of the apartment. Is he one of them? Would I recognize him?

"Could you pick him out of a line up?" the cop in front of me asks and, for a moment, I am confused. Pick whom out of a line up?

"Yes," I respond realising he means the guy Patty was with and I start to feel a little stronger because there's something I might be able to do. "Absolutely, he was incredibly good looking, not the type anyone is likely to forget." Looking at the cop standing before me I decide



he is not the type anyone is likely to forget either but there was something different about the guy last night. I ask, "Did you tell me your name?"

"John Abeara," he smiles then continues. "I'm going to need your name and some ID."

"Sorry, of course, I'm Ann LePage." I say as I reach into my purse to pull out my ID.

"LePage?" he enunciates, struggling to get the pronunciation right.

"Yes, spelled the same way as LePage." I pronounce it the English way then hand him my ID.

"Thanks," he writes something in his little book. "We're also going to need you to go to the station with us, give us your fingerprints and a few other things. Is there anyone you need to call before we go?"

I think of Josh, how comforting his presence would be. I want him to be with me but I shake my head no. The thought of telling Josh, no it's the thought of explaining, it's saying the words out loud that I can't deal with. How will I tell Josh what has happened. Tears prick my eyes and I yank my thoughts back to the moment. I watch John's hands as he writes my information into his little book.

John finishes writing then holds up one finger indicating I should wait. He walks over to one of the plain clothed detectives to talk to him for a few minutes. I strive to picture the uniform cop who first showed up but I cannot remember what he looks like. I want to... to thank him. Is he one of the guys by the door? I cannot pull his face out of my memory; my vision is blocked by images from the bedroom. John Abeara wears plain clothes so he was not the one. Does that make him a Sergeant? I lack any knowledge about how this works. I stare at John, my mind going blank for a moment, and then I notice he is directing me to follow him.

## Chapter 3

My arms rest folded on the table and I bury my face into them to hide from the situation, but I still hear the police talking around me. There have been... insinuations that I was involved in Patty's murder but I do not think the cops really believe it. Confusion constantly besets me. I will be fine for a while and then my mind tries to retreat from the horror of the morning. When I come back to the moment, I find I have missed words and actions in the last few minutes. I play 'catch up' with information. My Hollywood cop attempts to keep me focused but I end up staring into his blue eyes and... drifting away, as if those eyes are really the ocean and I can float away from reality in them.

"And you're sure you've never seen him before?" someone demands.

I glance up and I shake my head no. I have lost track of the number of times they asked that question and the movement of my head makes it hurt. That cop drifts away and I put my head back down on my arms, a headache begins to hammer the back of my skull. Movement surrounds me, cops hover over me for a moment and then walk away replaced by other cops. In spite of their questions, I am not worried about my story making sense or being consistent. All I feel, all I can feel, is pain.

"Whoever this sicko is he really enjoyed himself. The blood splatter guy says the walls were deliberately splashed with blood." The voice comes from another part of the room and the words trigger an image of Patty's bedroom in my mind. Tears drip onto my arm. I wish I could close my ears.

A bustle of movement and suddenly I sit alone at the table. Whispered voices buzz nearby but I do not bother to listen. Images flash inside my head and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block them out of my mind. I do not want to see Patty's bedroom any more. A hand gently touches my shoulder but I do not move. I want to sink away into the desk, down through the floor, into the ground, and disappear. The hand squeezes and I know I am expected to look up.

“We’re done here. Do you have someone who can pick you up?” The Hollywood cop asks me, concern written all over his face.

“I can call Josh,” I remember that my Hollywood cop told me his name but I do not recall what it is.

He sits down beside me, “Here’s my card. If you think of anything, anything at all, just call me. Even if you don’t think it’s important.”

I stretch out my right hand to take the card and it seems to take an hour to cross the distance until my fingers can grasp it. I stare at the name on the card. Sergeant John Abeara, yes, I remember it now. He did tell me his name at some point.

“Now, if you tell me your friend’s number I’ll call him for you.”

I give him Josh’s number and he walks away to make the call. The sergeant is too far away for me to hear what he says over all the noise in the station. Ennui holds me in my seat while I watch John approach.

“He’s says he’ll be here immediately. You can wait in the lobby. Do you want someone to wait with you?”

I shake my head no and slowly collect my things. Pulling on my coat seems to take more energy than I possess. As I take a step away, a thought occurs to me. “Sergeant could you do me a favour?” I ask but do not wait for his response. “The officer who found me could you... could you tell him thanks.”

I linger in the lobby of the police station with my headache slowly growing worse, waiting for Josh to arrive and get me out of there. It takes a while for me to realize that the headache inexorably buzzing through my skull is because I have not had any coffee. That cup of coffee sits on the floor in Patty’s bedroom. As that thought crosses my mind, an image of Patty’s bedroom appears before my eyes. I try to shut it out but it stays there blocking my view of my surroundings. I need something else to focus on. I look at the card in my hand. The name written there is Sergeant John Abeara, along with his phone number and email address. I carefully read all the details, all three of them and wish for something else to focus on as that image of Patty floats before my eyes again. I search the interior of the police station and then out the window. Relief floods through me as I see Josh walking up. He flashes a smile at me, the dimple in his right cheek making a brief appearance and I start toward the door, eager to get out of here.

“What the hell has happened? Why are you here?” Josh hugs me.

“I’ll tell you what happened but I need some coffee and a quiet place to sit.”

“Okay, let’s grab some coffee and go to my place.” A look of apprehension appears on his face. I think something in my voice bothers him.

## Chapter 4

It takes a couple of hours to tell Josh everything that happened to me since last night while we sip coffee and I try to keep from breaking down again. Telling the story to Josh makes me very aware of how strange it all sounds. I think it may be the pain on his face that really brings it home to me. Josh has known Patty almost as long as I have and I see I am hurting him with my story. I stop for a moment and just look at him. His blonde hair hanging in his green eyes grabs my attention for a second. He shakes his head in disbelief, making his bangs swing in a way that makes his hair look live.

My eyes drop to stare at the coffee on the table. I am focusing on Josh's hair so I do not have to think about Patty. I sit there and I wish I could go back in time. This time I would chase down Patty and stop her from leaving with that gorgeous, blonde guy. I wish I had just left my meeting, told them that I had a prior commitment. I wish the bus had been just a little bit faster, or I had dashed across the street when the light changed or... I wish it were yesterday. I wish... I wish... Suddenly I remember the words from my dream.

"I should have been there," Josh mutters.

"Why?"

"I was supposed to be there too." He reminds me.

"You said you couldn't make it," I reply very puzzled.

"I should have gone anyway. I should have been there to protect her." Josh jumps up and paces in front of the coffee table. "I've always told you guys that you could call me at any time of night to walk you home or pick you up or..." his voice trails away and he comes to a stop, energy expended.

"Josh, she chose to leave. She chose to leave knowing I was on my way. She didn't call anyone. She wasn't being forced when I saw her leaving with that guy."

"I should have been there to..."

I wait for him to say more but he does not seem to know where that sentence was going. I shake my head, "Josh, she chose. I understand that you feel guilty but you have no reason to."

“And what about you?” He stands over me for a moment and then flops onto the couch beside me.

“I feel guilty too.” I admit. “But not... I don’t know. I wish the bus had been a little faster, that I had run across the street instead of waiting for the light, that I had searched for her a little longer, that I...” Silence stretches out between us. “Would it have made any difference?” I ask Josh.

“We would have stopped her.”

“Would we? I mean if she wanted to go would we have stopped her?”

“I don’t get it.” Josh mutters quietly to the floor. “It’s just not like her to do that.”

“I know she’s never done anything like that since I’ve known her.” I respond. Of course, I only met Patty in university so I have not known her that long but she is not a person who sleeps around. Patty just wasn’t like that.

Josh leans forward, puts his face in his hands and mumbles, “I just wish...”

“That it was yesterday,” I finish with a sigh.

“Yes,” he looks up at me, his beautiful thick blonde hair sticking up in various directions.

“I get it,” I say, looking into Josh’s eyes. Somehow, what I see there breaks me and I start to cry, hard. Josh takes me in his arms, holds me, and I feel him start to cry as well. As my sobbing eases off to merely crying, I realize I have no idea how much time has passed. I have been in and out of it all day. I have no idea what time of day it is. Is it still morning? Is it still today?

Josh stops crying before I do and he gently strokes my hair. It calms me down and allows me to get my breath back and travel the distance from crying to merely sniffing. I lean away, feeling hot and sweaty from the intensity of the emotions that racked me. I look into Josh’s eyes, blood-shot and swollen from tears, to tell him thanks but I am halted by what I see there. Those green eyes gaze at me filled with sympathy and something more. His hand caresses my face. I see what he wants but it... makes me uncomfortable. I take his hand in mine to stop him, unable to find words that will not hurt him when I say no. Holding his hand, I shake my head and look down. With his other hand, he tilts up my chin and gives me a smile, and that flashing dimple tells me everything will be okay between us. I relax.

I give Josh's hand a squeeze and let go to sit back, staring up at the ceiling. My thoughts drift back to some random comments that the cops said while I was in the station. The most disturbing comments were the ones that were supposed to make me feel better. "There was nothing you could do" along with "it was meant to be." Several different cops said things like that. Maybe there was nothing I could have done but I refuse to accept that it was meant to be. I have had family die but somehow it was different. Patty feels... more dead. Maybe it is because I found the body. Or maybe it's because I feel guilty.

Josh hesitantly puts his arm around me again and pulls me close but this time comfort is all he is offering. The clean fresh-showered smell of him is soothing and I relax into his arms, feeling tired, pounded flat, and rung out to dry. I breathe deeply and slowly. I remember a comment Patty once made about Josh. We were out at a party while we were still at university. Patty was crazy about Josh since the first day they met.

*Patty and I were sitting on a couch while Patty stared across the room at Josh talking to several friends. One of the women put a hand on his arm, clearly signalling her interest in him, as she said something we could not hear.*

*"I don't think he's interested in me," Patty confided while she watched him laugh at some comment. She pushed her long loosely curled hair over her shoulder and flashed a smile at me.*

*I did not know how to respond. Friends are supposed to say things like 'of course he does' and 'who wouldn't be interested in you' but I was sure that Patty was right. I glanced over at Josh and the woman who was chatting him up. "I don't know what to tell you."*

*"Well, thanks for not lying." She smiled and her brown eyes regarded me for a moment. "I think Josh wants to rescue someone."*

*"What does that mean?" I asked, taking a sip of my beer.*

*"I don't know, it's just a feeling I have." Patty looked back at Josh. "I think he has White Knight syndrome."*

*"Really?" I laughed, "Why would he have that?"*

*"Well, his mother was a bit of a bitch. She made him feel like he had to rescue her from her bad marriage." Her full mouth turned down into a frown.*

*That surprised me. I had never thought of Josh as coming from a bad childhood. He seemed... so well adjusted. "Are you sure it was*

*her that made him feel that way? It seems to me that a lot of guys want to... play the hero."*

*Patty looked at me, "That's what I thought a first but he has said several things that make me think she made him feel he was responsible."*

White Knight Syndrome. I should have known that Josh would feel guilty about Patty. I should have been more careful when telling him about the events of last night. I pull my feet up onto the couch and give Josh a brief squeeze. My mind wanders, thinking about our days at university, hanging out with Patty and Josh, skipping classes, studying. Looking back it was all so simple and easy. Sitting in the library trying to study but really just laughing and talking; memories of Patty teaching me effective study techniques. 'Tips and tricks to get through homework faster so we can go out,' she used to joke. At some point, I drift off to sleep.



## Chapter 5

I stand in a dimly lit tunnel. I glance around but cannot find the source of the light. Water drips somewhere in the distance although the air feels dry. While I stand there trying to determine what direction I should walk, an unpleasant smell comes and goes. The odour seems familiar but I cannot place it. I have a... memory of being in a place like this before. Or is it something other than memory? Maybe I read about it. Checking both directions, I head off deciding that one way is as good as another. I think I hear someone scream but its right at the edge of my hearing so I cannot be sure. The walls appear to have vague images on them. I stop to stare at one spot that makes me a little queasy. There is something... I peer at it from slightly different angles, striving to figure out what is so disturbing. Is that a face?

A scream in the distance and my feet are moving before I think about it. Another scream and I start to run. The walls and floor get wetter as I run through the dank tunnel. Soon my feet are splashing through dark puddles that gleam dully but, oddly, the air is still dry and it begins to parch my throat. Up ahead I spot a lump of something sitting on the floor against the wall of the tunnel. As I approach it my steps get slower until I realize the object is my backpack. The sudden knowledge stops me still. I stand staring at it for a moment. It is definitely mine. I squat to open the bag. Inside I find my laptop and a folder full of papers. I start to pull out the papers when I hear a scream again. I shove the papers back into the pack and start walking while I zip the top closed. As I sling the pack onto my back, I break into a run again.

The smell grows stronger as I near the end of the tunnel. My throat painfully dry, a feeling of defeat fills me and slows my steps. Nothing. A dead end. I have run the wrong way. I will be too late. Tears prick my eyes then I notice the tunnel continues to the right. I walk around the corner and see a body lying on the floor. My chest suddenly feels tight and my legs weak. I put a hand on the wall to steady myself. The wall feels... sticky. I withdraw my hand and stare at it. Covered in blood, I want to wipe it off but I have no way to do that. I back up to scan the walls and the floor. Blood is everywhere. I splash through

puddles of blood to reach the body sprawled across the floor. Brown hair obscures the face of a woman so I stretch out a hand to brush it aside. My heart pounds so loudly I am sure the sound is echoing down the tunnel. I fear what I will find but I need to know. Hand shaking, I push the hair aside revealing a face I have never seen before. Somehow, I had been sure that I would know her.

I peer down the tunnel stretching out before me, thinking the killer must have gone that way. Checking the ground for footprints, I stand up and step around the body. I clearly see my own footprints in the blood but there is no indication that anyone else has been here before me. I scan the walls but again find nothing. The cloying smell grows stronger. I look back down at the woman and jump back in horror. The body is... dissolving.

I hear a quiet, mellow voice say, "I've been waiting for you."

I wake up in Josh's bed, alone. I peer around wondering where he has gone and notice that my muscles are stiff and sore. I have a vague memory of Josh telling me to take his bed and sleep. I get up and walk into the living room to find blankets strewn across the couch. Josh must have slept out here. I move to the patio doors and gaze out at the street. It's afternoon so I have only slept for a couple of hours. Or is it the next day? I stretch up to loosen up my body. It feels like I had an intense work out yesterday. I must be sleeping badly.

Patty's mother; the thought hits me like a thunderclap. I should call her but I don't have her number. I decide to check and pull out my phone to scroll through the numbers on the off chance that her number is in there. Who would have her number? The police? It feels weird to call them for a phone number. Maybe she is in the phonebook. I spend fifteen minutes trying to find a phone number for Patty's mother and get nowhere. I hear the door open and Josh enters the living room with bags in his hands.

"I went out to get some stuff for dinner."

"But you don't know how to cook." I comment.

"True, so instead I bought some fruit and veggies and snacks. I figure we can order in." Josh walks into the kitchen and puts the bags on the counter. "I'm guessing you didn't eat at all yesterday."

"Did you take the day off?" I ask realising it is the next day. Patty has been dead for a whole day.

"Yeah, it was no problem." Josh shrugs and starts putting things away.

“I... I’ve been trying to find a number for Patty’s mom.” I tell him as I follow him into the kitchen.

“I have it.” He stops and stands up straight. “I never even thought of calling her. Too fucking selfish.” He berates himself angrily. “Jesus, I should have thought of that.”

“Don’t beat yourself up.” I say and take the bananas out of his hand to put them away.

“I’ll get her number.”

A few minutes later, he is back in the kitchen with his phone in hand and just stares at me. “What?” I ask.

“Do... do you think they told her? The cops.”

“I... I don’t know.” I reply and we stand there staring at each other. “I think we should assume they haven’t and try to brea— break it to her easy.”

Josh nods, “I’ll make the call. I’ve met her.”

I stretch out a hand to grip Josh’s upper right arm, which holds his phone. He peers into my eyes and quickly gives my hand a squeeze with his left. He dials, turns away and walks into the living room. After a moment, I hear his voice, “Mrs Fletcher, this is Josh Eaton. I’m sorry but I have some terrible news to tell you—”

## Chapter 6

The dream about the tunnel and decaying body is on my mind while I attend Patty's funeral. Her mother, Margery, is very upset because the body is not fit for display. I am relieved. I have never understood the open casket thing but Margery wants it and she claims it was Patty's wish as well. I hear Margery apologising to people because they cannot get one last look at Patty before they take the coffin to the cemetery and put it into the ground. I stand in the foyer of the church and wonder why people want a visual confirmation that Patty is in the box or, barring that, why they need the assurances from Patty's mother that her body is indeed in there. Are they afraid Patty might be secretly living-it-up down in Mexico while we are stuck suffering through her funeral?

Margery shakes hands and chats with people while I watch from a quiet corner. Close enough to hear her explain that Patty is "not presentable." Presentable, the word kind of echoes in my mind while I scan the crowd wondering what it means. Presentable? I'm not even sure what that word denotes under these circumstances. Or do I mean connotes? The definition of the word floats through my head. Margery isn't wrong. The body is not presentable no matter how the word is meant. I was with Margery a couple of days earlier when the cops explained that the body had decomposed at an accelerated rate. Patty had been an organ donor but none of her organs could be utilized because they had decayed beyond usability by the time they got the body to the morgue. I gaze out the door at the drizzly rain. I see more people huddled under umbrellas approaching the church. I don't want to think about Patty's decomposing body or the eerily prescient dream I'd had which featured a quickly decaying body.

"I'm sure she suffered a lot."

Jolted I look around for the person who said that and see three elderly women standing in a small group, all of them nodding to each other.

"Well, I think she deserved it." One of the women declares. All of them have to be in their seventies.

“Oh, yes, taking a strange man home like that for sex!” Her voice sounds delightfully shocked. I cannot figure out why these women are at Patty’s funeral. I know Patty’s grandmothers are dead so that cannot be it. And the women are far too old to be friends with Patty’s mother.

“Yes, it’s just disgusting how young women behave today.”

Suddenly I know what is going on and I turn away from them. I have encountered this before at funerals; older people who have nothing better to do with their day than attend funerals at ‘their’ church. As if the simple fact of location means they are automatically entitled to an invitation. They show up and discuss the shortcomings of the deceased who they never knew in voices loud enough to be overheard by the friends and family. These funeral aficionados often compare the various services as if they were discussing latest offerings at the local playhouse.

Disgusted, I glance around and spot a quieter corner of the foyer where I can escape to so I will not have to listen to more criticisms on Patty’s character. Of course, their comments also make me feel guilty. If I had been on time, would she have met the murderer? I assume he was there trolling for his victim so Patty would have been safe with me there. He must have been looking for a woman alone. Patty’s behaviour bothers me too. Not that she had taken some stranger home to bed, although that was a little out of character for her, but that she did so in such a short time span. I was a little over an hour late, which meant she had only known him for an hour or an hour and a half at the most. Maybe she had known him previously and just had not mentioned him to me. The cops said it was a possibility but I find that hard to believe. A guy that good looking? I think Patty would have talked about him. Besides, Patty was still hung up on Josh. She had always held back from getting involved with another guy because she was still hopeful that Josh would change his mind. I had tried to get her to move on. It just compounded my guilt that she chose that night to follow my advice.

Slowly I walk across the foyer to the quieter corner. I scan around for Josh, hoping he will show up and shield me from this crap. I am sure he will find me as soon as he arrives so I go back to searching the crowd, trying to do my ‘job’.

“It was just her time.”

The voice sounds familiar to me so I look for the owner and there she stands, near the door. I met her a couple of days ago because she

was helping Margery in 'her time of need'. Despite the woman's constant and annoying use of that phrase, she does seem to sincerely care about Margery and Patty. The woman seems to thrive on the drama of the situation, which makes it impossible for me to like her. Her (almost) enjoyment of her role as the best friend and helpmate of the tragic mother is just too much for me to handle. I am not sure I remember her name correctly but I'm pretty convinced it's Lorraine.

"Yes, there's no escaping our destiny," states the red head in the group of five women.

"Terrible, absolutely terrible to be taken like that but when it's your time, it's your time." Another woman sadly agrees.

"Oh, yes, I've been telling Margery that since it happened." Lorraine says this as if it is an important part of helping Margery in 'her time of need' and she is revelling in her role.

"Good, but you should tell her that when God decides it's time, it's time." The red head says in a way that indicates her advice is sure to result in an easing of Margery's grief over the loss of her only daughter.

Murmurs of agreement come from all the women in the group and then another woman shakes her head sorrowfully saying, "Destiny is inescapable ... it is whatever God decides." It sounds like a quote.

I quickly search around for the bathroom. I need to get away from these people. They are really hitting the destiny idea pretty hard. I guess I can't blame them. Destiny can be an attractive concept. It would certainly let me off the hook. If Patty's murder was just destiny then I nothing I did would have saved her. Her death was inevitable. But I've always hated the idea of destiny, that our lives are predetermined. That our choices have no meaning is a horrible notion to me. Someone touches my shoulder and I turn to see Lorraine and her merry band gathering around me.

"Are you alright dear?" Lorraine asks, concern colouring her voice. That I believe her concern is heartfelt does not mitigate the irritation I feel at her enjoyment of her role.

"Yes, I'm fine." I reply although the air in the foyer suddenly feels very close and hard to breathe...

"Lorraine told us that you were to meet Patty on the night of her murder." the red head comments with just the faintest hint of scandalized enjoyment altering her voice.

“Uh, yes, I was delayed.” I answer, surprised that Lorraine bandied this piece of information about with her friends. Or maybe I should not be so surprised; It is the kind of thing people would be talking about. I have just managed to avoid this type of encounter.

The red head pats my arm, “You shouldn’t feel guilty. There was nothing you could do.”

Her touch makes my skin crawl. Or maybe it’s her inane prattle about destiny. I can almost see what is coming next. My emotions bubble too close to the surface for this conversation. If I have to listen, or worse participate, in a conversation about destiny I’ll start screaming. I do not want to make a scene at Patty’s funeral. It’s so... disrespectful.

“Excuse me,” I mumble. “I need to use the bathroom.” I quickly extricate myself from the group that managed to surround me and practically sprint to the bathroom.

The bathroom, empty and cool, is a welcome relief from the stress of the foyer. I walk over to one of the sinks and place my hands on edges. I take a deep breath then lean forward and press my forehead against the coolness of the mirror. I stare down into the sink and my long hair falls forward obscuring my vision. I focus on the white porcelain in front of me, my thoughts in a jumble. I thought I was ready for this funeral but I am having a harder time than I expected. It is the guilt. At least I think guilt is turning Patty’s funeral into a horror show for me. I cannot shake it off. I tell myself it was not my fault. I was only late. I did not know how that one thing would result in Patty’s murder. I did not make her talk to that guy. I did not make her leave with him.

My body feels stiff and sore so I stretch a bit in the hopes it will ease the tenderness. I think back to the dream I had last night and wonder why I have been dreaming about a tunnel instead of Patty. I guess the decomposing body is sort of about Patty but I had that dream a couple of weeks before I learned that her body decayed at an accelerated pace. When Sergeant Abeara first told Margery and me about the condition of Patty’s body my mind instantly jumped back to standing in her bedroom with that... smell. Maybe that was why I dreamed it. Still I expected to dream of Patty, of saving her or just talking to her. Those were the types of dreams I had about my grandmother so why not Patty? An image of Patty’s dead eyes staring at the blood splattered walls flashes into my head. I shy away from thinking about Patty’s

bedroom. Maybe that is why I'm not dreaming of her; maybe I'm just not ready to face it.

I wish I could run away from the funeral but that feels wrong. I should be here to honour her memory, to demonstrate respect for her friends and family, and to find Patty's killer. It is the last one that really matters to me so I pull myself together and then check myself in the mirror to make sure I am presentable. I carefully check that my make-up is still okay. Hair perfectly straight, clothes nice and neat, no signs that I have been crying, yes, I look *presentable*. I stare myself in the eye to shore up my emotional defences. My eyes are blue. A fitting colour for the day and what I feel.

I walk out of the bathroom and, deciding to go find a seat, enter the nave. I look over the rows of pews, preferring one in the back but knowing I have to sit nearer the front, I choose to find one in the fourth row. As I march myself up the aisle, I spot one of the cops assigned to the funeral. He has a camera and continuously takes pictures of the guests. I find it a bit unbelievable that the murderer would turn up here but Sergeant Abeara assured Margery and me that there was a very good chance he would. I stare at my hand as I remember Margery reaching out and clasping it as the Sergeant told us the murderer might appear at the funeral. I know the idea horrified Margery. Oddly, I don't believe Sergeant Abeara really thinks that will happen. However, it is proper police procedure and he would follow it on the off chance that the murderer might show up. It was the reason I was standing in the foyer instead of hiding in a corner. I was looking for the guy I had come to think of as Mr Nordic. A hand touching my back startles me. Jumping a bit, I turn to see Josh with an apologetic look on his face.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he says and gives me a hug. I squeeze him tight.

"No worries, let's find a seat."



## Chapter 7

The service lasts for three days. Or maybe it's only three hours. I had hoped Josh would be a comfort but he is a little annoying. He hovers, putting his arm around me, holding my hand, giving me a hanky when I start to cry. It drives me a little crazy. I know he is just trying to offer support but it feels more like clinging. Maybe I'm just overly sensitive. I want to get away from everyone. Actually what I want is to talk to the cops and find out if they have learned anything. The idea that Patty's murderer might get away really eats at me and sitting through this endless funeral service has only increased my desire to find the guy. I want to help. I want this funeral to end. I want Patty alive, making jokes about the cops. I want yesterday back. No, I want it to be two weeks ago, before Patty died. November is nearly over and each day that has passed has made Patty's death more and more real to me. It also makes me feel more and more frustrated with the murder investigation.

As soon as the service is over, I tell Josh that I need to use the bathroom so I can get away from him. The old bathroom dodge; a useful excuse at times. Fortunately, Josh does not know I used the same excuse earlier so he believes me. I walk quickly down one of the side aisles to avoid the crowd in the centre. I pretend to examine the floor until I sense someone near and look up to find Sergeant Abeara surreptitiously motioning me over to him. I stroll over to stand beside him, looking out over the church.

"Have you seen him?" the sergeant asks, nodding towards the crowd.

"No," I reply, glancing around.

"How are you holding up?" my hunky Sergeant asks.

"I'm... getting through it."

"There's not much left."

"Of the service." I turn to look at him. "But the investigation isn't going well, is it?"

"No," he pauses for a long moment while the two of us peruse the church and focus on the people milling around in the centre aisle. "We think that your friend's killer is most likely a serial killer."

“Yes, I guessed that.” I answer absently while watching Josh spot me standing against the wall. He takes a step in my direction but I shake my head indicating that he shouldn’t join us. “If he is a serial killer then it’s unlikely for him to be here, right?”

“Yes, serial killers don’t feel remorse so they’re unlikely to show up.”

“Isn’t it unusual for a serial killer to kill in someone’s home?” I ask. I have done a little reading on the subject because the thought had occurred to me. The murder was too... neat. It spoke of practice.

“Yes, they like to kill in a place where they feel they have complete control. Being in some else’s place would give control to the victim.” Sergeant Abeara pauses, blue eyes intense and angry, and then says quietly, “At least I’ve never heard of a serial killer doing that.”

“Maybe the guy I saw Patty with had nothing to do with her murder and so he isn’t here. Maybe he doesn’t even know she’s dead.”

“That’s a possibility.”

I glance at the Sergeant again. Somehow, I am not convinced he believes what he just said. He sees my appraising look and smiles.

“No, I don’t believe that.” he confirms.

“Why?”

“It’s just too coincidental. Your friend leaves with someone you’ve never seen before and that night she’s murdered.” He pauses and then continues in a more thoughtful tone of voice, more to himself than to me. “No, that’s just a bit too coincidental.”

“Patty and I were friends but I couldn’t definitively say that she would tell me everything.”

“Maybe, but we have interviewed all her friends we could and none of them have mentioned the guy you saw.”

“That still doesn’t really mean anything,” I reply.

“True, but we still need to talk to him. At this moment he’s still our best lead.” Sergeant Abeara pauses again and then asks, “Is there anyone here you don’t recognize?”

“Sure, there are a lot of people I don’t know.” I look at the Sergeant’s beautiful blue eyes, wondering what he is getting at.

He smiles, “If the killer is not the guy you saw, he might still be here...”

“But I wouldn’t recognize him.” I finish. “I don’t know Patty’s family. You would have to ask her mother.”

The Sergeant nods and then makes a vague gesture towards Josh. “Your boyfriend appears a bit anxious.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” I say, trying to hide my annoyance while watching Josh watch me. I turned to John Abeara and take a couple of steps away, saying, “I was on my way to the bathroom. Please call me if you learn anything.”

He nods again and I pick up my pace. I really dread the next part. I hate seeing coffins lowered into the ground. At my grandmother’s funeral my mother fell to her knees crying when the first shovel full of dirt hit the coffin. It is an image I have never been able get out of my mind; my mother falling to her knees in the snow on the frozen ground, clinging to her best friend, crying out in pain and fear. Every time I think of my grandmother’s funeral, I re-experience that moment when my mother who had remained strong throughout all the preparations broke down and wailed her grief. I had wanted to run to her side and help her but our relationship did not allow for that. I knew she would not find me comforting so I stood ten feet away, tears flowing down my face, crying for my grandmother, for my mother, and for myself.

## Chapter 8

**Standing** by the food table, I watch the crowd. I feel I don't belong. Unfortunately, I'm not free to leave. Margery asked me to help her receive guests at the wake. Well, it is not really a wake since Margery does not allow drinking. She is one of those religious people who believe Christ drank unfermented grape juice. Maybe I can just hide in the bathroom for an hour or so. Maybe I should have smuggled alcohol in here.

I follow Margery's movement through the various groups of people. Although she has been holding up well, I see grief is taking its toll. I look away as I remember her grabbing my hand at the graveside when they started lowering Patty's coffin into the ground. She clung tightly, painfully so, and I could feel her get a little unsteady on her feet. She held onto me so she could stay standing upright while she cried but I think Margery also held onto me as the last piece of her daughter. It made me think of my mother. Margery was quieter but her grief was equally intense and now I can see her running out of energy, running out of strength, running out of whatever has made it possible for her to smile while her heart is breaking.

I always envied Patty's relationship with her mother. They had the kind of relationship most women wish they had with their mothers and daughters. My own relationship with my mother is a little more... fraught. I guess my mother would show up to my funeral but she certainly would not have taken Patty into her confidence the way Margery confided in me. Actually, I doubt my mother even knows who my friends are.

*"So, I told my mom about Josh," Patty said while flicking through the clothes on the rack during a shopping trip.*

*"Really, why?" I did not need any new clothes but Patty needed some 'professional clothes' for her new job so I was helping her shop.*

*"I wanted to know what she thought I should do," Patty explained, pulling a shirt off the rack and holding it up.*

*"What did she tell you?" I could not imagine calling my mother for advice, especially about men. She had me so she must have had sex*

*at some point but I have never seen her date or even express an interest in men. I sometimes wonder if she is gay.*

*“She basically said the same thing as you. That Josh doesn’t appear to see me as more than a friend and I should try to move on with my life.” She hung the shirt back up with a sigh, “I don’t know why but I find that really hard to do.”*

*“Maybe it’s because we hang out with him so much. It’s hard to move on if he’s always present.” I watched how Patty would take that advice.*

*“Yeah, but the trouble is I still want Josh for a friend even if I can’t... maybe I’m not ready to let go.” Her voice faded away on the last words.*

*“Did your mother offer any advice on how you could move on?” I asked, curious.*

*Patty laughed, “Her reply was ‘Baby, if I could figure out an easy way to move on from a man I’d open a store and get rich helping other women.’ My mom is such a nut.” She concluded with love and amusement in her voice.*

“It was a beautiful service, don’t you think?” a female voice says beside me, pulling me back to the present.

“Yes,” I reply, preparing myself to face more insensitive crap before turning to look at the speaker. She has light brown hair and blue eyes. She is not anyone I know but there is something about her. Something I can’t quite pin down.

“Did you know Patty well?” she asks.

“We were friends. I’m sorry but I don’t know who you are.”

“Oh, I was in a couple of classes with Patty back in university. She helped me a lot and I wanted to... say good-bye.” She answers obliquely.

“And your name is?” I ask.

“Oh, sorry, it’s Kathy.” she tells me, holding out a hand.

I shake it, “I think I remember Patty mentioning you. I’m Ann.”

Kathy smiles and looks around. “Yes, Patty told me about you. She was really good to me, always willing to help me out when I got stuck. She used to tell me that helping others in the class helped her learn the material better. Sometimes I thought she just said that to make me feel better whenever I imposed on her. Other times I believed she really meant it.”

I smile too, “It was probably both. She wouldn’t want you to feel bad about asking for help and she enjoyed teaching people. She would often talk about her teaching sessions. She truly believed that everyone could be taught and that it was up to the teacher to find right method.”

Kathy peers at the floor. “The world’s a poorer place without her.”

“Yes,” I agree, fighting back tears. After all the insensitive comments I have been hearing, Kathy’s remarks feel like a fresh wound. Not prepared for something sympathetic, thoughtful, and kind, it hurts but at the same time, I greatly appreciate it. I resist the urge to hug her.

“Thank you,” Kathy whispers.

“For what?”

She clears her throat a bit then replies a bit louder. “It just seems like you’re the only person I’ve talked to who has wanted to remember Patty. I mean who she was, the things she did. All anyone else has wanted to talk about has been Patty’s horrible murder.”

I look at her, “I thought it was just me who was getting that because everyone knows I found her.”

Kathy stares into my eyes and, once again, I am struck by... something. It is there but I can’t figure out what ‘it’ is. Maybe Patty introduced us at some point. Kathy gives me a small, weak smile. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that.” She says with true empathy in her voice.

“It wasn’t fun,” I reply, “Actually, it’s still not fun.”

Kathy glances over to Margery and then back at me. She holds out her hand again and as we shake she says, “It was nice to talk to you. I’m going to give my condolences to Patty’s mother and then leave.”

“It was nice talking to you too. Good-bye.”

She nods and walks off, slowly making her way to Margery. I watch her join the line of well-wishers who are also leaving. Surveying the group, I notice that Kathy stands out from the rest. It is not that she is beautiful but rather has a kind of gracefulness that sets her apart. I really want to join her in that line up and get the hell out but I know I’m expected to stay.

“Who was that?” Josh asks right at my shoulder. He must have approached while my attention was on Kathy.

I explain who she was and what she had said.

“I had almost forgotten how much Patty liked to teach,” Josh sighs, his voice filled with regret. “I’m surprised there aren’t more like her here.”

“Maybe they didn’t want to intrude. Or more likely they just didn’t know how to deal with a funeral.”

“Do you really think that?”

“Yes, people are very uncomfortable with funerals. They worry about saying the wrong thing, which is appropriate considering how many people do say insensitive things.”

“Not everyone has been to as many funerals as you have.” Josh replies gently.

“No, but all you have do is say you’re sorry for their loss and keep your opinions to yourself. It shouldn’t be that hard.” I say a little angrily. “I guess I feel that people should try instead of hiding away from it. It’s cowardly. I think that maybe death frightens people. Or maybe it’s just the intense emotions of a funeral that frighten people. Whatever it is they should just get over it.” I know I am rambling but I cannot stop myself. “Death is a part of life. My grandmother use to tell me, ‘Ain’t none of us getting out alive.’ And of course she’s right. Or maybe they should stay home instead of spouting all the insensitive things that they do. How hard is it?” I continue to babble, talking in circles, making no sense.

“Are you alright?” Josh asks, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I nod, take a deep breath and try to calm myself. Josh’s hand squeezes my shoulder and then his arm slides around me, turning into a brief hug that manages to burn through the crap I have been listening to and soothes me.

“What have people been saying?”

“It doesn’t matter.” I respond with a sigh, suddenly not caring about any of those people. Josh squeezes my shoulders again and I just want to grab him and run out of the place. Go somewhere where it is just the two of us; no worries, no funerals, and no other people. Guilt follows hard on the heels of that thought.

“It’s almost over.” Josh reassures me, “Look at the line of people who are saying good-bye to Patty’s mom.” I look over to Margery to see he is right. The line has reached a kind of quorum, prompting the other guests to join the line, assuming the service has reached its end. Soon the last people will be gone and it will be over. But I know it’s not really over. Not for me. It won’t be over until they catch Patty’s murderer.

## Chapter 9

I stand in a dimly lit tunnel. I have the uneasy feeling I have been here before but I can't remember when. I glance around but cannot find the source of the light. Water drips somewhere in the distance although the air feels dry. An unpleasant smell comes and goes as I stand there trying to determine which direction to go. The odour seems familiar but I cannot place it. I set off deciding that one way is as good as another. I think I hear someone scream but its right at the edge of my hearing so I can't be sure. The walls appear to have vague images on them. I stop to stare at one spot that makes me feel uneasy. There is something... I peer at it from a slightly different angle striving to figure out what is so disturbing. Is that a face?

I reach out a hand, reluctant to touch the wall but wanting to know what is there. The wall feels dry but as I brush my hand across it, it crumbles in a way that reminds me of damp earth. As I wipe the image begins to appear but then it starts to disappear. I brush the wall quicker, desperate to know what the image is but I just rub the picture away. I stop and then take a step back... And I stumble over a body.

I splash through puddles of blood to back away from the body sprawled across the floor. Brown hair obscures the face of a woman so I stretch out a hand to brush it aside. My heart pounds; I am afraid of what I might find but I need to know. Hand shaking, I push the hair aside revealing a face I have never seen before. Somehow, I had been sure that I would know her.

I peer down the tunnel stretching out before me, thinking the killer must have gone that way. Checking the ground for footprints, I stand up and step around the body. I clearly see my own footprints in the blood but there are no indications that anyone has been here before me. I scan the walls but again find nothing. The smell is cloying and growing stronger. I look back down at the woman and jump back in horror. The body is... dissolving.

I hunt around again, frantic for a way out. The tunnel seems to dead end in both directions. I give my head a shake. I was sure that a moment ago the tunnel, in both directions, continued straight until it disappeared into the gloom. I am not sure which way to go. After a



moment I decide it does not matter and walk towards one end to see if there is a way out. It looks like a dead end but the tunnel actually makes a left turn. I approach the corner cautiously, afraid of what I might find. I glance around the corner and find ... nothing. I continue. My throat, dry and scratchy, hurts as I search for a way out. I see the tunnel goes around another corner, this time to the right. I hear voices but they are unclear. Again, I approach the corner slowly and peer around. I see a woman who appears to be talking to a dog. She seems to sense me and looks up to meet my eyes.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” she says with a smile.

I wake up in my darkened bedroom and turn over to stare up at the ceiling. These dreams are driving me crazy. I turn on the light and get up to get a drink. I have been having similar dreams ever since Patty’s murder. In the kitchen, as I pour myself a glass of water, I realize that is not quite true. I had the first dream on the night that Patty was killed, before I knew she was dead, and I have not had a good night’s sleep since.

It’s not like this is unfamiliar to me. When my grandmother died, dreams haunted me for months. Of course, those dreams were about my grandmother not a tunnel or some other metaphorical thing. I did not eat or sleep in the two weeks that followed my grandmother’s death. While trying to deal with her death a counsellor told me that sleep and food were essential to get through a grieving period. The counsellor explained to me how not eating or sleeping causes chemical changes to take place, which make it harder to deal with grief. The counsellor explained all the cold-hard facts about grief, the best way to overcome it. Sleep, eat right, exercise, spend time with family and friends, allow yourself time to grieve alone, and push grief aside to go out and try to bring back your life. It all sounds so easy to do, a straightforward recipe for success, and yet it is so hard to achieve.

Grief, it’s such a short word to encompass so much pain. I lean against the doorway and sip my water. I am not anxious to get back to bed. In fact, I’m a little afraid of it. I do not want to be pulled into more dreams. The dreams make me feel confused and... young. They make me feel like that scared little kid growing up alone with a mother who was distant and cold. While my grandmother was alive, I was not so alone but after her death I felt like I had been shoved out into the world before I was ready. It took me a couple of years to fully deal with her death. Grandmother, she was more of a mother than my real

mom had ever been. My mother had also grieved deeply over her mother's death but it did not bring us closer. It created even more distance between us. I realized later that my grandmother had been a bridge between my mother and me. Without her, we were lost.

I give myself a shake. What I really need is food, exercise and a good night's sleep but, at this moment, I'll settle for just the last one. I turn to go back to bed when my cell phone rings, scaring the hell out of me.

"Hello?"

"Ann? Are you okay?" Josh sounds panicked.

"I'm fine, what's wrong?"

"Oh, thank god," he breathes into the phone.

"Josh?"

"Sorry, it's stupid. I..."

"You had a bad dream?"

"Yes, it's stupid, I know. I just had to call to check."

"No, I understand."

"Sorry, I'll let you go back to sleep. You are at home right?"

"Yes, I'm safely home and the doors are locked."

"Okay, sorry again. Have a good night."

"You too. And Josh," I call his name when it sounds like he is hanging up.

"Yes?"

"Thanks for calling."

"Really, I thought you'd be pissed."

"No, you know I have some pretty intense dreams. I understand the need to check."

"Thanks," he laughs. "It was like I couldn't tell what was real anymore and just needed to make sure."

I smile, "Yeah, I've been there. I once had a dream that I woke and my apartment was on fire. Then I woke up and my apartment was on fire. And then, I woke up. After that I wasn't sure if I was dreaming or awake."

"Creepy," Josh sighs. "Thanks for understanding. Good night."

"Good night." I say and, as I hang up the phone, I feel soreness creeping into my muscles.

## Chapter 10

I sit on the small balcony of Caffè Barney, waiting for Josh when I spot the guy Patty was with before she died. I see him just as he crosses Main St sauntering towards the café. My body tenses up. Although there is no proof that he killed Patty, I am convinced. I know the cops want to speak to him so I dig into my purse for my cell to make the call. When he walks up to the door of the café, I drop the phone back in my purse because he's so close I'm sure he will be able to hear my conversation with the cops and he'll run. For a moment, he stands close enough that I can stretch out a hand and touch him. Then he languidly reaches out a hand to pull open the door of the restaurant and enters.

Conversation in the restaurant momentarily stops while everyone turns to look at him. I covertly watch through the open patio doors as he scans the restaurant for a seat. Once again, I am struck by how beautiful he is. He really looks like a Nordic god, tall, blonde, with a perfectly sculpted face. The interior is dim so I cannot see the colour of his eyes but I assume they are blue. Something about him sets my blood pumping, and yet, as I watch him choose a table near me I realize I'm not the slightest bit attracted to him, my reaction stems from anger.

The adrenaline pumps through me, making me hear and see better. At least, that is what it feels like. He orders a drink from the waitress and then glances around. He does not appear to be looking at anyone in particular; more like he is waiting for someone. Does he know what happened to Patty that night? Did he kill her?

"Hey, how are you doing?" Josh's voice startles me out of my thoughts. I pull myself together as I watch him enter the café and walk out onto the balcony to take a seat next to me.

"Uh, good. How are you?" I lean on the small table railing of the patio.

He reaches out and touches my hand, "Are you sure?"

I flash him a smile but don't really make eye contact. We make small talk while I think about telling Josh the man I suspect killed Patty is sitting near us but in spite of the noise, I'm worried Mr Nordic

would over hear me. After a couple minutes, the restaurant goes still again as a new man enters. Dark haired and shorter, the new man is as beautiful as Mr Nordic; it's a very different look and yet the same kind of beauty. The second man peruses the room and, spotting the person he is looking for, sits at the same table with Mr Nordic. Again, I consider calling the cops. Would Mr Nordic know I was the one who called? What if he is the killer but the cops don't have enough evidence on him and they are forced to let him go? Would he then come after me? They are sitting so close.

Josh and I order our drinks and chat while I surreptitiously kept an eye on Mr Nordic. I worry that they will leave before I decide what to do. Their conversation seems intense but very quiet as if they are arguing. Their table is close enough that normally I would be able to overhear the odd word or phrase but I cannot hear a sound from either of them. I glance around the restaurant and notice that I am not the only person who keeps looking at them. Their stunning good looks attract a lot of attention, which gives me a feeling of relief. With so many people watching them, I hope I won't be noticed or stand out. Should I call the cops? Was there a way to let the cops know but keep my involvement a secret from Mr Nordic?

"You seem distracted." Josh's voice yanks me back to him.

"Yeah, sorry, I had a horrible dream the other night and I haven't been able to shake it off." I deflect.

Josh smiles, "Me too, obviously. Tell me about your dream."

I smile too. My dreams are fascinating to Josh. He does not remember his own dreams very often while mine are vivid and strange. His phone call the other night was definitely an oddity not just because he called but also because he remembered his dream after waking. I tell him about my dream.

"It's sort of odd." Josh comments when I am done.

"Well, I guess it's about Patty's murder even though it wasn't Patty in the dream." I reply, idly watching the bartender mix drinks while covertly keeping an eye on Mr Nordic.

"No, I don't mean that." He pauses for a moment to collect his thoughts. "No, it's odd that you have violent dreams so often."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know exactly," he places a hand on one of mine. "You're probably right about it being about Patty. I've had a lot of dreams too."

“Really that’s unusual for you,” I stare at his hand on mine. An urge to hold his hand comes over me but before I can act on that desire an uncomfortable feeling hits me and I want to pull away.

“Yeah, they’re all kind of similar. In my dreams I somehow manage to arrive in time to stop Patty from leaving with that guy.” He tells me while he slowly withdraws his hand. I feel sure he senses the strangeness between us.

“That’s understandable. I haven’t had any like that; just this weird reoccurring dream about a tunnel that is sort of obliquely about Patty. At least I think it’s about Patty.”

“Well, maybe it makes sense since you found... her.” Josh’s reluctance to use the word ‘body’ is very clear.

I reach out and give his hand a quick squeeze then reach for my drink, “Maybe I can’t go beyond when I found her. Every time I close my eyes I see her room and her...” I trail off, picking up my beer.

“In way I find it hard to believe she’s really gone. It’s as if she’s away on vacation somewhere and I’ll see her when she gets back.”

“I wish I could feel that way,” I take a sip and place my beer carefully on the bar. “It’s all just a little too real for me.”

Josh gives my hand a squeeze again and I look into his eyes and smile.

“Wow,” Josh leans away from me.

“What?”

“Your eyes are... sort of yellow. Or maybe a yellowish green.” He says leaning forward again and peering into my eyes carefully. “I’ve never seen them that colour before.”

“Really? I’ve seen them turn that colour before.” I reply thinking of the night Patty was killed. That night, I was woken up by the first tunnel dream and when I went into the bathroom, I noticed my eyes were yellowish.

“Cool.” he pauses, still examining my eyes. “It’s really different.”

I shrug. I am use to my eyes changing colour but it does take other people by surprise. My mother was very creeped out by it. She would get angry any time someone mentioned it, as if it scared her and she did not want any reminders. Maybe my father’s eyes changed colour too. Silence settles over Josh and me as he finishes his beer and then looks at me for a moment.

“I need to go home. I have to get up early tomorrow. I have a meeting,” he tells me.

“Sure,” I reply.

“I’ll walk you home,” he offers but, in that moment, I know that I have subconsciously been planning to follow Mr Nordic.

“No, I’ll be fine. I’m only a couple of blocks away.”

“I’m not comfortable with that.” Josh states, staring at me.

I smile, glance at Mr Nordic who has just had another beer placed on his table and reply, “Okay, let’s go.”

Josh drops money on the table for our drinks and says, “My treat.”

“Thanks.”

We walk outside and start heading towards Broadway but I change my mind about calling the cops so I pull Josh into the parking lot to tell him what I want to do.

“What the hell?” he asks bewildered.

“The guy that I saw Patty leave with is inside.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to let him know that I recognize him. I don’t think he knows I saw him with her that night and if he did...” I pause.

“Where was he sitting?”

“At a table by the window. The one farthest from the door.” I explain.

“One of those really good looking guys everyone was staring at?” asks Josh with real surprise in his voice.

“Yes, the blonde one.” I look at Josh. His shock seems a little odd. “I told you he looked like a Nordic god.”

“Yeah, I remember but he just doesn’t look like the type.”

“The type? What is the type?” I ask.

“I... I don’t know.” Josh’s voice wavers. “I guess I was expecting someone more dangerous looking.”

I am not sure what to make of that response so I don’t say anything.

“I guess I was expecting one of those crazy looking serial killers.” Josh amends.

“Ted Bundy was supposed to be very appealing.” I point out.

“Yes, I guess.” Josh’s voice is full of doubt.

“And anyway, what can you really tell from looks?” Astonished by Josh’s attitude I wonder why he is so reluctant to believe me.

“I guess,” he replies.

I stare at Josh for a moment. “Look, even if he isn’t Patty’s killer he was the last person to see her alive. The cops need to talk to him for that reason alone.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe we should call the cops.” Josh remarks, looking edgy.

“Okay, we’ll call the cops but we should keep an eye on him. I don’t want to lose him.” An idea occurs to me. “Let’s go pretend we’re waiting for the bus.”

## Chapter 11

Josh nods, hesitantly but he nods, so we cross Main Street to wait at the bus stop directly across from the restaurant. According to the sign, it is seventeen minutes until a bus will arrive. Caffè Barney has closed their sliding glass doors so I search through the window, trying to spot Mr Nordic. I see two guys sitting at the table where Mr Nordic and his friend were sitting just a few minutes ago but there appears to be two new guys sitting there. Blonde and dark haired, the men are similar but not even close to being as beautiful as Mr Nordic and his friend.

“Crap, they’re gone.” I say.

Josh looks at me then back at the restaurant. “What the hell are you talking about? They’re right there, still sitting at the same table. Unless you meant someone else?”

I can’t figure out what he is talking about. The two men sitting at that table look different, not ugly but certainly not attractive and definitely not the beautiful guys I had seen earlier. I peer at them, trying to decide what to do. There is no point in calling the cops since Mr Nordic has left.

“Jesus,” Josh gasps.

I turn to see what he is looking at and spot a beautiful dog. I give Josh a puzzled look. “What’s the matter?”

“That’s a wolf,” he says, edging away.

I laugh, “You really don’t know anything about dogs, do you? He’s a Husky. I’ve always loved Huskies; they have such nice dispositions. You know, a lot of people buy them because they look similar to wolves.” I reply while the dog walks towards me. The dog calmly stares into my eyes and he moves a couple of steps closer to me and then sits on his haunches. I squat and hold out a hand for him to sniff while I check for his tag. Very calm, almost grave he looks me in the eye while I continue to hold out my hand. The dog edges a little closer. I can’t see a collar but he must have an owner around here somewhere.

“Ann, I don’t think you should get so close. Seriously, what are you trying to do?” Josh’s tone has more than a little amazement to it.



I am about to reply when two guys walk out the door of the café. Shock hits me as I recognize that they are Mr Nordic and his friend. *How the hell could they look so different? Why was Josh still able to see them while I couldn't?*

"That's them," I gesture to Josh.

He gives me a look like I am crazy, "That's the same two guys who were just sitting at the table."

"Whatever." I respond, "Let's follow him. Once he gets home we'll call the cops." I glance back at the dog. The husky, now standing, has an interested look on his face. Josh starts to move but I grab his coat sleeve and warn, "Slowly."

The two guys walk south down Main St while Josh and I pace them on the other side of the road. As they near the intersection, we slow a bit more to see which way they will go. They cross Main St to our side of the road, which could mean trouble for us. I watch them walk west down Eleventh Avenue. Damn. Josh starts to dart after them but I grab his arm again and when he looks at me, I shake my head.

"Slowly," I whisper to Josh. He gives me a look filled with frustration. Funny, a few moments ago, Josh was reluctant to do this but now he seems more anxious than I am. We reach the intersection and look down Eleventh, trying to spot them but they have disappeared. Josh grants me a dirty look.

I scan around as we start down Eleventh. Main St is busy and therefore somewhat safe but Eleventh is a quiet street, which makes us very vulnerable. I know there is an alley, which runs parallel to Main St so I approach it cautiously and gesture for Josh to do the same. I quickly glance around the corner and see Mr Nordic and his friend facing each other in the middle of the alley.

"I followed the rules," Mr Nordic is saying. He stands straight and stiff with his hands clenched at his side. His voice is as beautiful as his face.

"Well, they still found the body too soon," is the melodious reply.

"I called the cleaners. They did not have time. I followed the rules." Mr Nordic reiterates while Josh and I exchange stunned looks. It is clear that the second man knows Mr Nordic killed Patty.

"Yes, but you called them too late for them to have time."

"I had some trouble. Work called." Mr Nordic's flat voice makes it sound like the other guy knows what he is talking about.

“You still should have called immediately. Mistakes like that put us all in danger,” the dark haired guy continues in a tone that sounds like it is meant to be soothing. “Look, you are in an important position and we would not want to you to jeopardise that but the cleaners are important too.”

“Yes, of course, James.” is the sarcastic reply. “But they still sent you to warn me.”

It occurs to me that we are in a great deal of danger, more than I had originally thought. Instead of following one possible murderer, we are following two. Or maybe it was one murderer and an accomplice. Either way we are dealing with two dangerous guys and following them has been a stupid idea. I should have called the cops as soon as I saw Mr Nordic. I am a damn fool; the kind of fool who gets killed. Worse, I could get Josh killed too. We need to get out here. I start to retreat but Josh doesn't follow me.

“It is protocol.” I hear James state while Josh and I stare at each other, not moving; me trying to communicate silently that we need to go and Josh trying to get me to stay. Josh wins our silent argument by not moving.

“Okay, I have received the message.” Mr Nordic replies. “Everyone can relax. No one is going to learn anything about us.”

Not speaking, Josh and I continue to stare at each other. Josh frowns then darts around the corner and into the alley. I make a grab for him but miss. Idiot! I'm not sure if I mean Josh or myself.

“Where did the other guy go?” I hear Josh demand while I scan the area, searching for help. I am surprised to see the same dog standing near the intersection, facing me. I curse myself again and, feeling helpless and incredibly stupid, I dash around the building, unwilling to let Josh confront two possible murderers alone.

## Chapter 12

**Rounding** the corner, I discover Josh facing James in the centre of the alley but Mr Nordic is nowhere in view.

“And just what did you hear?” James queries, tilting his head to the side and giving Josh a quizzical expression. James must have heard my footsteps because his gaze shifts to me. “Ah, another one. This is turning into a mess.”

I take another step forward and James glares straight into my eyes. Suddenly he hisses and with unbelievable speed, he reaches out to grab Josh by the upper arms, pinning them. Josh struggles but it is clear that James is a lot stronger and Josh is unable to free himself. James mutters something that sounds like “damn fool,” and tosses Josh fifteen feet into the air, slamming him into the brick wall. The truly frightening thing is that James made it look so effortless. I take a step back, desperate to check on Josh but I know I cannot take my eyes off James. His speed and strength are unbelievable. A growl makes me involuntarily glance to my left while James does the same. The same husky stands a few feet away from me, looking like he is protecting me. I look back at James.

“Of course you have a dog safeguarding you,” James says with derision. He backs away, keeping his eyes on us until he disappears around the corner.

“Thanks,” I irrationally call to the dog as he trots after James. I run to check on Josh who moans and sits up as I reach him.

“I’m okay,” he mumbles.

“Don’t be stupid, you’re not okay. We’re going to a hospital.” Josh starts to get up but I restrain him. “Are you sure you should get up?”

“I don’t think anything is broken,” he replies, so I help him up. “It’s not far to VGH. I think I can walk.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’ll call for an ambulance and VGH is farther away than St Joseph’s.”

“No,” Josh says, urgently.

I give him a baffled look. “Why not?”

“I just think it’s better if we’re not tied back to this alley tonight. Besides Vancouver General has a larger ER.”

I think about it. Caution does seem like a good idea. The things James and Mr Nordic said to each other indicate a conspiracy of some sort. I nod. “Okay, we’ll call a cab.”

“Alright but let’s walk back to Main and Broadway.”

“Okay, we can tell the cab driver to let us out a block from the emergency entrance.” I agree, slipping my arm around his waist to help him walk. I am surprised by Josh’s attitude change, but also grateful.

Main and Broadway is a busy enough intersection that grabbing a cab there, even at this time of night, will not be that notable. Even Josh’s stumbling would only make people think he drank too much. *What the hell is going on?* James obviously knew he was talking to Patty’s murderer but I don’t understand the part about ‘finding the body too soon.’ Mr Nordic’s comments made it sound like there were others involved. Who are *they*? And why could Josh see them through the window while I couldn’t? Or was it the other way around?

## Chapter 13

**While** I wait for the nurse to leave, a glance around the room reveals only one empty bed and two occupied beds, which contain patients who appear to be asleep. My eyes roam over the room again, searching for a chair. Spotting one by the window, I pick it up as quietly as I can and place it close to Josh's bed. The nurse gives me a warning look and indicates we should keep it down before she walks out of the room.

"How's your head feel?" I quietly inquire, putting a hand on Josh's arm.

"The headache is pretty bad but I'm okay." His dimple briefly appears as he flashes a smile.

"That was a pretty stupid thing to do, by the way."

"I was trying to track down Patty's killer." Josh sounds a little mad.

"Yes, I get that but we thought there were two of them and you ran around the corner to confront them. That was the stupid part. Did you seriously think you could take on two guys by yourself? Seriously, two guys with only me for backup?"

Josh actually smiles at that, his dimple appearing again as he replies, "Yeah, you're right. Then again you took on two guys by yourself once."

"That was different. I had to. They were trying to rape me." I mutter, as the incident flashes through my mind.

"Well, the truth is that the only thing going through my head was 'we're going to lose him' and I couldn't let that happen. I'll be more careful in the future."

"The future? No, I'm taking the information to the police and we're out of it."

"I thought you wanted to catch the guy." Josh hisses urgently.

"Close, I want to make sure he gets caught. I don't need to do the catching." I explain, feeling a little strange. Maybe I am lying to myself. I feel an obligation to find Patty's killer as if I can't let go until we get him. Maybe my nightmares will end once he's behind bars.

"You're the one who suggested we follow them." Josh points out.

I look him in the eye to make a scathing retort and find I can't. We stare at each other for a moment before I nod, "Okay, maybe you're right. Maybe I do want to catch him. Or did."

"Did? You don't want to catch him anymore because I got injured?"

"No, well sorry I mean I don't want you to get injured but that's not why I don't want to track him down on our own."

"I don't get it."

I quietly move my chair a bit closer and lean over to Josh. I check that the other patients are still asleep and then lower my voice to explain, "Think about what they said. Clearly, that guy James knew that the other guy had killed Patty. And from the comments he made, it's clear that there are others involved. That's a lot more dangerous than just trying to track down one guy."

Josh looks thoughtful for a moment, "So, do we report what we overheard?"

"Yes, of course," I shrug, sit back and stare at the floor. I know going to the cops is what we should do but I feel reluctant to do it. I lean forward to whisper, "We should go to the police and tell them the whole story. They'll give us hell for following a suspect but they will have the information they need to investigate the full scope of Patty's murder."

Josh motions me even closer, "Do you think they would believe us?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't they?" I ask a little puzzled.

"Well..." Josh's voice trails off.

"What's the matter?"

"I was just thinking about that weird thing that guy James said just before he grabbed me." Although his voice was thoughtful as he says it, I don't think he is telling the truth about what is on his mind.

"What weird thing?" I know we have not talked about one of the most disturbing things about our encounter with James.

"He said something that sounded like 'damper'."

I smile, "I thought he said 'damn fool'."

"Okay, maybe you were thinking that but—" Josh's voice sounds really dry.

"No, I'm serious. I thought that's what he said. And I thought he said it to me, not you. Or maybe he said it to himself." Quiet for a moment, I replay their conversation in my mind. I decide just to face what

we are afraid to talk about and plunge ahead by saying, "And then he threw you fifteen feet into a wall hard enough to give you a concussion."

"Yeah," Josh sighs.

"He was also terrifyingly fast."

"No shit." Josh mutters. "I couldn't believe how fast he grabbed me."

We stare at each other. I think neither of us wants to admit what we are really thinking. James did not move like a human being. I can see that thought reflected in Josh's eyes.

"Do we say it?" Josh finally asks me.

"To each other or the cops?"

Josh shrugs then says, "The speed, the strength, I think it would be hard to believe. I'm not sure I would believe us."

"Maybe I should leave those things out when I talk to the cops." I say dryly.

"Mentioning those things would certainly blow our credibility." Josh agrees just as dryly.

"But, if we don't tell them, they could be in danger."

"Yeah, but they'll have guns," Josh points out.

It is all just too bizarre. It is not just the speed and strength but the conspiracy. A group of people who commit, or at least help cover up, murder. Mr Nordic's remark about calling the 'cleaners' was particularly chilling. I lean on the bed, "Josh, we need to tell the cops what we overheard."

Josh nods. "Yeah, they need to know. Right now they're just looking for one crazy guy when they should be looking for a whole bunch of crazy guys."

I stand up and give Josh's hand a squeeze then start to leave but Josh holds onto my hand and tugs me back down to whisper, "He was frighteningly strong. I could barely move my arms. And that speed. He could do things we can't. What else can he do?"

"I know. All the more reason for us to call in the cops." I respond, staring into Josh's eyes I realize that both Josh and I have reached the same conclusion but we are afraid to admit it.

"Be careful," he urges me, giving my hand another squeeze.

I squeeze his hand in return then hurry out the door and into a bright sunny day, which somehow makes the night feel even more bizarre and unreal.

## Chapter 14

The squad room bustles around me while I wait for Sergeant John Abeara to show up. Motion pulls my eyes over to the door but instead of my beautiful cop, Mr Nordic enters the room. Adrenaline shoots through me. Dressed in a suit and tie he saunters around the room as if he belongs there. John comes in, spots Mr Nordic and steps over to exchange a few words. By John's attitude, I get the impression that Mr Nordic is his boss. While they are talking a third man approaches. The newcomer is gorgeous in the same way as Mr Nordic and his friend James and has the same graceful way of moving. Mr Nordic glances at the newcomer and holds up a hand to indicate that he should wait. After a few minutes of discussion, Mr Nordic nods to John and then turns to join the other gorgeous man, neither of whom glances in my direction. Sergeant Abeara stands still, staring at the floor for a moment. Then he peeks over to Mr Nordic and an odd... distrustful look crosses his face. I watch John pull himself together and, when he finally walks over to me, he looks surprised to find me at his desk.

"Ms LePage, how are you doing?" John says with a smile and a little annoyance.

"Good and you?" I reply, thinking fast while trying covertly to keep an eye on Mr Nordic and his new pal as they talk to each other. I need a reason to be here.

"So, what can I do for you?" John asks as he sits down and leans back.

"Well, I spotted the man I saw with my friend the night before she died."

"Really?" John perks up. "Where was he and why didn't you call us?"

"He was at the same restaurant. I saw him leaving with another guy just as I arrived." Neither Mr Nordic nor his friend looks my way as they speak. The two of them walk out the door and relief seeps into me.

"Really? Hmm..." John pauses, "that might be useful. Maybe he frequents the place. So why didn't you give us a call last night?"



“Well, because he was gone and I wasn’t able to tell you where he was going.” I ad-lib, all my mother’s lessons in lying jump to the fore. The most important — Stay as close to the truth as possible.

“Yeah, that’s true. At least you didn’t do anything stupid, like try to follow him. If he is your friend’s killer then he’s a very dangerous guy.”

“That’s what I thought.” I say, standing up to leave.

John looks surprised, “You’re going?”

“Yes, I just thought that information was important and I wanted to make sure you got it quickly.”

“Yes, thank you. It might be helpful,” he says, standing up to shake my hand.

I get out of there as fast as I can without looking like I’m running away. As the elevator door opens, I spot Mr Nordic and his pal talking in the middle of the lobby. I step out of the elevator slowly but thinking fast. I stride across the lobby without glancing in their direction, trying to make it appear that I have no interest in them. Once I make it through the door and into the sunshine, I cannot resist looking back. Peering at them through the glass windows, I notice the same thing as last night; they have changed. They are not the same gorgeous guys; instead, they are very ordinary looking. What the hell is going on? I start to turn away when I see James walk up to the door and enter. He glances in my direction as the door swings shut behind him and as the glass door closes between us, he changes just as our eyes meet. For some reason my eyes dart to Mr Nordic and then back to James. His eyes follow mine and then he grabs for the door handle while I take off.

The Cambie Street bus is loading just up ahead so I fumble around in my purse for my bus pass as I dash up to the door. I hop on and produce my pass as the doors close behind me and the driver pulls away from the curb. Some bus drivers in Vancouver just refuse to wait for anyone and relief fills me that this bus is driven by one of those.

I turn to look out the window at James as we drive past. Once again, he transforms into an ordinary looking guy. Sunlight shines on his dark hair as he stops running to watch me go by. The look on his face is... disturbing. Whether or not Mr Nordic knows about me no longer matters because I am sure he is about to learn about me from James. Patty’s killer is a cop— a cop who seems to be part of a conspiracy. The bus is heading downtown where it will be easy for me to

transfer to another bus, but which bus should I grab? I move to the back doors, trying to think clearly but my mind is fuzzy. I feel like smacking myself in the head to make it work better. What is wrong with me? Oh, yeah, up all night with Josh and scare after scare, means I am having a hard time thinking clearly. I need to calm down and focus. Overwhelmed by the things I have learned in the last day, I stare out the window at the clear blue sky. My mind goes blank; too much has happened too quickly. It has only been about half a day since Josh and I followed Mr Nordic into an alley. Alley? It felt more like we had followed them into another world. I give myself a mental shake. This is not helping. I'm just winding myself up. This frantic internal screaming is not going to get me anywhere.

I take a breath and focus on calming my mind. I have some time. They won't be able to find me immediately. My friend's killer is a cop who is about to be told that I have seen him which puts me in danger. A cop whose friend James might be able to tell him about Josh and then track Josh, which puts Josh in danger. I need to go to the hospital and get Josh out of there.

The things Mr Nordic and James said to each other suggested a wider conspiracy than just the two of them but there were other things they said that did not make a lot of sense. Of course, James' remark that Mr Nordic was in an 'important position' makes a lot of sense to me now.

Patty's killer is a cop. That thought just keeps screaming in my mind. Does he know my name? James is the one who knows that I might know something but he could not know my name. Why was James at the cop shop? Was he trying to find out if someone reported an assault? If I had reported an assault, James would have my name. If I had done that, he would probably be able to find Josh and me. Does that mean James has reached a dead end?

If Mr Nordic is John Abeara's boss then Mr Nordic must know there is a witness who saw him leave Caffè Barney with Patty. And he must know my name. Would he come after me for that reason? He has not so far and he has probably known since shortly after I reported Patty's murder that someone saw him. Could he arrest me? I have never broken the law, I don't even have any speeding tickets so what could he arrest me for? Nothing, but does mean I am safe? He can't arrest me and he probably can't get other cops after me but he and James are tied up in some sort of conspiracy and those people could come

after me. And Josh. James knows Josh was with me so Josh is also in danger. Do they know our names? Could they find out our names? I just don't know. I jump off the bus and look for the Oak Street bus, which will get me to VGH.

The sign at the bus stop reports that my bus is still a few minutes away so I pace impatiently, anxious to get to Josh and warn him. I wish I could just phone Josh but they made him turn off his cell phone when he was admitted to the hospital. My bus finally arrives so I board it and move to the back to find a seat. I stare out the window. It is a beautiful sunny day. Vancouver is an active city and every somewhat sunny day brings people out to walk. That is especially true on a nice day in December, one of the rainiest months of the year. I love this city but I know Josh and I need to run. A cop killed Patty, and he is going to find out that Josh and I know. As a cop he might be able get the police to search us out and he definitely would be able get all his conspiracy buddies to track us down. I'm not sure I want to be caught by either group. Maybe leave Canada? Then, once we are in a safer place, we can figure out what to do next. Maybe I could contact Sergeant John Abeara later and tell him his boss is a killer. Would he think I am crazy? The look of distrust on the Sergeant's face as he gazed at Mr Nordic flashes through my mind. Maybe John would believe me.

As I get off the bus at Oak and 12th, I realize another problem; I have no money saved. How the hell can I go on the run with no money? I stand on the corner waiting for the light to change, thinking about the two hundred dollars in my account. That won't last long. Hell, that is not even enough money to buy a ticket out of here. I can use my credit card to buy an airline ticket but that would leave a record. Well, that is a stupid thing to worry about because I have to use my passport to leave the country so that will leave a trail anyway. Once we get where we are going we can switch to cash so we can hide. Or would they still be able to find us? I have no idea what I am doing. We will need money. At home on my laptop are a couple of programming projects near completion but I won't get paid for those until a few weeks after they are submitted. I need that laptop. Without it, I have no way of earning money. Crap. I reach the doors of the Vancouver General Hospital and head to Josh's room as fast as I can. As soon as I finish talking to Josh, I will have to go home to get my laptop.

## Chapter 15

I scan the streets but cannot see anything suspicious. Of course, I do not have any experience in this so maybe there are several things that are suspicious but I just don't know it. I am not sure about the best way to approach my apartment but walking up to the front door seems stupid so I decide to walk down the alley and enter using the side door. The alley appears a little less exposed than walking down the street. I slip in through the gate and then unlock the side door. I am in. I breathe a little easier. I climb the staircase, listening hard and making as little noise as possible. If they know where I live, they might have managed to get into my building and could be waiting around the door of my apartment or in the stairwells. I'm not sure if I am being naïve or paranoid. I creep up to the fourth floor and quietly pull the door open just a sliver. I can't hear anything so I drag the door open and peer around. Nothing... I slip into the hallway, trying not to breathe too loudly. I quietly approach the fire doors and place an ear close to the door but hear nothing. Would I be able to hear someone standing in the hallway? Other than talking, what kind of noise would they make?

I push open the door to find... nothing. I dart to my door and quickly unlock it. Are they inside? Jesus, am I paranoid or just stupid? I momentarily press my forehead against the door then quickly open it and slip inside to find... nothing. I rush to my bedroom, pull a suitcase out of the closet and start throwing clothes in when I realize I am being stupid. The first thing to pack is my laptop; it is the most important thing. I grab my daypack and put the laptop in there, along with the power cord. I quickly add the charger for my phone and then pause. Maybe the phone is a bad idea. Can't they track you through your phone? Cell towers need to know where your phone is in order to route the calls. Or did they? With a start, I realize I have frozen in place so I make myself get back to packing. I should probably assume that they could track a cell phone. However, I need my phone until I meet up with Josh. Once we are together, we can ditch our cell phones and buy prepaid phones. I remember reading somewhere that authorities do not

like prepaid phones because there is no record of who owns which phone.

I go through my laundry basket and throw the dirty clothes into a plastic bag. I can have them washed at a hotel or wash them myself later. I have to get used to that anyway. There are Laundromats. Am I focusing on unimportant details? Naïve or paranoid? I just don't know what I am doing. Maybe my mind would be functioning better if I had some sleep but that is going to have to wait until we are on the plane. In the bathroom I toss everything into a toiletry bag and then search my bedroom for anything else I will need.

I stand in the middle of my living room looking around. There really is not anything important here. I moved away from my mother's home only a couple of years before and I have not had time to really settle in or accumulate a lot of stuff. I look at my suitcase and backpack and realize I have everything I need in my life stuffed into two bags. Actually, everything I really need is in my backpack. The moment I think that my mind flashes back to finding my backpack in my dream. It makes me feel uncomfortable, like my skin is too tight. Maybe I was stupid to return to my apartment but I need that laptop. In books and movies, the protagonist on the run always seems to have money socked away somewhere, making it easy for them to go into hiding. Without my laptop, I would have no way of making money and, within a couple of weeks, I would not be able to afford being on the run. I pick up my backpack and slide it on. I got this far. Will I be able to get out?

Glancing out the window, I see a dark haired guy walking down the street. He seems oddly familiar so I watch him for a moment. My heart skips a beat as I see him pause to study the door of my apartment building. Is he part of it? How can I know? He is not dressed like a cop. Is he like Mr Nordic? I can't tell through the glass. He continues walking but glances back at the door a couple times before he turns a corner and vanishes from my sight. Did he peer too intently at the entrance to my building? Is it because of me or something else? Paranoid or naïve? I elect to take the side door again but it will be harder with a suitcase. I could leave the suitcase behind or maybe checking onto a plane to Europe without luggage would be odd. Odd enough to be noted and remembered? Credit card for the ticket and I have to use my

passport so my name has to be on the ticket. Do they know my name? Would it matter? God, I need to get my brain working.

I grab the handle of the suitcase and roll it out of my apartment. I close the door and then stand there staring at the lock. I'm not coming back. The landlord will deal with whatever is in there. Should I lock it? It feels weird to walk away with locking it. But what would be the point? I lock the door. I decide to risk the elevator and end up standing with nerves jangling while I wait for it to arrive. Inside the elevator car, I push the button for the basement and then have a momentary panic attack as the door closes and makes me feel trapped. I reach the basement and hold my breath as the door slides open. I exhale in relief when the open door reveals an empty hall. I make my way back to the side door and then pause to scrutinize the area before opening the gate and stepping into the alley. The suitcase wheels are painfully loud as I trundle down the alley toward Main and Broadway, my eyes constantly scanning for trouble.

It did not take me long to convince Josh that we are in very serious trouble even though I did not tell him everything. Knowing that Patty's killer was a cop was enough for him to agree the safest course was to leave Canada. Certainly safer than staying in Vancouver where a killer could easily find us. Are the cops watching us? Would we be able to hop a plane out of here? How on earth could I answer those questions? I really need to clamp down on the panicked thought processes in my brain.

At the bus stop, I constantly search for Josh, afraid they already managed to track him. Then I spot James and adrenaline shoots through me. I glance around for Josh again while keeping an eye on James who does not appear to see me. Josh strides quickly around the corner, looking as relieved to see me, as I am to see him. I shift my gaze back to James and Josh follows my eyes. I see the realization in Josh's face as he too spots James. The bus pulls up then and blocks our view of James. We hop on and try to stay out of sight until the bus drives away from the stop. Looking at each other, Josh and I smile in relief. Of course, it is just temporary relief. We still need to get a flight out of the country.

## Chapter 16

Josh points to a quiet area. I nod my agreement and we walk over to sit down by some windows. We have hardly spoken since we jumped on the bus. With so many people around us, we were both afraid of being overheard. Once at the airport we searched the flights and a quick discussion ensued before we agreed on Amsterdam. As we settle into our seats, I pull out my new book to read. I stare at the cover for a moment not really seeing it. I tuck my boarding pass into the new book and open it to stare sightlessly at the page.

“I always find it weird that we go through security and end up in a place where we can buy stuff to add to our carry-on luggage.” Josh comments quietly.

I look at him. “I’ve never travelled anywhere before. I’m lucky I had a passport.”

“Why did you?”

“Patty and I talked about travelling somewhere. I thought I would just get the passport so...” Thoughts of Patty hurt, making it difficult to go on.

“Think we’re safe?” Josh examines the crowd.

“I really don’t know.” I sigh. I stare at the crowd with him. On the bus ride here, I decided to tell Josh the whole truth but I don’t know where to start. After a moment, I ask, “Josh, do they look different to you?”

“Does who look different?”

“That guy James and Mr Nordic.”

“Different?” He twists in his seat to look at me.

“Yeah,” I pause. “They look different to me.”

Josh goes back to surveying the crowd. “I don’t know what you mean by different. They’re... good-looking. And you know how men hate to say that about other men.” Josh smiles while keeping his eyes on the people.

“No, or I mean yes, they’re good-looking but it’s something else.” Josh rotates in his seat to make eye contact with me. I shrug and con-

tinue, "Honestly, I don't know how to describe it. They're beautiful in a... other-worldly sort of way. And..."

"And?" he prompts.

"And they change... they look different to me when I see them through glass." I wonder how Josh will respond and as the moment stretches out, I get worried.

"That's why you had trouble seeing them at Barney's last night." He sounds thoughtful as he runs his eyes over the people again.

I squirm a bit, feeling guilty. I know I should have told him at the hospital but I wanted Josh with me and I was afraid to say anything, afraid he wouldn't go with me if I did tell him. I wait for him to get mad.

"Or maybe it's the other way around," he continues contemplatively. "You say they look different through glass but I couldn't see that. They looked the same to me. I bet other people can't see them change either."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because if everyone could see it people would... question why they're different."

"How do you know they don't? Maybe they're... those other people who can see them maybe they're afraid to say something. I was. I thought maybe I was nuts."

"Maybe but I doubt it."

"Why?"

"If a lot of people saw them then there would be talk. It would get out. What exactly do you see?"

I try to describe to Josh how their beauty seems otherworldly and how they look through glass but words fail me.

"And it's just James and the guy who killed Patty who do that?"

"Uh, no... there was another guy at the cop shop." I answer forgetting 'cop shop' was an expression that was used in the town where I grew up but few other people use it.

Josh gives me a funny look, "Cop shop?"

"The police station," I reply. "There was another guy who showed up and talked to Mr Nordic who has the same beauty and he changed in the same way."

"So that makes three." Josh's calm demeanour surprises me.

I watch him for a moment, "What are you thinking?"



“Well...” he looks a little uncomfortable. “Okay, this is just an idea and maybe it’s a bit crazy but... maybe they’re not human.” He says and waits for my reaction.

“I... I can go with that. That speed, that strength, it was... incredible. And the way they change isn’t like other people.” I shake my head at the madness of our conversation.

“I know, it’s nuts but it sort of explains the conspiracy. If they are all the same and don’t want other people to know then keeping it quiet would be important. The question is what are they?”

I shake my head again, “No, it’s just too crazy.”

Josh laughs, “Yeah, maybe we should wait until we get some sleep before we have this conversation.”

I smile, “I think that is a good idea. We’ve both been awake for more than twenty-four hours and suffered through some pretty big shocks. I doubt we’re thinking clearly. Maybe it will make more sense after a good night’s sleep.”

“Well, actually I had a nice little nap at the hospital. Little being the operative word. I think the nap made me feel worse. I feel groggy.” Josh gestures to a coffee shop across from us, “I’m going to get some. Do you want one?”

I check the time, “Yeah, we still have two hours before our flight and I’d like to stay awake. At least until we get on the plane.”

Josh carefully places his boarding pass inside his book and hands it to me as he gets up. I watch him walk over to the little coffee booth, feeling happy that he decided to run with me. A couple of women stroll by him and turn to check him out. I often forget how attractive Josh is. Actually, I work hard to forget how good-looking Josh is. Since the day I met him he was off limits to me because my best friend was crazy about him. I remember Patty pulling me down the street—

*“You have to meet him,” Patty gushed.*

*“You said he would be there, right?” I asked as we hurried down the street.*

*“Yes, at least I hope so. It was more of a ‘I might be there’ kind of thing.” Patty checked the address on a slip of paper.*

*“Well, no worries, this party sounds like it will be fun anyway,”*

*Patty laughed, “Honestly, Ann, it’s like you don’t know what you’re supposed to say.”*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“Friends are supposed to say things like, ‘I’m sure he’ll show up’ and ‘how could he resist you’.” Her long lazy curls bounced around as she shook her head.*

*“Sorry,” I smiled. “I’m here for you, doesn’t that count?”*

*“Of course it does,” she laughed. “In fact, it’s more important to me that you’re here with me than spewing some bullshit platitudes. I can’t wait for you to meet him, he’s really great. I think you’ll really like him.”*

A blurry coffee cup appears before my eyes and I have to juggle the books around before I reach out to take it. Tears, I hate crying in public. A deep breath and I struggle to think of something else, anything else so I can stop crying.

Josh sits beside me, “Are you okay?”

I nod, “Just thinking about Patty.” Josh briefly squeezes my knee and then sets his coffee down before gently taking his book back from me. He opens the book and creates a little space for me to get my emotions back under control. I am so thankful that he knows to leave me alone while I pull myself together.

## Chapter 17

**A**fter fifteen minutes or so, Josh closes his book and stares at the people around us. “Do you think they’ll follow us?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think the cops will, at least not directly.”

“You think that guy... Mr Nordic will use the resources of the police to find us?”

“Yes,” I close my book. “I think he will use what resources he can. I’m not sure what that means though. I think we need to ditch our phones as soon as we get to Amsterdam.”

“Why wait? Why not ditch them now?”

“What if we get separated? We need a way to contact each other. Once we’re in Amsterdam we can buy a couple of prepaid phones and then get rid of our old ones. Ours may not work in Europe anyway.”

“Okay,” he nods, “so it’s better to wait until we get there. Of course, they can check where we went so they’ll know where there is. What do we do then?”

“I have no idea. Maybe we should run to another city as soon as we land.”

“Or maybe we should stay in Amsterdam.”

“Why?”

“Well, they’ll expect us to run so maybe not running will fool them.”

I think about it. “We just don’t know enough about how to do this.”

“Think we can google it?” Josh smiles and his dimple appears.

I have an urge to kiss him. He looks so appealing with that cute dimple while he attempts to joke about our situation. “Maybe,” I smile back. “I’ve come across some pretty subversive stuff on the internet.”

“So we need a hotel with wifi.”

“Yeah,” I agree but then a thought strikes me. “Maybe we should stay in a hostel instead.”

“Why?” He asks not looking especially pleased with the idea.

“We can get a private room but there are always people around. That might be a good thing.”

“True but I’m not thrilled with the idea of staying in some dorm. Are you sure they have private rooms?”

“Yes. I wonder if we can register under different names.”

“Why not?”

“Well, some places in Europe insist that you turn in your passport when you register. We wouldn’t be able to lie then any more than we could lie when we bought our airline tickets.”

Josh thinks about it, “We could try and if they need the passports we just pretend that we left them at the last hotel.”

“You think that would work?”

“Well, I think we should just tell them that we have to go back to our other hotel to get the passports. I think they would believe that.”

I ponder it for a moment, “Yeah that would probably work. If we seem more concerned about getting our passports back, it would probably be believable. Most people are nervous about losing them.”

“So what names do we use? Should we pretend to be married? Anabelle and Joshua Plantagenet.”

“Plantagenet?”

“Too recognisable?” he asks completely deadpan.

“Maybe, it is Europe after all. There might be one or two who recognize that name.”

“Okay, something different.” He smiles.

“The first thing we need to do is get new phones at the airport and exchange numbers.”

“And get some money. They might be able to trace our bank accounts.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I don’t think police are allowed to just demand a bank hand over records that are confidential. I think they would need a search warrant.”

“Then they shouldn’t be able to hack our phones either.”

“That’s true but it’s probably better to take the precautions that we can. Maybe we’ll come up with something better once we’ve had time to think about it. Besides I don’t think they know our names.”

“Really?” Josh stares at me in surprise.

“Really. Think about it. When would they have learned our names?”

“They might be able to get your name from that cop.”

“Sergeant John Abeara.”

“Yeah, him. They know you’re connected to Patty so they could ask him.”

I think about it for a moment, “I don’t think they know that we’re connected to Patty.”

Josh stares at the floor, “You were in the police station when that guy James saw you so they know to ask around.”

“And ask what? Was there a blonde girl here? Anyone know her name? I think James was there to see if we reported an assault.”

“An assault?” Josh looks at me and I gently touch his head. “Oh, right, assaulting me.” He laughs, “That already feels like a million years ago.”

“I know what you mean,” I agree. “I think that’s why that guy James was there. I think he went to ask Mr Nordic if an assault had been reported so he could get our names.”

“Okay so they might think that you were there to report an assault. So, maybe they don’t know our names. Maybe we just need to get out of town.” Josh thinks for moment and then points out, “But what about your connection to Patty? That Nordic guy must know there’s a witness.”

“He hasn’t come after me yet. Maybe he’s not worried about me.”

“Or maybe he doesn’t want his buddies to know he was seen. James was giving him shit last night for screwing up and didn’t sound like he knew there was a witness.”

“That’s true.” I agree and then a thought occurs to me. “That could also mean that Mr Nordic is the only cop in the conspiracy.”

“Because, if there was a second one that one would have told James that there was a witness.” Josh finishes for me. “Still, it’s probably better not to use your name.”

“Well, precautions are good but they will have more than an hour to track us down while we sit here waiting for our plane to leave.”

“It’s not like the movies, is it?” Josh’s dimple appears with his smile.

“No, not exactly.” I comment. “If they know our names I think they will be able to find us here.”

“Airports being one of the first places they’ll look.”

I nod.

“Okay, if we don’t get caught in the next couple of hours we’ll probably be safe for a while. Maybe we’ll be safe long enough to learn a trick or two.” Josh opens his book and then closes it. “Whoever,

whatever they are they probably can't use all the police resources but they must be able to use some. I think we need to assume they have access to everything the cops would. The more precautions we can take the safer we will be."

I nod again, fear slicing through me as I think about what lies ahead of us.

## Chapter 18

We land in Amsterdam too late, or too early, to find a hotel to check into so we find ourselves wandering around the airport late at night. Fortunately, the airport is open twenty-four hours so we can sit and have a coffee after collecting our luggage. One of the café areas has a nice view of the airfield. It is odd that watching planes take off and land is so interesting. Maybe it is because they do not look like they should be able to fly.

“Well, we planned this badly,” Josh comments dryly. “Middle of the night, going on two days without a decent night’s sleep.”

“Next time we go on the run from a killer cop we’ll pre-book everything.” I joke, keeping my voice serious.

“That would be a good idea. These last minute flights are so expensive.” Josh replies with a bantering tone. We have been trying to keep each other amused throughout the trip, trying to keep fear at bay. After a moment, Josh pushes his coffee aside and lays his head down on the table. “How long until we can check into a hotel and get some real sleep?”

“I don’t know. Seven? Or maybe eight o’clock?” I respond, sorting through a stack of pamphlets we picked up. We found a rack of pamphlets for hotels and grabbed everything.

“Did we decide on a name?” Josh asks, lifting his head to look at me.

“I think we have to use your name.”

“You think that’s a good idea?”

“Well, we can try making up a name at the first hotel but if they ask for a passport we’ll have to use your last name. Maybe they won’t track that.”

“Mr and Mrs Eaton. Joshua and Annabelle Eaton.”

I give him a flat stare, “Annabelle?”

Josh smirks because he knows that name would irk me. “Sure Annabelle. Okay, I’m kind of serious. If I call you Ann in front of anyone it wouldn’t be suspicious because people would assume it’s a nick name.”

“And you get to be Joshua, Joshua?” I hit his real name hard, knowing that he hates people calling him by his full name. He says it always reminds him of his mother yelling at him.

“What else are you going to call me, Jesus?”

“Very funny. I doubt many people know.” In fact, I have rarely met anyone who knew that Joshua and Jesus both come from the same biblical name – Yeshua. “But what last name should we try?” We had tossed out different names on the plane but we both fell asleep before we decided.

“How about Sears?”

I shake my head, “You need sleep.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” Josh sips his coffee. “Okay how about Smith?”

Responding to that feels like a waste of time so I say nothing.

“Jones?”

This time I look at him. “Smith and Jones? We’re not a TV show.”

“Okay, okay,” he drinks his coffee for a bit. “It should be something kind of common but not so common it sounds like an alias. So no Johnsons or Adams or Fitzgeralds. How about Barnes? It’s common but not alias common.”

“Annabelle Barnes, I don’t think I’d name my daughter that.”

“Your mother didn’t name you that. My mother named me Joshua Barnes.”

I shake my head, “That’s cruel and unusual punishment.”

“We really do need sleep,” Josh replies checking his watch. “Only four more hours to go.”

I start stacking the pamphlets in order, cheapest on top. Our money won’t last long.

“So, Mrs Barnes, I have an idea.”

I stop stacking to look at him, feeling fatigue pulling at me.

“I’m going to go check the trains. If we don’t need to use our passports to buy a ticket then they’ll have no idea if we left or stayed here. If we do need to use our passports I’m going to buy us a couple of tickets out of here.”

“To where?”

“No, I’ll just buy the tickets and we’ll just stay here.”

“Maybe it’s the lack of sleep talking, but that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Josh grabs his coffee and walks away.



## Chapter 19

“Well, that worked,” Josh sets down our suitcases, stretches for a second before removing his coat and then flopping onto one of the beds. Registering under a different name was easy, getting the suitcases up here was not. The only problem we had was reassuring the concierge that a room with twin beds instead of a queen size was perfectly okay. That and remembering the name of the street or canal the hostel is on in case we get lost.

It is a surprisingly nice hostel. Sitting on the Ouderjids Vootburgwal canal near the centre of town, I expected something run down but it is a beautiful place with rather funky decor. We even had our choice of renting an apartment. After a little discussion, we decided to take the private room but not the apartment. The room is big and bright, painted in cheerful colours. A stylised coffee cup with steam rising is painted across the wall that the beds sit against. On the wall next to the bed Josh just flopped onto is a window that overlooks the canal. A very small table sits under the window with two chairs flanking it. As I look around the room, I think this is a good place to take a few days to think and plan. Maybe once we have had a chance to do some planning we can leave Amsterdam in such a way that they will not be able to follow us. That is if they followed us here.

I take off my coat and toss it on a chair before flopping onto my bed. “I’m surprised there isn’t any snow. Isn’t Amsterdam farther north than Vancouver?”

“Yeah, but they have that Gulf Stream thing,” Josh replies, staring at the ceiling. “Isn’t it supposed to keep the northern European coast warmer?” He is silent for a while; long enough that I think he has drifted off to sleep. “Do you think we’re safe?” He mutters with his eyes closed.

“I don’t think we can ever assume that again.” I sigh.

“God, I’m tired.” Josh sits back up as he says those words. He scrubs his hands through his hair, making it stick up in twenty different directions. It looks adorable. “But maybe we should try to stay awake so our days don’t get all turned around.”

I look at him. A note in his voice suggests he has something else on his mind. I ask, "What is it?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just scared or maybe... I don't know. I just feel like I would sleep better if we took a walk around. Maybe you could check out... the people?"

"You want to look around and see if I see anything... weird?"

"Yeah, but going for a walk would probably help us sleep better too. Come on, Mrs Barnes, a little exercise will do us some good."

"Okay," I respond and slowly haul my body out of bed. Our beds are very close together and I reach out to run my fingers through his hair, trying to impose a bit of order. Josh stands up and smiles at me, his dimple appears, giving me an urge to kiss him. Tension leaps up between us as we stand there so I step away. "But I think the real reason you want to walk around is to check out the famous 'red light district'."

"I think you mean infamous," he says and reaches for his coat.

We almost tumble down stairs that are so narrow they would never pass inspection in Vancouver and pop out onto an equally narrow street with a canal directly across the road. The concierge made a point of telling us that the Hash, Marihuana, and Hemp Museum is just across the canal. Maybe he thought we would be interested because we are from Vancouver.

"Maybe we should try to find some newspapers." Josh suggests as we stand on the corner wondering which way to go.

"Newspapers?"

"Yeah, find out if there's anything about... us."

I stare at Josh for a moment, "You really need sleep. We can just log on and track the papers or news back in Canada through the internet."

"Oh, right, yeah I do need sleep." He sighs.

We wander around the streets just looking through windows for a couple of blocks before deciding that we need to grab a coffee to warm up. Inside the coffee shop everything looks cheerful, all decorated for Christmas. It does not feel like Christmas to me. Patty's death is still too recent and then being on the run just pushed it out of my mind. My mother loves Christmas. She really throws herself into it; decorating, putting up three trees, making ornaments, and baking enough for the entire Chinese Army should they happen to show up during the holidays. It keeps her busy. Not that she was any easier to live with.

Josh slips off his coat and drapes it over the back of his chair. "I've been thinking."

"You think that's wise in your sleep deprived state?"

"Maybe we should still try to contact that cop you were dealing with."

"Sergeant John Abeara."

"Yeah, him. Tell him what we know. Just because he works with a murderer doesn't mean he would help with the cover up."

"Tell him *all* we know?" I emphasise.

"No but we should tell him we followed that Nordic guy and what we over heard in the alley. Tell him why we ran and that he can reach us through email."

I sit quietly, pondering Josh's suggestion. I recall the look of mistrust that crossed the Sergeant's face when Mr Nordic walked away from him. Maybe the Sergeant would be willing to investigate his superior. After a moment, I scrutinize Josh. He sits across from me staring at his hands, looking rung out and tired.

"I think I still have his card. But..." I stop and Josh looks my in the eye. "But I'm afraid of involving them. James was unbelievably strong. We could end up getting them killed."

"Ann," Josh says and lays a hand on mine. "They signed up for it. They know their work is dangerous. And they have guns."

"Okay, so we email Sergeant Abeara and tell him. Maybe we can also learn if they're after us."

"We know they're after us."

"No, I mean the cops."

"Right," Josh sips his coffee. "I thought the Red Light District would be... nicer. They always make it sound so upscale."

"Prostitution is always seedy." I reply, staring out the window. "People try to dress it up, Hollywood romanticises it but the reality always turns out seedy. Every now and then, someone tells me about a woman they know who does it but she has 'high' self-esteem. I never seem to meet those women."

"You don't think they exist."

"Maybe they do and maybe they don't." I shrug. "Maybe I just haven't met one."

Josh stares out the window while we sip our coffee. He tenses up, "How about her?"

I twist in my chair to see the woman he referenced. She is beautiful but not that otherworldly beautiful. Then it occurs to me, I can't see them through glass. I tap the window and look at Josh.

"Oh, yeah, right."

"This all feels so crazy. Did we do the right thing? Maybe we jumped the gun by running away."

"In that case, we can always go back." Josh replies and stretches. "I think I see a problem with stopping to drink coffee."

"You want to fall asleep now that you're not moving?"

"Exactly. This is going to be a tough day."

"All we have to do is make it to six or seven o'clock."

"Eight would be better. Come on, let's walk. I can't sit here much longer." Josh downs the last of his coffee and grabs his coat.

Back on the street, Josh slips an arm around me and points to our right. I feel his wariness in the way he walks as he pretends to snooze on my shoulder for a moment. We have gone past the point of tired and over-tired. Deep wariness has settled in stealing away our ability to joke about the situation. I grab Josh's wrist and check his watch; we have hours to go before we sleep. As we approach one of the canals, I see a guy walking towards us but on the other side of the street. There is something... odd about him. He is not particularly good looking but he is... sexy. That is the only word that leaps to mind. I turn slightly to continue watching him, trying to puzzle out what looks so different.

Josh gently pulls me closer and whispers in my ear, "Is that one of them?"

I shake my head and stop watching the guy. "No, but there is something different about him."

"He's not good-looking like you described."

"No, he's not." I pause thoughtfully. "Maybe I'm just wired after everything that's happened."

"And of course, you need sleep," Josh teases, and kisses my cheek. Suddenly everything feels awkward and, after a moment, Josh removes his arm from my shoulder. "So what should we do to stay awake?"

We wander around for hours before Josh has a new thought and tells me, "Maybe this is a bad idea."

"Running away from Canada?" I ask feeling bleary.

"No, wandering around the streets while we're too tired to think straight." Josh grabs my elbow and stops me in the middle of a bridge.

“We’re being idiots. Now is when we would make mistakes. We should just go back to the hostel and sleep.”

After a moment I nod, “You’re right. We’re being stupid.”

## Chapter 20

I contemplate Van Gogh's paintings while Josh tells me stories about the artist. Josh loves art and always knows interesting things about the work and the artist. I stare at the bright colours, listen to Josh and try to relax. That was the goal when we decided to check out this exhibit, to spend the day relaxing but neither of us seems capable of doing that. We have been in Amsterdam for three days but we have no idea if we are actually safe.

"What about her?" Josh nudges me and nods his head towards a woman on our right.

I look at her but she appears to be a normal person. I shake my head. My description about what they look like does not seem to help Josh spot them. "Maybe I was just seeing things." I comment.

"You don't really believe that."

"No, but we haven't seen a single one here."

"And only three in Vancouver. Maybe there aren't that many and the only reason you saw three was because you saw one."

"Was that supposed to make sense?" I ask puzzled. Normally I find it easy to follow Josh around blind corners in a conversation but this turn left me driving down the road alone.

"Yeah, but I didn't say it right. Look you saw one with Patty and then after that you saw the others because they were with him."

"That's true." I respond considering his words and slowly backtracking to the conversational corner where he lost me.

"Well let's say there are only twenty or so in a city but they all know each other so if you encounter one you will find more."

"Okay, birds of a feather. I get it."

"Yeah, from that conversation we heard between James and Mr Nordic they are organised in some way and seem to watch each other. That comment James made about 'protocol' makes it sound like they have rules in their... organisation."

We walk around into another room in the gallery. "Have you learned anything else in your research?" Josh asks.

"I keep coming up with vampires." We have had this discussion before.

“Vampires.” Josh mutters under his breath. “Vampires are real.”

“It’s just too crazy.”

“But it explains it. Their strength, speed, killing Patty; It all fits.”

“It’s just too crazy.”

“It also explains why they don’t want anyone to know. Didn’t you say there were scares in the past?”

“Yes, probably more than I was able to learn about but I did find references to a couple of towns where they dug up bodies and staked them because the locals were convinced there were vampires in their areas.”

“Maybe there really were.”

“Yeah, maybe, but the problem is that the legends don’t really match what is going on.”

“Because they don’t burn up in sunlight?”

“No, that’s not part of the legends, that’s something that was introduced in a movie. Some legends say vampires need to return to their coffin every day, during the day. Some say it’s only on Saturday or only on Saturday night. And some don’t mention anything about coffins. The legends aren’t clear about how someone is turned into a vampire. Some legends say that every person bitten by a vampire will die and rise again as a vampire. Other legends say smearing blood all over your body will make you turn into a vampire after you die. Oddly, it’s also supposed to protect you from vampires while you’re alive.”

“That’s weird. Talk about the cure being worse than the disease.”

“And don’t vampires like blood? Smearing blood all over your body seems like it would be ringing the dinner bell not scaring them off.”

“What about the mirror thing?” Josh asks as we walk into another room.

“Some legends say they have no reflections and some say they do but none of them say anything about looking different through glass.”

“Sure they do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, a mirror is just glass with a silver backing.”

“So maybe the legend is just a little bit wrong.” I respond, a little startled by the idea.

“Yeah, maybe you can only see their true face in a mirror. Of course, that doesn’t explain why you see them differently through glass but I don’t.”

I keep quiet. I did come across something in the legends that could explain it. The offspring of a vampire and a human produces a dhampir. According to those legends, only a dhampir can see a vampire. Fear grips me every time I think about it so, to avoid the subject, I point out something else I learned, “Legends also say that silver can affect them but again it’s not clear how it affects them. Some say it hurts them but it’s not clear how. It’s all just a lot of hearsay; really useless stuff.”

“I guess we need to separate the truth from the myths.”

“Yeah, in a way the legends are worse than useless. There are so many stories, ideas, and contradictions. Relying on them is probably not a good idea.”

“So we’re right back where we started from; we know there are creatures which may or may not be vampires, if they are vampires we can’t rely on any of things we think we know about them.”

“Yup, that about sums it up. Why don’t we go get a coffee?”

“Okay, Mrs Barnes.”

“Are you trying to get me use to being called that?”

“Yup. You never know, someone might call you that.”

I shrug, “If I forget I’ll just tell them that we’re newlyweds and I’m not used to it yet.”



## Chapter 21

**Back** at our hostel the two of us try to get some work done. My programming is going fine but I can tell that Josh is getting more frustrated by the minute. I covertly watch him. That thick blonde hair falling into his eyes makes him look a bit desperate, especially since he keeps running his fingers through it, messing it up. The last couple of days have been a little confusing to me. Every now and then, I get the urge to kiss him but then guilt hits me. I wonder why I feel guilty. I'm single, Josh is single. Where does—?

"Damn it!" Josh picks up his laptop as if he is going to throw it but then he sets it back down and jumps off the bed to pace around the tiny room.

"Trouble?"

"Yes," he stops pacing. "I thought setting up an untraceable bank account would be easy. Everyone talks about number accounts, blah, blah, blah. But it's just a load of bullshit."

"Maybe we should stop and get some dinner?"

Josh hesitates, looking angry for a moment, and then he sighs and nods. We grab our coats and head out to find something to eat. It is pretty cold walking along the canals but the views are lovely so we huddle in our coats but stroll slowly to take in the sights. Christmas lights shining on the water and people bustling about make a cheerful evening. Dinner and an upbeat atmosphere should put Josh into a better mood. Josh puts an arm around me and then whispers in my ear, "Let me know if you see any of those... What do we call them?"

"I don't know. Predators?" We walk in silence for a bit before I say, "I've been thinking."

"About?" Josh sounds more relaxed.

"We don't know that they all kill people." It is an idea that has been floating around in my mind for a couple of days.

"You think there might be good vampires?"

"Well, we don't know for sure that they are vampires so yeah, maybe there are 'good guys' who don't kill." I reply, thinking of the dhampir legends. Dhampir are supposed to be the only people who can see a vampire but more importantly, they are supposed to be the only

ones who possess the speed and strength to kill a vampire. So why would a vampire allow a woman to live to have a child who could kill them? Wouldn't they just kill every woman they had sex with on the off chance she got pregnant? Actually, that begs the question why would they even have sex with a human woman if they run the risk of creating someone who could kill them. It seems stupid unless the vampire actually wanted to create a dhampir. Maybe the vampire wanted to create a dhampir to destroy other vampires. Could I be a dhampir? Was my father a vampire? The thought sends a jolting sensation through me like an electric current.

"Good vampires. Believing something like that might get you killed." Josh comments interrupting my thoughts.

We cross one of the many bridges and I see a beautiful guy walking towards us. "What about him?" Josh whispers in my ear.

"No," I reply, briefly wishing he would not whisper in my ear like that; it's a bit of a turn on.

"How about there?" he asks pointing to a small restaurant we went to the first night we arrived in Amsterdam. One of the hostel employees recommended it to us and it turned out to be a great suggestion.

Inside we find a small table and wait for the waitress. Josh scans around nervously.

"Is something wrong?"

He shakes his head and then leans forward and starts to say, "It's just that—" when the waitress arrives to take our drinks orders and leave us a couple of menus. As she walks away to get our beers, Josh continues. "It's just that... it makes my skin crawl that I can't see them. I know they're out there but I can't see them."

"Me too," I agree.

"I can't stop looking for them."

"I've noticed."

"Annoying huh?"

"No, scary. I worry about it all the time." I tell him without making eye contact. For some reason I don't want Josh to see how intense my feelings are. Guilt hits me again.

A couple of beers and a couple of hours later Josh and I leave the restaurant to wander around Amsterdam for a while. We both want to walk and pretend we are just tourists not on the run for our lives. Amsterdam is a great city for walking, small and compact with lots to do.

Christmas music plays everywhere and we stroll through the streets listening to different songs and being a little silly. Maybe the constant stress is getting to us.

I tell Josh a funny story about computer programming.

“Nerd,” Josh laughs as we stop on one of the bridges to admire the view. A bit of fog has rolled in softening all the lights and creating a quiet atmosphere. Leaning against the railing Josh gets very quiet. I glance at him and then look back at the water.

“You know,” he says quietly. “I think tonight is the first time we’ve really laughed since Patty’s murder.” We stand without speaking for a while before Josh adds, “I feel kind of guilty. Guilty for laughing when...”

I turn to Josh and reach out to lay a hand on his cheek, “I know what you mean. I kind of feel guilty just because I’m alive.”

The moment hangs. As if the air has grown small fingers, as if Josh is touching me even though he isn’t. An image of Patty informing me that she thinks she is in love with Josh flashes in my mind and suddenly there is an uncomfortable feeling in the air. Josh and I look away from each other and I am unsure what to say or do next. Maybe that is the reason I decide to tell Josh about dhampirs.

“I found something else,” I take a small step away from him and lean on the bridge railing. “It might explain why I can see them.”

Josh remains quiet, waiting for me to go on. I am sure he can sense my reluctance.

“There’s a legend about something called a dhampir.”

“Dhampir? I’ve never heard of it.”

“I never heard of them either but they are a legend about... about some people who can see vampires. According to the legends they have the strength and speed to... well, to kill them.” I watch Josh’s face as I say the words.

“Kill them?” Josh looks shocked. “Do you think you could actually do that? Run around and kill people because... because... they...”

I shake my head, “No, I don’t think I could. Maybe, in self-defence or to save someone else but just to walk up to them and...” I cannot even finish the thought.

Josh kind of shakes himself, “I don’t think I could either. It’s... it’s... I don’t know. Horrible, I guess.”

I see that the idea is as repugnant to Josh as it is to me. “Of course, the legends also say that dhampir are incredibly hairy and have small tails.”

“So again, the information is almost completely useless.” Josh shrugs. “Do the legends say why a dhampir can see vampires but no one else can.”

I shake my head, unwilling to tell Josh that dhampirs are half vampire.

“Shall we head back?” Josh asks while looking at the water.”

“It’s probably a good idea.” I reply even though I am pretty sure it’s not a good idea. Heading back to our room and sleeping next to each other does not seem like a good idea. Each night I have become more aware of Josh sleeping in the next bed.

## Chapter 22

I wait for Josh to arrive while sipping coffee and working on my laptop in a small “brown café.” Brown cafes are a new experience for me because they are different from anything in Canada. They are kind of a cross between a coffee shop and a pub. Rumour has it that you can order, and smoke, pot in these cafes but I have never tried that nor have I seen anyone else do it.

We have been in Amsterdam for four days now and there are aspects of the city I am not really enjoying. My Canadian upbringing continues to cause problems for me. The urge to smile and say a friendly hello to people keeps getting me into trouble. The locals mistake my basic politeness for a come-on, which in turn creates situations where I am forced to be ‘rude’ in order to get out of them. I wonder how many other Canadians have had this struggle between local social convention and that ingrained politeness. Of course, my mother’s teachings may have made it worse for me. She always insisted on being extra polite and helpful to the elderly. Unfortunately, in Amsterdam, those elderly men I was polite and helpful to thought I was angling for a date.

When Josh walks through the door, I immediately notice he is in a bad mood. Life without work holds little enjoyment for him. He hates relying on me for money. Since I telecommute as a freelance software writer, it is easy for me to keep working. Lately I have been thinking of creating a second online personality so we will be harder to track but the banking issue creates a problem. Josh’s research continues to show that the stories about numbered counts and banking secrecy are exactly that — stories.

Josh sits at my table and gives me annoyed look. I slowly start shutting down my laptop and wait for him to speak.

“Maybe we should go to another city,” He says with a surly edge to his voice.

“We can do that,” I reply calmly, trying to keep my tone as neutral as possible. It was Josh’s idea to stay in Amsterdam.

“Maybe another city will be cheaper and we can afford a hotel.” He complains.

I sigh, "I doubt that."

He gives me a sour look. Josh hates staying in the hostel but I like it. I find the friendliness very enjoyable. The people love talking about where they have been and where they are going next. I also feel a little safer with all the people around. Our private room is about the same size as a large hotel room making it as comfortable as a hotel but the place is fairly busy day and night. Not loud or noisy, just busy. Plus, we can cook our own meals which saves a lot of money. I hate eating in restaurants all the time.

"Any luck with the banking?" I ask.

"No, not really." Oddly, Josh's mood improves and some enthusiasm enters his voice. "I thought it would be easy to set up numbered accounts that the police wouldn't have access to but it turns out that they've closed all those loop holes."

"Maybe we should try it anyway."

"You really think the cops can't get access to it?"

"I think they would need a warrant and we haven't broken any laws for them to do that. Look, maybe we should go to a bank and watch it for a few days. Make sure no... predators work there."

"That might work. If they don't have someone on the inside they couldn't get the info unless they get a warrant or break in." Josh glances around and sits back in his chair. "But we can't transfer the money directly because that would leave a record so we'd have to take out cash and deposit it."

"That's doable but does it matter?"

"Well there's less chance they can track it. If we use a European bank the Canadian police should have a harder time getting the info." Josh explains.

We sit quietly for a moment. Josh's idea has merit and it is probably safer to take whatever precautions we can. I study Josh while he gazes off into the distance. A confusing welter of emotions hit me as I watch him. Things are changing between us and it... makes me uncomfortable. To distract myself I ask Josh, "Have you thought of what kind of work you'd like to do?"

He sighs and turns to look at me for a moment. "I don't know what to do. I don't have the same skills as you. I can't find anything online." Frustration fills his voice.

I reach out a hand to lay it on his, "Josh, I don't care that you don't have work. I'm just glad that you're with me."

He grips my hand and tries to smile. Again, a flood of emotion hits me and then turns into something awkward and embarrassing making me release his hand.

A woman walks into the dark interior of the café and we both glance in her direction. The woman is beautiful. A jolt of adrenaline hits me as I realize she has the same kind of beauty as Mr Nordic and his friends. Watching her directly seems a little indiscreet so I try to follow her reflection in the mirror behind the bar but it takes me a moment to realize that the ugly creature in the mirror is in fact the beautiful woman stalking through the smoky interior of the café. Our eyes meet as she looks at me in the mirror. Recognition, and what appears to be fear, crosses her face. She glances at Josh and I am convinced recognition crosses her face again. I have the uneasy feeling she knows who we are. She smirks at me, confirming that idea.

Josh's eyes remain glued to her so I nudge his knee under the table. "It might be more discreet if you watched her in the mirror." I want to see Josh's reaction when he looks at her reflection. I am surprised he has not asked if she is one of them. Surprised and scared.

He mumbles something inaudible while his eyes settle briefly on the floor and then his gaze flicks to the mirror. He does not seem disconcerted nor does he seem to have trouble putting together her reflection with her in the way I did. Staring at her image in the mirror Josh comments, "She's very beautiful."

"Yes, she is." I reply and wait for Josh to ask the question he has been asking repeatedly but Josh doesn't. Dread spreads through me as I realize he's not even wondering if she is one of those creatures. Looking at her in the mirror she appears human and yet somehow not human. For me it is worse than seeing her through glass. I finish packing up my laptop and then look at Josh still staring at the woman. "Why don't we head back to the hostel and figure out where we should go next?"

"Okay," Josh jerks his eyes back to mine. "Weird, your eyes are that yellowy colour again."

"Let's go," is all I say. Out on the street, I describe to Josh what I saw in the mirror.

"She looked just the same to me."

"Well, what I find weird is that you have been searching for one. Asking over, and over again, every time we meet a good-looking person and yet you never asked about her. You said she was very beauti-

ful but it didn't seem to even cross your mind that she was one of them."

"No, it didn't. I guess I was just thinking about how good looking she is."

I grip his hand, "I don't like the sound of that."

Josh is quiet for a moment then says, "Here, give me your backpack, I'll carry it."

I mumble thanks and hand him the bag, "Josh."

He stops to look at me.

"I think she recognized us."

"Shit. We need to get out of town."

We set out for our hostel.



## Chapter 23

I finish booking a private room at a hostel in Berlin but my mind is on Josh who is lying on one of the twin beds in our room. It really worries me that he spent the last few days searching for one of them and then when one walked in it never crossed his mind. If questioning them never even crosses his mind then how can he learn to protect himself? I pack away my laptop then stand up stretching my arms to the ceiling. I can touch the roof here, which is weird for me. I am not tall and being able to touch the ceiling simply by reaching up is a strange experience. I catch myself doing it again and again, just because I can.

I turn to find Josh standing close to me. He reaches out and runs his hands down my arms and then back up to my shoulders. I start to speak but suddenly his hands are in my hair and his mouth is on mine. I kiss him back but then a wave of guilt hits me. Confused I slowly and gently push Josh away.

“This isn’t the time,” I say as he moves away from me and shakes his head, staring at the floor. The moment stretches out. I am unsure how to proceed. I start to speak and then stop because I have no idea what to say. I stretch out a hand to touch him but then I think that might be a bad idea and pull back. I want to grab him and kiss him but I end up standing still as he slowly walks to the door. He places one hand on the doorknob and then pauses. Finally, Josh looks me in the eye.

“I just need a little while alone,” his voice is very quiet.

“Okay,” I reply, worrying about what is going to happen between us as I watch him walk out the door. I want to chase after him and throw him on the bed but the moment that thought crosses my mind, I feel guilty. What is wrong with me?

I turn back to the desk and open my laptop again. I try to do some work but I have a difficult time because I just cannot get my mind to focus and programming requires focus. My mind keeps returning to Josh’s kiss. Why did I kiss him back? I should have pulled away immediately. The sensation of Josh running his hands up into my hair and

pulling me into the kiss lingers. I tell myself to focus on programming but the feel of his kiss returns and drives out all thoughts of computers.

My thoughts are just running around in circles so I shut down my laptop since I am not getting anything done. What I really want to do is go after Josh. We need to talk about this so we can deal with it. Just brushing it aside will not help. I decide to go after Josh. I grab my coat and head out.

Just a couple of doors down the road is a brown café and I am pretty sure I will find Josh there. Outside the air is cold and damp. I turn right, put my hands in my pockets and stroll along the canal, checking out the Christmas decorations. I smile as I remember encountering a little Christmas festival in the street the day before. They had snow machines, music, dancing, and food and hot drinks. I have no idea what the festival was about other than something to do with Christmas but it was fun to just stand around and watch people enjoying themselves. The laughter was infectious and made me forget my troubles for an hour and just enjoy being in the beautiful city of Amsterdam, feeling like a tourist rather than a fugitive.

As I approach the café, I see Josh through the window sitting with the creature we had seen earlier today. My heart starts to pound. I pick up my pace and quickly stride through the door but come to a sudden stop a couple of feet behind the woman just as she says, "Tell me your names."

Josh shakes his head and horror fills me as I see the blank expression in his eyes. He does not look at me but stares directly into the eyes of the predator.

"Josh?" I address him, hoping that look will change when he hears my voice but instead those blank eyes, completely devoid of thought, turn to regard me.

The creature twists to look at me and then she hisses. "Ah, the prefect in Vancouver told me he had encountered you." She sees my concern for Josh and her eyes flick to him and then back to me. A nasty smile slowly spreads across her face. "So, you care about this one?"

I feel like I am in deep water. I am struggling to stay afloat and find a direction in which to swim. With no other ideas, I decide to swim towards the crazy raft in front of me. I refuse to leave Josh so I pull out a chair and sit down, facing the predator. A waiter comes over and asks what I want. I order a beer and think about the predator's comment. A prefect was kind of like a governor in ancient Rome.

“So, what is your name?” she asks me, once the waiter is out of earshot. Josh gives her an adoring look and she smiles at him while she runs a finger down his cheek.

“Don’t you know?” I respond and shudder inwardly, my mind racing. I’m not entirely sure how to proceed but my mother always told me to never let anyone see you sweat so I decide to just pretend confidence while desperately wondering how to get Josh out of here. Looking at Josh’s vacant eyes, I doubt I will get any help from him so I need to get the woman to leave. I sit back casually and ask, “Would you care to give me your name?”

My refusal to answer her question seems to annoy her. She appears momentarily taken aback but then she deliberately affects a cavalier attitude and leans back in her chair. “This one approached me.” She informs me. “He came over to offer a deal. Said neither of you would reveal us if we would just leave you alone. Of course, you know that’s not possible.”

“I take it that you’re refusing?”

She only smiles, “James said you had a dog with you. Where is he now?”

“James or the dog?” I ask as the waiter approaches. He sets my beer down and I reach out a hand to grab the glass but don’t drink. I turn the glass around thinking that if I can keep her talking I can learn a bit about what she is.

Irritation crosses her face again but she doesn’t speak until the waiter is far enough away that he can’t over hear our conversation. “Do not annoy me, child. I might have to take this one in order to teach you a lesson.”

The image of Josh thrown fifteen feet in the air flashes through my mind and fear stabs me. How can I stop her even if she has only half of James’ strength? I lean forward, elbows on the table. “Here? You’re going to do it here? Wouldn’t that piss off *your* prefect?” It is a shot in the dark but by the look on her face I scored a point.

She casually leans back in her chair again, an evil smile spreading across her beautiful face. “No, not here, but you cannot protect him all the time.” I have no response and she knows it. She downs her drink, slowly gets up and walks out the door, leaving me scared and mad. Once outside, she turns and smiles at me through the glass windows. Her face has changed in the way that I have come to expect from these creatures I am starting to think of as predators. Not as ghastly as the

face I had seen revealed in the mirror earlier in the day but it is still the face of a woman who was not particularly attractive. Did she do that because she knows what I see through glass?

I consider Josh. He still has a vapid look on his face. Why did she threaten him instead of me? Was it the dhampir thing? The legends say dhampir can kill vampires but they also say that a dhampir possesses the strength and speed of a vampire and that part had to be a lie; I am not even good at sports. Ever since Patty was murdered, my life has thudded into a gully of the weird and scary. I signal the waiter to bring the bill. I stare at the piece of paper for a moment before I register the fact that she stiffed us with the bill. Although it is dark outside, it is only six o'clock so the streets are full of people walking and biking. I want to get Josh back to the hostel before it gets too late and we are alone on those streets. How can I protect him?

## Chapter 24

**Getting** Josh back to our room turns out to be very easy. He does everything I tell him to do. I do not know what she did to him but his willpower seems gone and that scares the hell out of me. Once inside our room I tell Josh to take off his coat while I toss my purse and coat onto my bed. He numbly removes his coat then stands there with it in his hands. I take the coat and toss it onto my bed as well. Taking his face in my hands, I command him to look at me. I examine his eyes closely but he doesn't seem to be inside. Desperate and terrified, I hug him. After several long minutes his hands move up to hug me back. I pull away to stare into his eyes and find that he is actually looking back at me.

"Oh, thank god," I mutter, squeezing him tight.

"I'm okay," he replies but there was a disturbing quality to his voice.

I pull away again to look at his eyes but now they seem normal. I smile and watch the look in his eyes change. His hand comes up and he brushes his thumb across my lips then leans down and kisses me.

Moments later, our clothes are on the floor and we are in his bed.

I awake in Josh's arms with sunlight streaming through the window. A wave of guilt hits me. I try to ease out of Josh's arms without waking him but he stirs and opens his eyes. He reaches for me but I forestall him. A hurt look crosses his face and remorse makes me try to cover what I am really doing.

"I need some coffee. Do you want any?"

He shakes his head and lies back. I get up and dress. I need some time alone to consider how to handle this situation.

"I'll be back in a bit," I tell him in a falsely cheery voice as I walk out the door.

Out on the street I take a deep breath and try to calm my mind. I really didn't intend to sleep with him. Sex is a complication we do not need right now. I think of Josh as a friend. Someone who is fun to hang out with, who can be counted on but I never wanted it to go further.

Thoughts of Patty skitter through my brain. I feel like I have betrayed her.

I reach the café and, because Amsterdam is not really a ‘take out’ kind of place, I sit down to drink my coffee, wishing I had brought a book to read or to pretend to read. Sitting there sipping my coffee I stare out the window and my mind goes blank. Idly, I watch a woman talking to her little girl, the two of them laughing as they stroll and skip and then stroll again down the street. There is a... playfulness between them that is engaging to watch. Looking down at my coffee, I think about my own mother. Our relationship is not playful. In fact, I have come to realize that my mother is afraid of me. I haven’t even told her I am in Europe.

I sip my coffee and my thoughts slide back to the night before. Josh’s passionate intensity makes me feel warm as I think about him. I remember Patty telling me how she hoped Josh would one day see her as more than a friend. The memory of Josh’s hands running over my bare skin intrudes and I experience guilt and confusion. In spite of those bewildering feelings, I want to run back to the hostel and take Josh back to bed. Did I really want to be just friends with him? Was I just telling myself that out of habit?

The attraction between Josh and me started with Patty’s death and it has been growing stronger since coming to Amsterdam. Or maybe it really started when I met him but I refused to acknowledge it because Patty wanted him. Over the last few days, Josh has been unconsciously acting on that attraction. It wasn’t just him, it was me. I have often found myself fighting an urge to kiss him. I want him but I keep holding back. Guilt. For a moment, the memory of Josh’s warm lips kissing my neck distracts me and then another wave of guilt hits me. Again, I feel like I have betrayed Patty. She was crazy about Josh. For me, that meant he was out of bounds. I guess I was always attracted to him but I buried those feelings because Patty wanted him. It would have ended our friendship if I had acted on those feelings.

I think about Josh; always there for me, fun, easy-going, and yes, sexy. I never let myself consider that before this moment. I never examined my feelings about him. As if I knew unconsciously that I could never admit to myself how I felt, otherwise I might not be able to resist. That, once I was aware of my feelings for Josh, I would sleep with him. And that action would have hurt Patty more than I could stand.

I gulp the last of my coffee, grab my coat and head back to the hostel. I have no idea what I am going to say but Josh needs to know. The only way for us to move beyond this point is for me to be honest with him.

## Chapter 25

“I think we need to talk,” Josh says as soon as I walk through the door. He gets to his feet and faces me before continuing, “I’m sorry about last night. I shouldn’t—”

I cut him off by reaching up to run my fingers through his hair and then pulling his face down so I can kiss him.

After a moment, Josh stops me, “Sorry, I—”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I ran out this morning but I needed to think.” I wait to see how he will respond. He runs his hands into my hair and then kisses me, hard. I start unbuttoning his shirt.

Quite a while later, Josh props himself up on an elbow to look at me as his other hand traces circles on my stomach. “Can I ask what happened?”

I stare up at the ceiling. “I needed time to think. Since Patty... It was because Patty...” I flounder around, looking for the right words.

Josh’s hand stops moving and he places his palm flat on my stomach while his face assumes a look of intense calm, “It was because of how Patty felt... about me.”

“Yes, Patty was crazy about you. I couldn’t... let myself think about you like that because it would be a betrayal.”

“Didn’t I get a say in it?”

“It’s not like that. I suppose I could have told Patty that I was interested in you but that would have hurt her. Even if she said she was okay with it, I know it would have hurt her. I felt like I was betraying her every time...”

“Every time we kissed.” His fingers tips start roaming over my body again.

“Yes, but also every time I even thought about you.”

“So what changed? You ran out of here so fast this morning I thought you regretted last night.”

“I did but not because I didn’t want to it to happen but because I did.”

“Because that felt like a greater betrayal?”



“Yes,” I pause for a moment. “Patty met you first. Even before I met you, Patty told me how crazy she was about you. For me, that just automatically meant you were out of bounds.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, just the way I am. She met you and was crazy about you so that made it like... like...”

“Like I was her boyfriend?”

“Yeah, in a way.”

“I never wanted Patty,” Josh says, fingertips running up my body to my neck, leaving behind a tingling sensation on my skin.

“I know. And I won’t feel bad about this anymore but there’s still a part of me that feels guilty that Patty’s not here.”

“I feel guilty about that too. I wish I could have saved her but I’m not going to feel guilty about us.” His thumb brushes across my lips as he leans over to kiss me then he snuggles closer.

“I also feel guilty for running away from Vancouver.” I tell him. “There’s a part of me that thinks we should have stayed and made sure they caught Patty’s killer.”

“We sent an email to Sergeant Abeara telling him everything in the hope he would be able to act on it but he never replied.” Josh comments quietly and adds as he sits up. “Maybe he thinks we’re crazy.”

“Maybe it *is* me who is crazy.” I reply and watch Josh shake his head no. “You don’t see them the way I see them. Maybe finding Patty’s body the way I did caused a mental break?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re perfectly sane. We may be ‘Alice through the Looking Glass’ but we’re both sane. It’s bad enough knowing Patty’s killer is a cop who seems to be part of a big conspiracy.”

“Big?” I ask. “Actually, all we know for sure is that Mr Nordic and James are involved in the conspiracy. I don’t know for sure that the other guy I saw at the police station is implicated in any way.”

“What about the woman here?”

“What do you remember about last night?” I ask timidly, very afraid to hear the answer.

“I remember everything. At least I think I remember everything.” For a moment, Josh is very still and then he twists around to place his feet on the floor. He takes a deep breathe then stands up before continuing. “It was like... like I was trapped inside my body.” Josh explains reaching for his pants. “I couldn’t do anything I wanted to do. I

knew, *knew* I wanted to get away from her but I just sat there.” He dresses as if he is putting on armour to face the world.

I sit up in the bed, “She doesn’t know our names, remember? If she doesn’t know our names then Mr Nordic and that guy James can’t know our name either because she said James had told her about us. So when we leave town she won’t be able to track us.”

Josh stops dressing and then, with a shrug continues, “I wish we could go back to Vancouver but I don’t think we can. If they can do what she did last night then they only need to catch us off guard.”

I nod, terrified by the events of last night. How do you protect yourself from someone who can take away your will? We would always have to be on guard against those creatures.

“Ann, do you think that Nordic guy did the same thing to Patty?”

The idea surprises me and then the surprise dissipates as I realize it explains everything that troubled me about that night. I look up into Josh’s eyes, “I think you’re right. Patty’s actions bothered me. She didn’t seem to be acting like herself. Not answering my calls and leaving with that guy really bothered me. It just didn’t seem like her. She was crazy about you. It was hard for me to understand why she would leave with some guy like that.”

“Yeah,” Josh agrees and buttons up his shirt, “It always bothered me too. It just wasn’t like her. Part of me blamed myself because...”

I get out of bed and start to dress while waiting for him to finish.

Josh gives me a brief smile, the dimple flashing in his cheek. “Well, because I knew how she felt about me. I felt guilty because I thought maybe she had decided to move on and picked the wrong guy. I...” he falters, “I never wanted to hurt her. I always tried to make it clear that I was only interested in being friends. I thought that maybe that day, when I called to cancel, she decided she’d had enough.”

I smile at him caught by the idea that we had each been harbouring the same guilt. “I thought maybe that was the day she decided to take my advice. I kind of blamed myself for her decision to move on but I think you must be right. Mr Nordic must have done the same thing to her.” Then guilt hits me hard. It makes me feel worse that I didn’t stop her. She was probably screaming inside as he led her away.

“What?” Josh asks me and, when I look at him, I see that he knows what I was just thinking.

“I should have been there with her. Mr Nordic would have left her alone if she was with another person.” I admit.

“Well, maybe Patty would have been safe but someone else would have died that night.”

I start buttoning up my shirt and say, “Maybe we should try contacting Sergeant Abeara again.”

“It doesn’t hurt to try but he probably thinks we’re crazy.” Josh sighs and grabs his coat. “I need some coffee, want to join me?”

I shake my head, “I want to finish that program and send it off today.”

“How long will it take you?”

I think about it, “Probably only an hour or so.”

Josh walks around the bed to kiss me. “Come join me when you’re done.”

“Okay,” I say and then a thought occurs to me. “Josh, you didn’t tell her where we are going, did you?”

He pauses at the door to think for a moment, “No, but we can go someplace else, just in case. Don’t... don’t change the reservation we made, just in case she does figure out our names. We’ll just go someplace different.”

“That’s a good idea,” I respond.

“Ann, don’t book anything ahead of time. We’ll just hop a train out of here and see where we end up.”

I laugh, “Yeah because running without a direction worked out so well when we came here.”

Josh smiles, his dimple making another appearance. “It didn’t turn out all that badly and maybe we could get a sleeper car. That would be fun. I’ve always wanted to ride in one of those. Maybe we can just ride trains for a few days and book something while we ride.”

“Just like an old movie, it will be fun.” I reply with a smile, feeling happy inside, a little guilty but still happy.

## Chapter 26

I open up my laptop but stop before I turn it on. Fear spikes through me as I wonder, could that woman have put some sort of compulsion on him? The way he behaved last night showed that she could do something to his mind but what did that include? Could she create an impulse that would make Josh return to her the next day? I stand, dithering for a moment and then decide to go after him; I don't dare take the risk. I put away my laptop and grab a coat. I slip out the door and head to the same café I was in earlier. I know Josh went there.

I'm scared and want to get to Josh as fast as possible but Amsterdam is such a small and compact city that it doesn't take a lot of people to make the sidewalks feel crowded and as I step out onto the sidewalk it is packed with people who slow me down. I dodge and weave around the people and, at times, I dart into the street to get around people blocking the narrow sidewalks, desperate to get to Josh as quickly as I can. Panic builds in me but I keep squashing it down. Panic won't help.

Just then, I notice Josh walking out of the café. I momentarily feel relief, until I see who steps out from behind him. I curse under my breath and try to pick up my pace, keeping an eye on Josh. The predator we met the night before smiles at me then tows Josh along with her. A quick check and I dash out into the street but a car forces me back onto the sidewalk. The woman keeps glancing back at me, anxiously keeping an eye on me. I begin to get the feeling she is making sure I can keep up. Although the idea worries me, I refuse to slow down just in case I am wrong.

She leads me south past a couple of theatres and then turns west for a couple of blocks. I wonder if she wants to steer me into the red light district but instead we turn south again on Rokin, heading to the Canal Belt. We cross a couple of canals until we reach Kerkstraat where she turns east. Maybe she is leading me out of the city, trying to find a less crowded area to do away with both of us. That thought scares me but I will not leave Josh so I continue to struggle, striving to catch up while she takes us back towards our hostel. Maybe once the

people thin out a bit I will be able to catch up before we get to some secluded place.

Dodging and weaving as fast as I can, I am unable to close the gap between us until we turn onto Kattenburgersraat. The throngs of people thin out as we approach a bridge and I surge forward to catch her but she makes it easy by stopping in the centre of the bridge. Suddenly worried, I slow my step to approach with caution because rushing her seems like a bad idea. The bridge is a bit odd with big green girders between the pedestrian walkway and the cars but there are only thin railings along the outer edge. The strange arrangement creates an unusual feeling of privacy even though we stand in the middle of a bridge arcing over a canal.

The woman grips Josh by his left arm but the hold appears unnecessary; he has that vapid look on his face again and I feel sure that compulsion keeps him at her side. My heart pounds and it is not from the race through the streets.

“Josh?” I call, searching for some kind of response from him. He smiles at me in a vague way, causing my stomach to tighten in fear.

“I thought you should understand that you can’t protect everyone,” the woman states in a flat tone of voice.

“I don’t believe I can protect everyone.” I reply as calmly as I can, pleased to note that my voice doesn’t quaver. “I’m not really looking to protect anyone. I just want to leave with him.”

“He is sweet, the way he came over to me last night to offer a deal. He actually wanted to protect you. He is rather remarkable. You know last night I asked him what your name is several times but he refused to answer. I have never encountered that in a human before.” The note of amusement in her voice changes to admiration when she repeats, “Yes, quite remarkable.”

I curse myself inwardly. “So... what do we do now?”

She looks me directly in the eye, “Let me have him.”

“What?” I blurt, stunned.

“Let me have him. You can walk away.” She sounds sincere.

“How can you possibly think I would agree to that?” I risk a glance around, seeking something that will help me get Josh away from her.

“If you let me have him I won’t kill him.” Her voice sounds as if she is trying to be reasonable.

“What do you mean, let you have him?” I ask, curious in spite of the situation.

“Let me... let me keep him. I promise I will not kill him if you let me keep him. You can even see him.” She smiles her nasty smile. “In a week you can see him again. In fact, I will make him seek you out.”

“There’s no way I can trust you.”

She sighs, “I guess that’s true.”

“So now what?”

“That is an interesting question.” She responds with a sad look on her face as she gazes at Josh.

I almost believe that she regrets the current situation. “Look,” I say. “Why don’t you just let me take him and go? After all, you can’t do anything here. We’re in a public—”

Faster than I think possible, she moves. She grabs Josh by the head and twists. A snap rings out in the cold crisp air that feels like a punch in the stomach and then she gives Josh a casual shove sending him tumbling over the thin railing and into the water. A sickening floppiness in the way he falls screams ‘dead’ but I refuse to believe it as all the air rushes out of my lungs. The predator moves towards me but I dash through the girders and jump in front of a car. Brakes squeal, horns honk, and voices shout. The man in the stopped car jumps out and starts yelling at me in Dutch.

“A man fell off the bridge!” I bark in English.

He sprints to the railing with me. Josh floats face down in the water. The man pulls out a phone and punches in some numbers. A blonde man grabs me by my right arm and shoves a coat into my arms. As I watch him pull off his shoes, my vision starts to blur. I continue to stare at those shoes as I hear a splash. Time slows. I bend over and pick up the shoes. This blonde stranger rushing in to help makes me think of the bravery the people of Amsterdam showed in World War II during the Nazi occupation. I turn over the shoes in my hands, tangible evidence that those brave people still exist today. I blink and hot tears run down my cheeks as I peer over the side of the bridge. I see the man towing Josh to shore and scramble over to meet them.

I arrive on the shore as the blonde man carefully lays Josh down and begins CPR. Somewhere sirens are wailing, people are talking, shoes are shuffling, my vision is blurring, and my head is ringing. Where is she? A spike of anger, intense and hot, shoots through me, but when I glance around to search for her, I only see legs. Momentarily confused by the view I realize I must be on my knees. I look down to see Josh’s hand almost touching my knee. Hate, anger, revenge have to

wait as I carefully place the blonde man's shoes to my left before I reach out a hand to take Josh's hand in mine. His hand is cold. I tell myself the cold is just from the water. Denial.

I peer around to see the wall of legs part and new legs appear. Those legs kneel down on the other side of Josh. Words are spoken but I do not understand them. I force myself to look at Josh's face. Josh's dead face. I see that clearly. I look at the owners' of the legs and realize they are paramedics. The paramedics check Josh over and speak words. More words, people gesture and still more words float over my head. I briefly wonder if the words are in English but I find it impossible to care about the words when I already know the horror. The blonde man places a hand on my arm and gently says more words. Maybe they are in English and maybe they are in Dutch. The language does not matter because I can't really hear the words; I just know the blonde man is telling me Josh is dead.

I stand up and drape the coat I still hold around the man who tried to save Josh. "Dank u wel," I whisper to him.

I vaguely look around. Part of my mind shouts at me. Danger! I'm not listening. Dizziness rolls over me. I wonder how well my legs work. I look at the paramedics in deep conversation with the blonde man. I take a step backward into the crowd and then another one. People flow around me, blocking my view of Josh. Someone gently touches my arm and asks a question I can't understand. I shake my head and kept moving backwards out of the crowd of people, who have gathered around, concern marking their faces while they speak to each other in hushed voices. I pass the last circle of people and find myself staring at an empty street. I start walking. No one shouts. I keep walking.

## Chapter 27

I place all the suitcases beside the door and then very carefully check over the room, making sure I removed all evidence of our visit. I found Josh's passport in his suitcase but I have to assume he had his wallet with him. When I am sure I have everything, I slip on my backpack and grab the two cases by their handles and head to the train station. I do not want to call a cab because the cops would be able to trace that. I catch a bus and become just another person travelling. Naïve or paranoid, I still don't know which.

At the train station, I locate the lockers, place Josh's suitcase in one and then buy a ticket to Germany. I keep his passport and laptop, for some reason I just can't leave those things behind. I'm not too sure what I will do if the cops track me to Josh. With no plan but a lot of fear, I stand on the platform and stare around. Even if the police find Josh's ID, it should not lead them to the hostel since we checked in under another name. If the police do manage to track Josh to the hostel they will find that he checked out. Maybe they will find Josh's luggage at the train station. After that... After that, all I have is a vague possibility that they will consider the luggage a dead end. I hope they will end up looking for Annabelle Barnes and not Ann LePage but it does not matter that much. The cops are not what I am running from anyway.

The train pulls up and I board; searching for my cabin I slowly walk through the narrow corridor, pulling my small suitcase behind me. Once inside my compartment I find it still set up for daytime travel so I tuck my suitcase and backpack into a spot that looks clear in case the porter comes by to pull down the beds. I lock the cabin and proceed to the bar car. I should probably eat but the thought of food turns my stomach. The bar has two counters running the length of the car and facing the windows. The first person to arrive, I sit on one of the stools with a clear view out the window. The bartender walks over and I order a glass of wine then stare out the window with my mind blank. Wine appears in front of me. I guess I paid because the bartender walks away but my mind is not really operating at its best. The station starts to slide away and it takes a moment before I realize that it is the



train moving and not the station. I peer around me and notice the car has filled up while my mind was on vacation. I carefully but covertly check over the passengers, searching for that beauty I am beginning to associate with those predators. Everyone looks normal or do I mean human? A brief surge of rage sweeps over me but I force it away.

The train picks up speed and the motion and sound begin to lull me. My wine glass is empty but a gesture to the bartender is all that is required to get it refilled. I wish the bar car had chairs, comfortable chairs, instead of stools. A hum of voices, the quiet clicking of the wheels on the rails, the swaying motion of the trains slowly changes calm into tranquillity. My mind starts to work a bit better. I decide that when I arrive in Munich I will search the newspapers for any stories about Josh and then buy a ticket on the next train out of there. I take a sip of wine. Maybe I will ride the trains for a couple of days and see where I end up, buying newspapers along the way.

More wine, buzzing voices, swaying motion, the countryside sliding by the window. Tranquillity transforms into serenity and slowly all emotion drains away. The sun sets and outside grows darker as the Earth rotates into shadow. Quiet music, murmuring voices, the slithery sound of wheels on steel tracks. My muscles unknot. 'Did you want another glass of wine?' a quiet voice inquires. 'Yes, just one more.' I reply without thinking about it. Sipping wine I watch as twilight fades into night and lights flash in my eyes. Wine glass empty, needing sleep, a quiet 'good-night' and 'thanks' to the bartender, sliding off the stool, slowly walking through cars filled with whispering voices, jostling between the cars with loud clacking and wind howling, through more cars with the soft sounds of people preparing for bed. I arrive at my cabin and, stepping inside, happiness fills me when I see the Porter has pulled down the beds. I sit on the lower bunk by the end closest to the window and start crying.

## Chapter 28

I stand on a bridge where everything is dark in the distance but nearby I see everything clearly. Is it twilight? Sounds, like screams, off in the distance create a feeling of disquiet. I look in both directions but the bridge does not seem to end. Peering over the railing, I cannot see the ground, or water, or anything holding up the bridge. I clutch at the balustrade, thick and solid; made of stone it feels reassuring but I am not reassured. I take a step but waves of vertigo crash over me so I stop and seize the banister again. My vision narrows; I can barely see my own hands on the railing. I steady myself, trying to find my balance, waiting for my vision to clear.

The bridge reverberates. Clinging to the handrail, I twirl around seeking the cause but only succeed in making myself dizzy again. Slowly, I tell myself. I stand still, searching for my equilibrium. I straighten up and slowly peer around. Off in the distance, barely visible, a figure stalks towards me. Fear stabs into me like knife wounds. The figure seems full of menace. I take a step backwards, then turn and, fighting vertigo, try to run. Waves of dizziness hit me and I grab the railing for support but force my feet to keep moving.

Kilometres, miles, leagues, I do not know how far I run. Stumbling in exhaustion and dizziness, I force one foot in front of the other. I risk a glance back and see the figure has gained on me. Balancing myself with the aid of the balustrade, I try to run faster.

Gasping for air, pushing one foot in front of the other, using my hands to drag myself along the railing, I have lost track of time and space. Why won't this bridge end? Why does the figure still follow me? I can't stop, must move, must get away. Fatigue seeps up from my legs, drains my energy, drains my willpower, and drains my desire to fight. Maybe I should stop and confront the figure following me? As soon as that thought crosses my mind, terror slashes through my stomach, spilling all my determination, willpower, and courage onto the bridge. My feet lurch back into motion, propelling my body away, away from the thing that follows.

Kilometres, miles, leagues, I do not know how far I have run. Gasping for air, convinced I have run for days, I attempt to pull oxygen

into my lungs. The vibrations of the bridge grow stronger. I hear footsteps. Afraid to look back I try to force my legs to move faster. Screams, no longer in the background, reach my ears from all directions. The footsteps and vibrations grow, drowning out the screams. Fear and panic reach out to touch my back and spin me around. Face to face with my pursuer, I stare at... me.

I sit bolt upright in bed. With no idea where I am, I reach up and touch the ceiling. Paris, that's where I am; an apartment in Paris, near the Eiffel Tower. I feel momentary relief and then I remember Josh is dead and my heart drops through the floor. I put my face in my hands and focus on not crying.

Memories flood me as I think of Josh. After his death, I rode the trains for three days. I stayed in Munich for one night but saw one of those predators that very first night so I ran again the next day. The same thing happened in Zurich. I rode the trains again, reading newspapers, searching the internet for word about Josh, before finally finding myself in Paris. I was in town for two days before I found a newspaper with an article about Josh. The police identified him but could not find where he was staying in Amsterdam so all they knew was which plane he had arrived on and assumed he had been living on the streets or staying with locals who were reluctant to come forward. The article went on to explain that no one seemed to know why he was in Amsterdam but the police had discovered that he had left Canada in an unusual hurry. Although the article claimed the circumstances were a bit suspicious, the assumption was that Josh's death was an accident. I hope that means I am safe... well, sort of, safe. I am safe from the cops trying to track me down anyway.

I run my fingers through my hair and throw back the covers. I need to get up and... I just need to get up. I stand and carefully find my way over to the ladder. My 'bedroom' is just a platform that covers the dining area and bathroom of the apartment not a true second floor. The bedroom is all in white while the décor in the rest of the apartment is green and orange. I descend the ladder and open the door to the kitchen. I pause for a moment to glance out the window. The dark sky has no stars but I cannot tell if that is because it is cloudy or because the city lights wash out the stars. I need to turn on the light in the kitchen. It is an odd arrangement for an apartment. It must have been part of a larger place at one time. The kitchen is a fully enclosed room and yet it does not have a window. I pour myself a glass of water and walk back

into the main area. In front of the window sits a small table and chair, which I use as a computer station. My laptop is not on the table. As soon as I finish working on it, I pack it away in my backpack, right next to Josh's laptop, just in case I need to run again.

My eyes sweep around the main room. Directly opposite the window is a door to the bathroom and beside the bathroom is the dining area. Beyond that is the living room, which has a door directly opposite to the door for the kitchen. I think, in the past, this entire apartment was actually just a bedroom with a fireplace. At some point, the fireplace was closed off and filled with candles but they left the wrought iron poker, broom and shovel for the fireplace as a decorative piece. Across from the fireplace is a green couch that in a pinch could seat three people if they squeezed together. A small coffee table sits in front and on the left side, between the couch and dining table is a tiny end table. On the other side of the couch is the closet for my clothes. A very weird layout but somehow so tastefully done that it is actually comfortable and attractive.

I sit on the couch and pull my feet up, staring around the dark apartment. Since Josh's death, the same dream has plagued me almost every night. Oddly, I never dream of Josh. I wish I would dream of him. I wish I would dream of Josh or Patty. I press the cold glass of water to my forehead, fighting tears. I do not want to cry. If I do, I might not be able to calm down again for hours. I reach over to place my glass on the coffee table and notice a slight soreness in my arm. I stretch a bit and realize all my muscles feel stiff and sore. Was I actually running in my dream?

I often wonder if the woman who killed Josh is a vampire. In the eight months since Josh's death, I have not figured out what those predators really are. Or what I am. Am I a dhampir? Is that why that woman singled me out? Is that why she killed Josh? How much of the legend about dhampirs is true? If I am a dhampir does that mean my father was, is a vampire? Are they all evil? Did he let my mother live on purpose? Maybe I should call her. What would I say? Hey, mom, were you raped by a vampire? Is that how you got pregnant? Yeah, there's a conversation I really want to have. I scream inside my head to stop, stop thinking just for tonight.

I finish the last of my water and stand up. I need to sleep so I can get some work done tomorrow. I need to finish this programming project so I will have some money to pay the bills. I walk over the ladder

but the moment my hands touch it a wave of grief rolls over me. I feel so hollow inside. The pain of Patty's murder has not washed away completely but the water of time has worn it down a bit. I can sometimes manage to remember her without crying. Ten months since Patty's death and the sorrow has grown less. Eight months since Josh died and it still feels like yesterday.

## Chapter 29

I sit outside on the sidewalk of Café de l'Alma in Paris at dusk reading a book and enjoying a glass of wine. I feel good because I managed to finish the program and do not need to worry about money for a little while. I look around as I take a sip of my wine and that is when I see him. My head turns in his direction before I know what is happening. He is stunning, of course. I look around the café and notice that everyone's head has turned in his direction. I glance away from him to watch the reactions of the crowd in the café. They slowly start going back to what they were doing, after all beautiful people attract attention but it is impolite to stare. The people sitting together, in small groups or couples are safe; I sit alone. A couple of the women are still staring at him. I feel my heart thumping. I am not sure when the hammering started but I hear my blood pounding in my ears. It is not a reaction to him, or at least not because he is beautiful and graceful and seems to radiate confidence and power. Anger washes over me in a wave. His eyes roam over the café, searching the people as if seeking for something in particular. In fact, his actions make me think he is... hunting. The thought makes me shiver.

He makes his selection and walks over to join one woman at her table. Placing a hand on the back of a chair he quietly asks in French, "May I join you?" His voice has amazing timbre and resonance, so melodious that the simple sentence sounds like a song. All the predators I have met have beautiful voices. Is he a vampire? I wish I knew the answer to that question.

The woman nods, clearly believing herself to be lucky. She gestures to the chair, indicating that he should sit. I look away. I do not want to watch. Glancing around the café, I search for help but cannot find any. Who could possibly help? I already know that others cannot see what I see. I peer at my table and try to shut out the conversation. It should not be too hard to shut out the conversation since they are speaking French and my French is not very good but I find it impossible to ignore. I want to do something but I have seen how strong they are. I know I do not have a chance.

Glancing over at the table, I see the predator lightly touch her arm. From the look on her face, I know his spell has worked its magic. He leans forward to whisper in her ear. It makes me feel more desperate. Oddly, a dream springs to my mind. A dream I had just that morning. I remember that in the dream I placed my laptop computer into the back of someone's truck and then forgot it there. They drove away and I did not know how to contact them to ask for my laptop back. It started to rain and I felt more frantic because it would get wet and ruined. There was... something more to the dream but I can't pull it out of my memory. It feels important. Why am I remembering the dream?

The predator caresses her arm and I shudder, remembering that evening in Amsterdam while that female predator toyed with Josh. I have considered "accidentally" touching one of these predators so I can figure out what is going on but I am afraid. I have seen the reactions on the faces of a couple of victims. I know that the same thing that happened to Josh's willpower is happening to them. The victims' faces get the same vapid look, like their thought processes have shut down. I fear that would happen to me if I touch one of the predators, preventing me from getting away and, in spite of my guilt, I do not want to become a victim. My only protections are my ability to see them and free will. If I lose my free will then my ability to see them will be meaningless.

I peer around the café again, still searching for a way to save her. It is a beautiful warm evening, the kind of evening to sit and enjoy a glass of wine while reading a book, which is what many of the people around me are doing but I cannot join them in their simple pleasure because I am frantically examining the area, trying to find help. I see a couple walking towards the river and a guy walking a beautiful Siberian Husky. What I do not see is anyway to help her. I have not seen one of these predators in months, not since I came to Paris. I thought I was safe but the current situation makes me feel a little violated, almost like having a burglar break into your home. I do not feel safe anymore. The couple disappear around a corner and the guy walking his dog approaches the café. As I search, my eye keeps returning to the guy with the dog. A... sexual energy seems to radiate from him and that keeps drawing my eyes back to him.

Turning my head, I see that the predator has one hand resting on the back of the woman's chair as he leans over to speak into her ear. He will try to make it look natural when they leave so I know I still

have some time. The predators try to stay hidden. I have given a lot of thought to the conversation I overheard between Mr Nordic and James and I am convinced that they force each other to keep a low profile. Suddenly, the guy walking the dog puts a hand on the woman's shoulder and asks her if she is ready to go.

Flustered and a little confused, she tries to cover her discomfort by grabbing the guy's hand and gesturing towards the predator. "Oh, John, I was just talking to..." the woman stops talking and her eyes drop to the ground. I see her embarrassment.

"Paul," the predator supplies his name but does not offer to shake hands. Instead he sits back in his chair and deliberately gives John the once over. A hint of... aggression in Paul's attitude seems to annoy the dog.

Looking a little miffed and then worried, John says, "Nice to meet you, Paul."

The dog, perhaps sensing the predator's implied threat, growls low and quiet. Paul leans forward to look down into the dog's eyes and smiles. It looks as if Paul is extending his threat to include the dog. I expect the dog to whine and back off but instead the growling intensifies and the husky takes a small step forward.

"Quiet," John instructs the dog, who ignores him. John does not seem surprised that the dog has not followed orders but instead of issuing the command again, he turns to the woman and says, "Ann, we need to go if we're going to make it on time."

John stands close enough for me to see that he is not exactly handsome but there is something that makes him... sexy is the only word that comes to mind. Short black hair sticking straight up above rather heavy eyebrows does not really scream sexy and yet he is. He possesses a casual elegance in the way he moves and dresses, which might account for the sex appeal. Not beautiful like the predator, John still has a quality that is hard to ignore.

John manages to get Ann moving. They say their good-byes and start walking towards the river. The predator, whose name is certainly not Paul, sits back in his chair and glances around the café, looking like he's searching for another victim. His eyes turn in my direction and I look down at my book hoping he won't notice me. The predator appears to make up his mind and quickly downs his wine, drops some money on the table and walks away.



I sit back, relaxing a bit, hoping that the predator really is leaving the neighbourhood. After all, I still need to walk home and I do not want to encounter him along the way. Suddenly a voice whispers in my ear, “So, you see them too.”

## Chapter 30

**Startled,** I turn to look at the owner of the voice but it takes a moment before I can fathom what I see. He is good looking but not the way those predators are so I relax a little. Black hair and green eyes, is a very appealing combination, at least to me. His face is a bit long but still very attractive. He smiles a bit and a dimple in his right cheek gives him a charming almost boyish look. Solid shoulders and a trim waist suggest he exercises but he is not over the top about it. Dressed in faded old blue jeans and a white shirt he looks comfortable and at ease but a line of tension in the way he leans towards me gives away his worry. All in all a very appealing guy, one I would like to get to know. My mind reflects on the question he asked while he shifts to place one elbow on his knee and gives me a knowing smirk, dimple somehow making it less sneering and more teasing. A little surprised that he spoke English to me, I lean back in my chair.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” I manage to reply in an even tone.

“Sure you do. I saw you tense up when that guy *Paul* showed up and started putting the moves on the girl.” He sits up a little straighter.

I check how much wine I have left, wondering if I can make a quick get away without it looking like I am making a quick getaway. The wine is a little too full for me to pull that off. I look at my book, hoping he will let me read.

He shifts in his sit and leans a little closer, “I know you see them too.”

I decide to try a different tack. He is not one of the predators but maybe he knows more about them than I do. “What do you mean by them?” I ask.

“Those... hunters.” He responds, clearly substituting a different word.

“Hunters?” I think about it a moment. “Hunters, yeah, okay that’s a good name for them but what are they?”

He grabs his glass of wine and moves over to my table. We look at each other for a moment and then he pulls his eyes away and does a quick scan of the area.

"I don't really know." He says but when his eyes come back to me, I can tell he is lying. "I was hoping you might. You seemed to know that Paul was dangerous."

Taking a drink of wine, I shrug.

"Come on. How do you know?" his face is sombre but the dimple continually flashing as he talks makes him look mischievous rather than serious.

"Look, I don't know you and the whole thing is a little... unbelievable." I take another sip. I want out of this conversation.

"I'm Sam," he tells me holding out his hand. A full smile spreads across his face and the dimple appears at maximum strength. It is very disarming.

Cautious about touching strangers since I discovered what the predators can do, I slowly reach out a hand to shake his. I feel a little disturbed by his name; a snippet of my dream from the night before comes back to me but it is nothing I can catch hold of. Or maybe I'm a little disturbed because his dimple reminds me of Josh, in spite of their very different looks.

He smirks again when he sees my reluctance to touch him, "I see you've also noticed what happens when they touch people."

I nod as I let go of his hand. I take a drink of wine, carefully place the glass back on the table, and then fiddle with my book.

"Well," he says to me.

"Well what?"

"What's your name?"

I consider lying. I reach out with my right hand and twirl my wine glass by the stem. I sit up a little straighter in my chair.

"Come on. You're the first person I've met who sees them."

"It's Ann."

"Are you lying?"

"No."

"That's the same name as the girl that... hunter was after, are you sure you're not lying?" Again the hesitation on the word hunter, does this guy know what they are?

"No, it's just a coincidence." I reply.

“Really.” he says as he sits up straighter and leans a little away from me with a considering look on his face.

“Yes, it’s just a coincidence.”

We sit quietly for a moment and take a drink of our wine at the same time. I brush some hair out of my face and turn to him.

“I noticed them because they look different through glass.” I tell him, fudging the truth a bit. Well, I guess I am fudging the truth a lot.

“Yeah, glass, they look different through glass.” He looks at his hands for a moment and then says, “There was this beautiful woman. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was... mesmerizing.”

“I know what you mean.”

He gives me a quick smile. “I was at a café like this one, sitting on the patio when this beautiful woman walked up. She did the same thing that guy Paul did.”

Clearly, my puzzlement shows on my face because he explains a bit more.

“You know, how he scanned the crowd, as if he—”

“Was looking for something particular.” I finish for him.

He nods. We are silent again.

“Your story?” I prompt, wondering if he is being as dishonest as I am.

“Right. She didn’t see anyone on the patio she wanted so she walked into the café and because it was night I was able to see through the window when she walked inside. She... changed. I mean she still looked the same but not as beautiful. I thought at first that it was just me, or maybe the lighting. I don’t know, maybe I thought I was just not... seeing things right.” As Sam speaks, I detect a slight accent but I cannot place it.

I nod. “Why do you think she didn’t pick you?”

“I was sitting with a friend.”

“So, you weren’t alone.”

“Yeah, they only go for people who are alone.”

A thought occurs to me, “Did your friend notice her change?”

“No, or at least she didn’t seem to.” The look on his face tells me that he hopes I will understand.

I study him, so beautiful and... familiar. Something about him reminds me of Josh and I wonder what it could be. They look so different from each other that I cannot understand why I make the connection between the two of them. Maybe it is the dimple although Josh’s

dimple only appeared when he smiled while Sam's flashes while he talks. I continue to stare at him and he just stares back.

"Why did you talk to me in English?" I ask.

"I heard you talking to the waitress," he explains. We stare at each other for another moment then Sam asks, "Are you going to tell me what happened to you? The fact that they look different through glass isn't enough to make you tense up the way you did when that guy Paul arrived."

He is right of course but then his story doesn't contain a reason why he would think they are dangerous either. Obviously, we are both fudging the truth. I wonder if he has seen them kill or if it was something else that led to his discovery that they are dangerous. Well, whatever led to his discovery it does not sound like that discovery includes what the predators actually are. I feel like I'm being pulled into a dream and I don't like it so I finish my wine then put some money on the table for my bill.

As I stand up I say, "Well, my story is very similar to yours."

"Where are you going?" he looks startled as he peers up at me.

"Home."

"What? We need to talk about this." He sounds very upset, perhaps even a little frantic.

"No, we don't."

He stands up and lightly clasps my arm, stopping me from leaving, "Yes, we do."

"No, we don't or, at least, I don't." I respond as I remove his arm. I walk away with a tingly feeling where he touched my arm and a fluttery feeling in my gut.

## Chapter 31

I stride along the sidewalk, at first I move quickly but when I notice Sam is not trying to follow me except with his eyes, I begin to slow down. Before meeting Sam, I would have thought it a relief to know someone else who could see what I see but I don't feel relieved. What I feel is wariness. Oddly, it makes me miss Josh even more. As Sam talked, I began to feel like a door was opening into a different world, as if I stood on the threshold of something. The feeling scares me because I do not understand it. I already knew about the predators, so why would encountering another person who could see them make me feel like I am falling down the rabbit hole? I need time to think, to decide, even if it means losing the only other person who is able to see them. I turn onto my street and continue towards my apartment.

When I arrived in Paris, I chose to live in the area around the Eiffel Tower and I really love the neighbourhood. It is full of beautiful old buildings and sidewalk cafés, the kind of street Paris is famous for. Although the area around the Eiffel Tower is popular, the place is surprisingly quiet. Over the last few months, that had not bothered me because I felt safe. The appearance of Paul ruined that. I guess I had some crazy idea that I had left all this behind.

A sound almost a block ahead on the other side of the street causes me to duck into a darkened alcove before I really think about it. I silently curse myself because my nerves, a little jangled by the events of the evening, have me jumping at shadows and leaping into hidey-holes. And yet, as I silently berate myself for being foolish, I stay hidden, hardly daring to breathe. I stand frozen, staring a block ahead, searching with all my senses for the thing that caused the sound but all I hear is the distance sound of traffic. After a moment, I curse myself again for being a frightened fool but, just as I am about to step back out onto the street, he strolls into view.

Paul. He walks slowly, saunters really, with a casual relaxed air about him. As I watch, he looks at his right hand and then he licks one of his fingers. *What the hell?* Could he be licking blood off his fingers? A shiver runs through me attempting to chase that thought out of my

head but the thought lingers anyway. I cannot see well enough to know for sure what the finger licking is about but, unable to shake off the thought, I continue to monitor his behaviour in the hopes of learning something new. As he nears me, he slows and then stops, turning around in a way that looks like dancing. He glances up the street in the direction he came from and then slowly brings his eyes back down the block to my hidey-hole. A stabbing fear pierces me as I feel his eyes when they sweep pass me while he rotates to look the other direction. Relief floods me as his eyes peer down the block. I watch him pause, and then very slowly his eyes come back to the alcove I desperately hope conceals me from his view. Forcing myself to stay perfectly still, I feel his eyes like hands groping in the dark to reach me in my pathetic refuge. My heart pounds harder, sounding like a marching drum. *Can he hear it?* He is across the street; he cannot possibly hear my heart hammering away under his scrutiny. Does superhearing go with the other superhuman abilities? Crap, I wish I knew more about their abilities. I hold my breath, a feeling of desperation shoots through me as my gaze flicks longingly to my apartment only three doors and three light-years away from my darkness-shrouded alcove. Unfortunately, my apartment is on the same side of the street as the predator; so close and yet so very far away. I would have to walk right past him. He starts to take a step in my direction and I gasp, terror swamping all other emotions leaving behind a frantic need to run. Now my eyes hysterically search for a way out. He steps closer. I can't fight him, he's too strong. I need a way out. My mind flashes back to how fast James moved when he grabbed Josh. I have no hope. If I scream, he will be on me before I really make a noise.

Voices come up the street, followed by the sound of a woman's high heels. The predator stops, shoots a glance towards the sound, and then moves off in the direction he came from earlier. I wait. The fact that he didn't seem to want to meet whoever was coming up the street feels like both a good sign and a bad one so I wait a bit more, remaining hidden. Suddenly one of Josh's jokes runs through my mind, *'when scary things are afraid it's time to be really scared'*. Great, that's a comforting thought for me to focus on. The sound of high heels grows louder and a beautiful Siberian husky comes into view, followed by... John and Ann. They must live in the neighbourhood too. Watching them as they near me, an odd sensation of familiarity washes over me so I peer at them more closely, wondering where the feeling

comes from. I am sure I have never met John or Ann or even seen them before tonight so why the impression of familiarity? I wait for them to pass me while I pull out my keys and then I quietly slip out of the alcove and onto the street, following behind them. John tenses then turns and glances back for a moment. He sees me but does not relax until I cross the street and run up to my door. I unlock the door as quickly as I can and then make sure it closes and locks behind me before I head up the stairs to my apartment. I feel rung out and drained but as I ascend the stairs I realize that John reminds me of someone else. That must be where the feeling of familiarity comes from.

My quiet evening, sipping wine and reading has not turned out the way I expected but I am home, safe and aware that other people out there can see the predators. Or at least there is one other person. Strangely, that knowledge still does not make me feel better. I guess, in spite of everything I have seen and been through, I was still hoping those creatures were really just human predators. Knowing someone else could see them makes them real in a way they had not been before. Once inside my apartment I sit down on the little green couch wishing Josh were with me to talk things over. I imagine him sitting beside me and asking what happened.

“You’re not going to believe it but I met someone else who can see those predators.” I whisper to the empty space.

“Seriously? That’s incredible. Did you learn anything?” the imaginary Josh asks me.

“No, unfortunately he didn’t seem to know any more than we do.”

“Well, that’s not very helpful,” the imaginary Josh wryly comments.

“No, it’s not.”

“Still, he can see them and that’s an edge.” Josh pauses, “It’s more than I had. Remember I could only ‘see’ them after you pointed them out to me.”

“There’s no way I could forget that.”

Josh’s smiles, his dimple makes an appearance in his right cheek. “It might be helpful to have someone around who can see them. Maybe you’ll be able to learn more and keep yourself safe.”

“But can I trust him?” I ask Josh.

“Trust is important,” Josh says thoughtfully. “We need to trust people—”

“But blind trust is stupid.” I finish for him.



“Actually, I think, under these circumstances blind trust could be suicidal.” Josh corrects me with a smile, his dimple reassuring me.

“What do you think I should do?” I ask the empty air as the image in my mind fades away.

“Trust yourself,” his voice drifts over to me across the river of time and memory. Suddenly, I remember how many times he said those words to me. He reappears on the couch next to me. I see him there, his left elbow on the back of the couch, head resting against that hand as he smiles at me while he reaches out his other hand to take mine. I stretch out a hand to touch Josh and... encounter empty air. Pain and emptiness permeate me, soaking through every defence I erect before I step outside to face the world. I know these little daydreams of Josh are not good for me but I cannot let them go. I imagine him everywhere, walking down the street with me, sitting near me while I work. But in the end, fantasy does not satisfy.

Josh never existed in this space. He was never here. Now I can picture him setting next to me, leaning back on the couch as he turns to smile at me, his dimple reassuring me. But for the first few months after Josh's death, I couldn't picture his face at all. That inability to picture him made me frantic. I wondered what was wrong with me. Nothing I did allowed me to draw his face in my mind. Oh, I could remember that he had thick-blond hair and green eyes but not the specifics of his appearance. I could not reconstruct his face in my mind until one day I remembered how he looked when he laughed. It was as if a door had opened. Suddenly I could picture him walking beside me on the street, sitting across the table from me while I have coffee or standing beside me in the kitchen while I wash dishes. I could take Josh everywhere with me but he was never anywhere.

I sigh and curl up on the couch, how do you move on when someone was so much a part of you that it feels like a huge chunk has been cut out, leaving only emptiness behind. “Half of me is gone so I don't know how to trust myself,” I whisper to the imaginary Josh as tears sting my eyes.

I think back over the events of the evening; meeting Sam, Paul walking down the street and licking his fingers. Is Paul a vampire? Is that what those creatures are? Is Sam a dhampir? Is that what I am? I really do not know any more now than I did when Josh was killed and still Josh's words whisper through my mind, “trust yourself.”

## Chapter 32

I stand on a bridge where everything is dark in the distance but nearby I can see everything clearly. Is it twilight? Have I been here before? Sounds, like screams, off in the distance create a feeling of disquiet. Are they screams? I glance in both directions but the bridge does not seem to end. Peering over the railing, I cannot see the ground, or water, or anything holding up the bridge. I consider jumping but dismiss the idea as crazy. I clutch at the balustrade; thick and solid and made of stone it feels reassuring, but I am not reassured. I take a step but waves of vertigo crash over me so I stop and seize the banister again. My vision narrows; I can barely see my own hands on the railing. I steady myself, trying to find my balance, waiting for my vision to clear.

The bridge reverberates. Clinging to the handrail, I twirl around seeking the cause but only succeed in making myself dizzy. Slowly, I tell myself. I stand still, searching for my equilibrium. I straighten up and slowly peer around. Off in the distance, barely visible, a figure stalks towards me. Fear stabs into me like knife wounds. The figure seems full of menace. I take a step backwards, then turn and, fighting vertigo, try to run. Waves of dizziness hit me and I grab the railing for support but force my feet to keep moving.

Kilometres, miles, leagues, I do not know how far I run. Stumbling in exhaustion and dizziness, I force one foot in front of the other. I risk a glance back and see the figure has gained on me. The bridge reverberates with each step the figure takes. Balancing myself with the aid of the balustrade, I try to run faster. The figure does not run but somehow it is gaining on me. I consider jumping off the bridge again but a quick glance into the blackness below convinces me that it would be madness.

Gasping for air, pushing one foot in front of the other, dragging myself along the railing, I have lost track of time and space. Why won't this bridge end? Why does the figure still follow me? I cannot stop, must move, must get away. Fatigue seeps up from my legs, drains my energy, drains my willpower, and drains my desire to fight. No, I tell myself, I won't give up. Maybe I should stop and confront the fig-

ure following me? As soon as that thought crosses my mind, terror slashes through my gut, spilling all my determination, willpower, and courage onto the bridge. My feet lurch back into motion, propelling my body away, away from the thing that follows. The vibrations of the bridge increase as the figure advances on me.

Kilometres, miles, leagues, I do not know how far I have run. The vibrations of the bridge grow stronger. I hear footsteps. Afraid to look back I try to force my legs to move faster. Screams, no longer in the background, reach my ears from all directions. The footsteps and vibrations grow, drowning out the screams. I feel breath on the back of my neck. Fear, panic reach out to touch my back and spin me around. Face to face with my pursuer, I stare at... me.

I jolt awake. I wonder for a moment where I am. The room is unfamiliar. Then the shadows pull back to reveal my living room... in Paris. That is where I am. I fell asleep on the couch. I sit up very slowly, feeling a growing soreness in my muscles. I hate these dreams. Although the circumstances in the dreams are different, they are very similar to the dreams I had after Patty's murder. Maybe, if I figure out what my unconscious is trying to tell me, the dreams will end. On the bridge, I am running from myself. Why would I be doing that? I stand up, feeling unsteady on my feet. I need a glass of water so I carefully make my way into the kitchen. Do I dream I am running from myself because I'm afraid of what I am?

## Chapter 33

I sit in Café de l'Alma, working on my laptop when a vaguely familiar voice says, "So, you're finally back." I turn to see Sam standing there, hands in the pockets of his faded blue jeans, looking rather pleased and to my eye rather sexy. Black hair falling into his eyes as he stares at me I realize it has been about two weeks since the night we met.

"I've been here." I reply in a distant way.

"I've been here every evening looking for you," he informs me while he catches the waiter's eye and signals that he would like to order. The waiter comes over as Sam pulls out a chair at my table and sits down.

"Could I get an espresso?" he asks politely, rolling up the sleeves of a light green cotton shirt. The waiter nods and walks away. Sam turns his attention back to me. "I hoped you lived in the area and frequented this place."

"Why would you think that?"

"Well, you were here alone, at night. I figured that meant you lived nearby. I didn't think you were the type to walk a long way alone at night with those hunters around." That slight accent in his voice remains noticeable but I still cannot place it.

"That's a reasonable guess." I respond, still not sure I want to involve myself with him.

"So, I came back looking for you. Every night." He informs me as I watch the dimple flash in his cheek while he talks.

"Every night?" I repeat, "Maybe you need a job or a life or both."

"Well, I like to delude myself that I have both," he says very dryly. "I just needed to talk to you."

"I haven't been sure that I want to talk to you." I say softly.

"Yeah, I got that." he remarks as the waiter places his espresso in front of him. Sam looks up and says, "Merci."

My mom always told me that you should watch how men treat waiters and waitresses. She said that it would give you an insight into how they would treat you in a relationship. I take hold of myself when I realize I am thinking of Sam in that light. This is not some romantic

‘I just had to see you again’ kind of thing, it is... well, I guess you would call it business. Then again, it is those small things, like courtesy, that really tell us what kind of person someone is so maybe watching for those things will tell me if I can trust Sam. I hear Josh’s voice whisper, ‘trust yourself’.

With my mind on Josh, I sit in silence while Sam and I drink our coffee. After a moment, Sam gestures to my laptop, “Working on something?”

“Work.” I can tell my one word answer annoys him and it makes me feel bad. I was brought up to be polite and welcoming to people. Even in situations where I should be rude to people I find it difficult to do that without feeling guilty. “I have an online contracting job that allows me to work from home.”

“Or a café.” he smiles, “it must be nice.”

“It’s definitely one of the perks.” I reply, sitting back and watching him. He takes a breath as if he is going to say something but I want to know why he sought me out so I quickly ask, “Why have you been looking for me?”

“Because you’re the only person, besides me, who can see them. We need to talk.”

“Why?”

“I just told you.”

“No, I mean why do we need to talk? Okay, so we both see them but what else is there to talk about?”

“Well,” he begins, looking rather uncomfortable when someone walks up from behind him and speaks.

“Hey, Sam.”

Sam quickly turns in his seat and then relaxes when he recognizes the newcomer. “Hi Andy, have a seat. Ann this is Andrew. Andrew, Ann.”

Andrew sits down and holds out a hand. I shake his hand, noticing that he is quite different from Sam in appearance. Blonde, blue-eyed Andrew lacks Sam’s easy confidence or good looks. The kindest way to describe his appearance would be to say that he is ordinary looking. However, as Andrew smiles, a shy gentle smile, I have the feeling that smile describes his personality quite well and I find myself warming to him. The two of them are dressed in a similar way but then men do not have a wide range of clothing options to choose from. Andrew wears black jeans, a faded blue t-shirt and seems to have difficulty looking

me in the eye. Definitely shy, perhaps painfully so, he appears a little uncomfortable around me.

“This is my friend I was just telling you about.” Sam says, giving me a significant look.

I nod as if I know what he is talking about, realizing that Sam does not want Andrew to know what we were discussing. Not a surprise, since Sam told me that he does not know anyone else who can see what he calls hunters so he probably does not want to talk about them in front of other people any more than I do. They might think we are crazy. It occurs to me that we might be crazy. Just because we share a delusion, does not mean we are sane.

Sam downs his espresso and pulls out some money to leave on the table. Standing up he says to Andrew, “Andy, we should go.” Sam looks at me and explains, “I’m hoping to fix Andy’s computer quickly so we can get make it to the office party on time. We have to be at the bar at eight. But I’ll see you here tomorrow at 6:00 pm.”

I smile, “Sure, tomorrow at six.” I cannot help but admire how he managed to slip that in. Sam smiles confidently although I can tell he is not sure I will show up. As they walk away, I realize Sam is from Newfoundland. The way he pronounced ‘bar’ had that distinct ‘bair’ sound to it. I shake my head and I wonder what to do. Should I meet Sam? Part of me really wants to meet him but I am still not sure I want to get involved in whatever Sam has in mind. I go back to my work.

## Chapter 34

I stand on a bridge where everything is dark in the distance but nearby I can see everything clearly. Is it twilight? Have I been here before? Sounds, like screams, off in the distance create a feeling of disquiet. Are they screams? I look in both directions but the bridge does not seem to end. Peering over the railing, I cannot see the ground, or water, or anything holding up the bridge. I consider jumping but dismiss the idea as crazy. I clutch at the balustrade; thick and solid and made of stone it feels reassuring, but I am not reassured. I take a step but waves of vertigo crash over me so I stop and seize the banister again. My vision narrows; I can barely see my own hands on the railing. I steady myself, trying to find my balance, waiting for my vision to clear. I have been here before. Fear grips me because I know what is coming next.

The bridge reverberates. Clinging to the handrail, I twirl around seeking the cause but only succeed in making myself dizzy. Slowly, I tell myself. I stand still, searching for my equilibrium. I straighten up and slowly peer around. Off in the distance, barely visible, a figure stalks towards me. Fear stabs into me like knife wounds. The figure seems full of menace. I take a step backwards, then turn and, fighting vertigo, try to run. Waves of dizziness hit me and I grab the railing for support but force my feet to keep moving. I risk a glance back and see the figure has gained on me. The bridge reverberates with each step the figure takes. Balancing myself with the aid of the balustrade, I try to run faster. The figure does not run but somehow it is gaining on me. I consider jumping off the bridge again but a quick glance into the blackness below convinces me that it would be madness. Something is wrong. I have done this before and I know what is coming next.

I stop running and turn to face the figure pursuing me. Why won't this bridge end? Why does the figure still follow me? The vibrations of the bridge increase as the figure advances on me. Screams, no longer in the background, reach my ears from all directions. The footsteps and vibrations grow, drowning out the screams. The figure closes on me. I can almost see its face. I grasp the railing, peer down into the blackness, one last glance at the figure and I vault over the side of the

bridge. My fall slows. The blackness surrounding me has substance. The darkness clings to me, restraining me, slowing my fall. I see nothing but feel my body slow down until... I touch the ground on my back. I lie there a moment, breathing, and then roll over onto my hands to discover green grass as I open my eyes.

I wake up and stare at the ceiling. I feel shock. I jumped off the bridge. I sit up and look down to see sunlight streaming through the window. I climb down the ladder, feeling odd and sore. In the kitchen, I make myself breakfast and wonder if I should meet Sam. So long as I ran in the dream, things got worse. When I stopped running and took a blind jump, I felt... relief. Taking that jump in the dream made me feel like I was back in charge.



## Chapter 35

I walk towards Café de l'Alma feeling soreness in my muscles as if I have recently worked out. I wonder if I am actually running in my dreams when I dream of the bridge. Of course that would only explain why my legs are sore and not why my arms or back muscles are so stiff. Each time I dream of that damn bridge I wake up stiff and sore the next morning. It occurs to me that the dreams of the tunnel also left me stiff and sore.

As I near the café, I scan for Sam wondering if I am being stupid by agreeing to meet with him. I am pretty confident that he will be there early, waiting for me and he is. When I spot him, he is staring in another direction. I slow down to take a good look at him, trying to decide if I should trust him. I notice that once again, he wears faded blue jeans but this time he has on a soft looking pink cotton shirt. Pink? The colour looks great on him, contrasting with his jet-black hair. Although he leans back in his chair looking relaxed, his manner suggests anxiety to me. He looks down at his glass of wine and slowly raises his left hand placing it around the glass without picking it up. I do not know what it is but something about that simple little movement makes me feel Sam carries a great weight. Sadness surrounds him. An urge to dispel the gloom that hovers over him hits me and I know it will take more than me waving my hands as if shooing away flies to chase away that sadness. Lifting the wine to take a drink he surveys the street and spots me. Tension leaves his body but not the despondency and he sets the wine back down without taking a drink. He stands up and pulls out a chair as I weave through the tables to reach him.

"I wasn't sure you were going to show up," he says quietly as I sit down.

One of the waiters appears, "Can I get you anything?" he asks me in French.

"I'll have the house red." I say.

I watch the waiter walk away. A moment of silence that stretches out to take up more than a moment passes between us. I study Sam. He is very good looking, the eyes especially. I always check out the eyes and then look for a wedding ring. He does not wear one. I wonder if

the real reason I am there is because find him so attractive. Guilt and regret hit me as that thought crosses my mind. I wish Josh were the one sitting next to me instead of Sam. I wonder what Josh would make of Sam.

“So, why did you come?” he asks.

“Well, I’m not really sure. I don’t think you know any more about them than I do and I don’t think you’re looking for information from me but you definitely want something. I guess I’m curious.” My answer is not entirely honest. Floating in the back of my mind is the dream and Josh’s words telling me to trust myself.

“Okay, well, I’ll just say it.” Sam tells me but at that moment, the waiter comes back and places my wine in front of me. I thank him and turn back to Sam.

He leans close to me and stares straight into my eyes as he says, “Those hunters are really vampires and for some reason we can see them when no one else can. I think we need to learn more about them and I think the safest way to do that is together.”

“Together.” The comment pops out of my mouth sounding very flat.

“Yeah, because, well because we can see them so we can watch each other’s back.” His tone is reasonable and he continues to stare into my eyes.

Holding his eyes, I say seriously, “Do you really think it will be safer or will it just seem safer.”

He laughs a short laugh but still a laugh. “I don’t know,” he confesses. “But I know we’re both in danger and I would feel safer with someone else who understands what’s going on.”

Flooded by memories of Josh, I smile and take a sip of the wine. If I allow myself to think about Josh, I will cry so I push Josh out of my mind and think about wine. One of the great things about cafes in Paris is that each café is supplied by its own vintner so the house wines are usually pretty good. This one is no exception. I look up and find Sam waiting for my answer. I agree with him but have to point something out. “Well, to be honest I would feel safer too but we don’t really know what is going on. We don’t know what they are. We don’t know why they do what they do. We really don’t know anything. We don’t even know each other.”

He sits back for a moment and we stare at each other again. “You’re partly right,” he admits, “except that I know what they are.”

“Vampires?”

“Vampires,” he asserts with a puzzled look on his face. “You must know that.”

“I don’t. The only one I saw kill didn’t drink the person’s blood.” In my mind, I see Patty’s bedroom splashed with blood and a wound in her thigh. Did he drink her blood? The thought makes me shudder.

Sam stares at the ground, “I’ve seen them drink.”

In shock, I stare at Sam, unable to speak.

“I’ve seen it,” Sam responds grimly. I wait for him to continue. “The problem is that a lot of the legends are wrong.”

I can only nod while my mind races, wondering whom Sam saw them drink.

“Like walking around in daylight,” he continues dryly.

“No, that’s not part of the legends.” I comment, finding words at last.

“How do you know that?” Sam asks.

“Research, but, like you said, it’s pretty useless because there’s a lot of stuff that’s wrong.”

“We need to learn the truth about them.”

I stare at my wine, avoiding Sam’s eyes. “What you are suggesting is dangerous.”

He nods, “But it’s not more dangerous than not knowing.”

“You’re wrong about that. Gathering the information will be more dangerous than just avoiding them.”

“Okay, you’re right,” he acknowledges, “but it scares me not knowing. I don’t know if I’m doing something dangerous and it scares me that I don’t know.”

“Yeah, it scares me too. Wondering what else they are capable of.” I reply, thinking about the predator in Amsterdam who took away Josh’s willpower. I have never been able to figure out if she managed to put a compulsion on Josh, forcing him to return to her. Or did she go looking for him?

“Besides,” Sam says quietly pulling my mind back to the here and now, “I can’t stand knowing that they’re out there killing people while I do nothing.”

Silence falls over us as I think about guilt. Sam watches me and I evade his eyes by peering into my wine, then around the café, while I decide what to do. I hate being afraid. I hate watching them hunt. I hate knowing that they kill people and get away with it. I hate feeling

guilty, feeling like an unwilling accomplice. I look back at Sam and wonder how what is in his past. I decide the story he told me yesterday had as much truth in it as the little bit I told him. His story, his real story was probably similar to my real story. Or similar enough that guilt is driving both of us down a road that is dark and dangerous. I hope the road is not a dead end.

I study Sam for a moment, my thoughts drift back to the dream I had last night. I realize I made my decision after waking up from the dream. I sit forward on my chair and ask, "What do you have in mind?"

## Chapter 36

I have a lot of sympathy for the worm on a hook because that is how I feel. Sitting in Café Le Malar I wonder, why the hell did I agreed to do this. Sure Sam is nearby but he is not *that* nearby. Of course, I am not entirely sure I can trust him and yet... I do trust him. Or maybe I trust my judgement about him. Or maybe I am just tired of trying to do this alone.

Café Le Malar has tables lined up along the sidewalk like so many cafes in Paris so I choose to sit at a table at one end on Rue Malar while Sam sits at the other end. I pretend to read and do not allow myself to glance over to Sam. The crazy plan that we came up with was that we would sit here at separate tables and read. If the predators follow their usual pattern then one of them would approach only one of us and the other person will be free to do some rescuing. I am not actually afraid. After all, I have talked with the predators before and walked away. Of course, Josh did not walk away. It's a busy street corner so even if I meet one he's not going to do something right here. Sam and I are betting that a predator would try to mesmerise one of us and then get that person to leave with them. Holding my book in my left hand, I take a sip of coffee and think back to my conversation with Sam yesterday.

*"Well, my thought is we first find out if they can mesmerise us."* Sam responded to my question.

*"What good would that do? I asked, thinking it was a big risk to take."*

*"Well, if they can mesmerise us then that's a major weakness and we need to know so we can protect ourselves against it."*

*"And if they can't mesmerise us we know we have a certain kind of protection."* I nodded.

Sam sat forward in his chair, *"Yeah and once we know if they can mesmerise us we can do a better job planning our next move."*

*"So, how do we find out if they can mesmerise us?" I stupidly asked.*

I almost wish I had not asked that question. So, why did I agree to this? I do not know Sam. I am not sure why I feel I can trust him. I

stare sightlessly at my book. Maybe I really am just tired of trying to do this on my own. Since Josh's death, I have been running and hiding, hoping they are not following. But mostly what I have felt is scared and alone... and powerless. I can see that Sam is not a predator and I feel that Sam is a... a 'right guy'. The fact that Sam can see those predators probably means he is a dhampir or whatever the hell I am. Of course, the problem is that the legends of dhampir are as confusing as the ones about vampires. I did not say anything to Sam about dhampirs and as I sit here, I wonder if he knows about them.

We have been here for a couple of hours and our plan is not working. I have not seen a single predator but then they are not that common so it is not that surprising. I pull out my phone and call Sam's number. He answers on the first ring.

"Do you see something?" he asks.

"No, and I think this is a waste of time. Let's forget this and talk."

"Okay," he replies, and looks over at me with a smile. "Don't go anywhere. I should be there in about twenty minutes."

"Funny, no let's go for a walk. I'm sick of sitting."

"Alright," he responds while signally to the waitress that he would like the bill.

I ask for my bill a couple of minutes later. I drop some money on the table, grab my book and I walk across the street to join Sam who is waiting for me on the other corner.

As I get close to Sam I say, "I don't think our plan is going to work."

"Why's that?"

"Well, there aren't that many predators, since I first noticed them I've only seen eight, including that guy Paul, and I can't spend my nights sitting in cafes hoping that one of them will show up. And I doubt that you can continue to do that every night."

He gestures that we should walk down Rue Saint-Dominique, "I know but I haven't got any other ideas."

We walk in silence for a couple of blocks. I take a deep breath, hold it for a moment, and then let it out slowly. As I do so, I feel the tension from the last couple of hours leaving my body. "Do you know what a dhampir is?"

"No," he sounds a little depressed. "What's a dhampir?"

"It's someone who can see vampires."

"I've never heard of them."

I stare at him, “Was that supposed to be sarcasm?”

He looks a bit startled and then smiles, “No, I mean I’ve never heard the word before. Clearly there are two people who can see them.”

“Didn’t you do any research?”

“I did until I realized that very little of it was actually true. After that... it seemed sort of pointless.” The words and the dimple flashing in his cheek remind me of Josh and cause a small swell of sadness.

“Yeah, you got that right.” I sigh.

“So what’s a dhampir?”

“Well, a dhampir is someone who can see vampires.”

“Yeah, okay, I got that part. Is there anything else?” he asks.

“Yeah, they’re supposed to be incredibly ugly, have excessively hairy bodies, a small tail, and a hairline that almost sits on the eyebrows.” I stop walking and look at Sam as I say this, waiting for his reaction.

“You’re making that up.” He laughs that dimple appearing in his cheek.

“Nope, that’s really what the legends say.”

“Well, you got me. I was hoping to keep the tail a secret but I guess I might as well tell you about it now.” Sam reaches out a hand to gently nudge my shoulder, starting me walking again.

“Very funny.” I respond with a smile.

“Do the legends say anything else?”

They do but I am unwilling to discuss some of those things... yet so I just say, “I’m really not sure that they are helpful. I’ll confess that I don’t have a tail but I can see them and I know that... other people can’t but the description of a dhampir doesn’t match either of us so those legends don’t appear to have any more validity than the vampire ones.”

“Yeah, they appear to be truth mixed up with a lot of bullshit.” We walk in silence for a bit before Sam quietly says, “I often wonder about the inviting part of the legend.”

“Inviting?”

“Yeah, a lot of legends say they can’t enter unless they’re invited in. I don’t get why that would be true. Maybe it’s just a wish for safety. I certainly hope it’s true.”

“I don’t know. I came across a lot of references to the ‘hospitality’ rules. Those myths extend beyond vampire stories. There are myths

that doing harm to someone who has invited you into their home will damn your soul. Those myths also mention other creatures that can only cross the threshold if they are invited. If vampires can be real why not that?"

"Hospitality rules. Interesting..." he says thoughtfully, "Even if the hospitality rules don't hold they like to keep a low profile so they probably wouldn't want people to hear them breaking in."

"But a break in could be quiet." I realize Sam has been slowly walking me back to the café where we first met.

"Well, thanks for the nightmares," Sam's voice practically drips with sarcasm.

I smile, "You're welcome."



## Chapter 37

**C**hecking the time, I announce, "I'm going to head home." I take a couple of steps but Sam touches my sleeve and stops me.

"You're not going to walk are you?" His face is full of concern.

"We're very close to my place." I remind him, pointing at Café de l'Alma.

"Oh, right. Okay, but call me as soon as you're inside your apartment. Or I could walk you home and make sure you get inside safely." Sam offers but I see that he does not want to push the issue. Our... partnership is still new and we have not told each other our home addresses. In fact, all we have exchanged is our cell numbers.

"I'll be fine," I tell him.

"Sorry, I guess tonight was a waste of your time."

I shrug, "Maybe we can think of something else to do."

"Was there anything in the legends about dhampirs that we could test?" he watches the street.

"Yeah, it says they're as strong as a vampire and just as fast."

He turns his head to stare at me with a slight smile on his face. "Maybe we should investigate that."

"Sure we might be able to try that." My tone of voice is very flat.

"You don't think it's a good idea?"

"No, it's not that. It's just that I've never noticed any unusual strength or speed. I wasn't particularly good at sports in school."

Sam gives me a considering look, "Yeah, I use to race in school but I wasn't faster than normal. Or I guess I should say I wasn't freakishly fast."

"I guess those attributes can get lumped in with the tail."

"Listen, I'll call you if I get an idea. And don't forget to call me as soon as you get inside." Those beautiful green eyes are very intense as they stare into mine.

I nod in agreement, "I'll talk to you soon."

We say good-bye and I walk away from Sam but do not head directly to my place. The shortest route home will take me down a road that is often empty so I decide to loop around and stick to the busy

streets. I glance back at Sam and see him walking back the way we came. Maybe Sam is right, maybe we should be testing our abilities. Maybe we are dhampirs. Half human and half vampire said to possess the ability to perceive vampires and the strength and speed to kill them. It is the 'half human and half vampire' that keeps me awake at night. I keep telling myself it cannot be true. Other than my ability to see vampires, I have none of the attributes of a dhampir. It could not be true. My father was not, is not a vampire.

## Chapter 38

The next day, around noon, I am involved in my work when I get a call from Sam. “Hey, listen when I got into work today I was reminded about a party tonight.”

“Okay,” I drawl the word out wondering where this is going.

“There’s this friend of mine who says he’s invited the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen to the party.”

“Oh, and you’re hoping she will turn out to be a hunter or whatever.”

“Yes, I was hoping you would go with me.”

“Sure,” I answer, suddenly realising that would be a very safe environment to run our test.

“I was thinking of trying to get her to touch me and I was hoping you’d be there to save me.”

I laugh, “Sure, I’ll be the cavalry and ride to your rescue.”

“Andrew is going to the party and I’m going try and arrange it so it looks like you two arrived together. That way, if she’s there, she won’t know we know each other. It might help.”

“Okay, that sounds like a good idea.” I think for a moment then say, “Are you going to tell Andrew anything?”

“No, I’ll just offer to drive and then drop the two of you off at the door. It will look like you came in together and maybe people won’t connect the two of us together. It might make it easier for you to save me.”

“Okay, hey, make sure you have your phone with you so we can text each other.”

“Right we can talk and still look like we don’t know each other. See you at eight.”

Andrew and I walk up the steps to the apartment building while Sam parks the car. It rained about an hour before Sam picked me up so the air smells fresh and clean. In my hand, I carry a bottle of red wine. My mother taught me to give a hostess gift the first time I go to someone’s home and red wine seemed the safest choice for people I do not know. The apartment building we approach has flower boxes be-

low the windows and the scents from the blossoms are intense, heavy and fragrant. I breathe deeply, enjoying the perfume and smile at Andrew as he rings the bell. He seems very nervous. Because of the party or me?

After being buzzed into the building, I ask, "Have you known Sam long?"

"A couple of years. We met through work back in St. John's and we both got transferred here." Andrew answers quietly. As we walk up the stairs, Andrew pauses in his stride for a moment to look at me, "And yeah, I knew his wife."

*Wife? Knew?* I keep my face blank. Clearly, Andrew thinks I know all this. It is also clear to me that Andrew is used to Sam getting all the attention. Not a surprise, I suppose. Sam is good-looking and confident while Andrew is shy and plain; women would undoubtedly prefer Sam. Uncomfortable, I feel the need to break the silence that threatens to stretch out between us, "By the way, Sam didn't tell me what this party was about."

Andrew looks a little taken aback. "It's our boss's wedding anniversary."

I feel rather stupid for not having asked Sam about this earlier. Thank god, I brought a bottle of wine. On the third floor, Andrew leads me down to a door and knocks, "You'll like Roger and Joan."

I smile. Roger and Joan? Those names do not sound particularly French. During all my time in Paris, I have only met ex-pats. Disappointed because I had been hoping to meet some locals, Andrew and I wait in silence for someone to answer the door.

The door opens and reveals an incredibly beautiful woman. Long black hair and the most startling pale blue eyes coupled with an amazingly warm, friendly smile make her one of the most stunningly gorgeous women I have ever seen but she is not a predator. She greets us with enthusiasm and gestures us into her home. Andrew introduces me to Joan. She graciously thanks me for the wine and her eyes twinkle as she ushers Andrew and me into the kitchen. As Joan hands me a drink the doorbell rings again and off she goes to greet her next guests. Andrew points out Roger to me while I sip my wine and consider Joan. Her beauty is astonishing and yet she is not a predator. I think about Sam's comment that one of his friends invited the 'most beautiful woman in the world' to the party. If Sam's friend has already met Joan

then there is a good chance that the woman he invited will turn out to be a predator.

An hour later, Sam stands in the kitchen being ‘talked at’ by some woman. The look on his face makes it clear that he is struggling to appear attentive. At first, I think the woman has not picked up on Sam’s disinterest but, as she chatters on, seemingly unaware, she keeps touching him every couple of minutes in an effort to grab his attention. Maybe she has noticed.

While Sam remains captive in the kitchen, Andrew and I stand in the living room chatting quietly to each other. His shy, gentle demeanour is very appealing. Andrew offers to get me another glass of wine and, as soon as he walks away, a woman decides to introduce herself. She begins in French but quickly realizes I would be more comfortable speaking in English. She tells me her name is Claudette Something-or-other and, since she supplied her full name, I unthinkingly respond with my full name.

“Ann LePage” I reply, regretting the words the moment they leave my mouth. Using my real name at a party where a predator might show up seems more than a little stupid.

“But that is French!” Claudette says, sounding surprised.

“Yes, my father was Francophone.” I usually leave out the fact that I have never met him. Actually, the only information I have about him is that he is Francophone and the disturbing possibility that he might be a vampire.

She looks puzzled.

“Sorry, in Canada Francophone means your first language is French.”

“But he didn’t teach you?”

“No, he died when I was very young. My mother doesn’t speak French.”

“That is too bad.” Claudette smiles at me.

“I agree.” I do wish I could speak French better.

“So you are from Canada. Do you like it there?”

“Yes, I love Vancouver but I wanted to come to Paris. It is one of the great cities.” As I speak, I glance over at Sam. I think I am discrete but Claudette disabuses me of that idea.

“I see you have noticed our Monsieur Doyle.” her smile gets a little wider.

"I'm sorry, who?"

She gestures and says, "Monsieur Doyle. His first name is Sam."

"Oh, yes, well he's very noticeable." I state. It occurs to me that I did not know Sam's last name. A little odd considering that we have been putting our lives in each other's hands. Of course, the good thing about this little exchange is that effectively convinces Claudette that I do not know 'our Monsieur Doyle' without me lying about it.

"He is from Canada as well. From..." she pauses, taking a moment to remember. "St John's I think it was."

"Other side of the country from me." I smile. Europeans often have a hard time remembering how big Canada is. I look around for Andrew while Claudette appears to be examining me.

"It is odd," Claudette says very slowly.

"What is?"

"You and Sam seem very familiar."

"We do?" I wonder whom she thinks we look like.

"Yes, are you related?"

"To who?" I ask, puzzled by the strange turn in the conversation.

"To Sam?" Claudette looks as puzzled as I feel.

"No, I'm not related to Sam. Why do you ask that?" I feel I am in the middle of a blind corner with no idea of where the conversation is headed.

"There is a... resemblance." Claudette seems to be giving me careful thought.

"A resemblance? In what way?" I ask, finally understanding that she means Sam and I look similar not familiar. I search Sam's face for any similarity to mine. We do not look anything a like, my golden-blond hair contrasts pretty sharply with Sam's jet-black hair. Sam's dimple is very pronounced while I do not have one. Nothing in the shape of our faces or expressions appears similar to me. I shake my head, unable to see any resemblance.

Claudette continues to stare at me for a bit before finally saying, "I don't know. There is something... But no, you said you had never met Sam before."

I had not actually said that but I do not correct her. Just then, Andrew appears at my side and hands me another glass of wine. Fortunately, Andrew does not hear Claudette's comment. At least, I assume he did not hear her because he makes no effort to correct Claudette's misunderstanding. I thank Andrew for the drink while I

watch Claudette's smile change from polite to heartfelt the moment she turns to talk to Andrew. Throughout the evening, I have noticed that all the women who know Andrew appear very fond of him. As someone pulls Claudette away to another conversation, Andrew apologizes to me.

"What are you apologizing for?"

Andrew gestures toward Sam, "For Sam."

"For Sam?" Once again, I feel like I have missed a turn in the conversation and ended up off the road, sitting in a field by myself.

"He's not usually so rude." Andrew's eyes fill with concern. "He brought you here and since he got here he's been ignoring you."

"Oh, no, don't worry about that." Crap, Andrew's anxiety could ruin our plans. Well, ruin our plans if the 'most beautiful woman in the world' shows up and if she turns out to be a predator. I try to think of something that will excuse Sam's behaviour in Andrew's eyes but just then, the predator does walk in...

## Chapter 39

The air seems to ripple when she enters. She certainly is beautiful but it is more than that which causes the ripple through the room. Energy and charm enter with her as if the room was devoid of those qualities until her appearance. Graceful, elegant, and lively, she has long black hair and blue eyes like our hostess but somehow she completely outshines Joan. Everyone turns to stare at her except Sam and me. We look at each other. A spike of fear and then, oddly, I experience a slow build of energy and excitement. Well, maybe it is not so odd. We are about to get some answers. Looking at Sam I see what looks like the same rush of energy and excitement.

Andrew turns back to me with a sheepish look of his face. I guess he is embarrassed to be caught staring. I smile to myself. Such a small thing but it is a strong indication that Andrew really is a sweet guy. I glance at Sam again. I want to see what happens when he walks up to the predator and starts talking but I know he has to wait for the right moment to make that move seem natural. Someone touches my shoulder and I turn to see a nice looking guy I noticed earlier in the evening. He introduces himself but I immediately forget his name because I can only manage to give the conversation half of my attention, or maybe it is less than half. It is a good thing the discussion is just about the weather and what we each do for a living. I work my way through the party like that, thirty per cent listening to the conversation and seventy per cent watching Sam, waiting for him to make his move.

The only thing that manages to penetrate my preoccupation occurs when one guy comments, "You have the most unusual eye colour."

"I'm sorry," I respond.

"You have a very unusual eye colour." He restates.

"Oh, why? What colour are they?" A puzzled look crosses his face so I explain, "They change depending on the lighting and what colours I'm wearing. I don't always know what colour they are."

"Oh, that's rather cool. Right now they're a greenish yellow or maybe a yellowish green." He smiles.

"Yeah, they turn that colour every now and then," I reply, refocusing my attention on Sam.



Sam talks to various people slowly working his way to the predator. It seems to take forever. In reality, it is probably only about an hour before Sam manoeuvres himself into a position to talk to her but I feel like twenty hours have passed. Sam waits until he catches my eye before he slides over to join a group of three people in conversation just behind the predator. I am glad he waited because as soon as he joins the group the predator turns and joins the discussion.

I watch the predator watch Sam. She stares at him quite openly while Sam looks away from her. A pleased smile touches her lips and I know she finds Sam attractive. After a moment, she slowly sidles up to him, smiling and taking in Sam's good looks. Even in that small act, an air about her suggests she is used to being in control. I watch Sam steel himself and then turn to engage her in conversation. As she chats, her smile grows. Clearly pleased that he has decided to pay attention to her, she looks Sam up and down, until she gets to his eyes. I see her give a small jerk as their eyes meet. There is a look of shocked recognition, and then fear rises in her eyes. I cannot hear what they are saying because I stand on the other side of the room but I watch her take possession of herself, her confidence returns and a calculating look enters her eyes. After a moment, she deliberately places a hand on Sam's bare wrist. I am surprised Sam does not flinch. He appears unaffected by her touch. I have a sudden thought and pull out my phone to text Sam, telling him to say good night and meet me outside.

I check the time and look at Andrew with a smile, "I'm going to have to go."

"Oh, sure," Andrew stands up, eager to help, "I'll just tell Sam."

"Okay, I'm just going to say good-bye to our hosts." I say. I know they are standing by the door wishing another guest goodnight and it will get me out of sight before Andrew reaches Sam. It might be advantageous if the predator does not know there are two of us, whatever the hell we are. I thank Joan and Roger and put on my coat as Sam walks into the hallway.

"Where's Andrew?" I ask, hoping he has decided to stick around.

"He's staying." Sam turns to Joan and Roger, "I offered him a ride, but he wants to stay. He doesn't have to be up as early as we do. Thanks for a wonderful night."

The four of us smile at each other and then say good-bye, which takes a bit of time and a lot of kissing and hugging until finally Sam and I are out the door and walking down the street toward his car.

## Chapter 40

“So why did you want to leave so suddenly? I thought things were going well.” Sam seems a little annoyed.

I look at him as we walk, “Are you sure that touch didn’t affect you?”

He gives me a quick glance but his annoyance dissipates, “So what was it?”

“Several things.” I start, trying to get my thoughts in order. “First of all, did you notice how she reacted to you, to seeing your eyes?”

“She... seemed afraid.”

“Yes, but before that it was...” I struggle to work through the thoughts that flashed through my mind, “it was like she recognized you.”

“I’ve never seen her before.”

“I didn’t think you had. It’s just that...” I do not know how to put it into words. “Just give me a minute.” I say and we walk in silence until we reach the car.

“Well, clearly we need to talk for a bit so where do you want to go.” Sam asks opening the door for me.

“Nowhere, I think we should sit in the car and watch the apartment and make sure that predator doesn’t leave with someone.”

“Good idea.” Sam agrees as he gives my shoulder a quick squeeze and then walks around to the driver’s side. “I don’t know how we’ll do it; make sure she leaves alone.”

I wait until we are both sitting in the car. “There are two of us. I think we’ll come with something.”

Sam twists in his seat to scrutinise the entrance to the apartment and then glances back at me. He scans the street for a moment until he spots a parking space on the other side of the street. “Could you keep an eye on the entrance?”

“Absolutely.”

As Sam pulls out to re-park the car facing the apartment he comments, “At least we know they can’t mesmerise us.”

“Actually, we don’t.” I shake my head, thinking about the way she touched him. “I’m not convinced she was trying to mesmerise you...”

Although she did appear to be... very interested in you, at least until she saw your eyes.”

“Crap, so we haven’t learned anything.”

“That’s not true.” I say as I remember Josh’s old joke, *‘when scary things are afraid it’s time to be really scared’*. That predator definitely seemed afraid of Sam... once she saw his eyes just the way James...

“We might as well get comfortable,” Sam interrupts my thoughts and we fiddle with the seats, trying to set them to a comfortable position for a long wait. “So, why did you want to leave?”

“You know earlier in the evening a woman named Claudette asked me if we were related.”

“Interesting non sequitur.” Sam comments dryly.

“No, it’s not.”

Sam gives me a level look, “We don’t look anything alike.”

“I know but there was something Claudette saw. Later when the predator recognized you, it hit me. Maybe we are different. Think about it. What I mean is maybe we’re different from other people but similar to each other. Just think about it for a moment. You have never met anyone who can see those predators and I’ve never met anyone either. Maybe there is something to the dhampir legend.” I see I have Sam’s full attention.

“I...” Sam starts but the sentence goes nowhere.

“Back in Vancouver I met one of those predators and he didn’t seem upset or worried until I stepped closer then he kind of... got scared.”

“What did he do?”

“He...” I visualise that encounter in the alley, trying to remember it clearly. “James was his name. James saw me and he... kinda... hissed, and that’s when he...” I stop talking because I have not told Sam about Josh. Sam just waits for me to continue, “That’s when he threw... a friend of mine.” Suddenly I remember something. “When he hissed he said something. I thought he said ‘damn fool’ but—”

“What if he said dhampir?”

“Yeah,” a chill runs down my spine as I remember the evening. “James was calling me a dhampir. Now that I think about it he wasn’t worried until he saw my eyes.”

“Your eyes, just like the woman tonight,” Sam’s voice has an edge of excitement to it.

As I think about it I realize James was throwing Josh out of his way. James really was after me. I turn to Sam, "James also told a woman in Amsterdam about me. Why would he do that unless..."

"Unless he was warning her." Sam just looks at me while silence stretches out between us.

"And she recognized me the moment our eyes met," I continue, thinking back to that afternoon in Amsterdam when she first saw my eyes in the mirror. "How could she do that unless our eyes give away what we are?"

"So, you think the vampires can recognize that we are dhampirs when they see our eyes."

I nod, the pieces fit together in a way that makes sense.

"So why are they so scared?" Sam asks, gripping the steering wheel and staring at the entrance to the apartment building.

"I don't know. I mean the dhampir legends suggest that we have the same speed and strength as..." I hesitate reluctant to use the word, "... as vampires but I've never noticed it."

"The same strength and speed." He repeats thoughtfully, "Do you think that means we can kill them?"

Uncomfortable with the question, I finally admit, "Yes, I remember one of the lines I read said, 'dhampirs are supposed to be adept at detecting and killing vampires.' But keep in mind those legends also say that dhampirs don't have any bones."

"But there must be something to scare them." Sam insists.

I shrug, "You're right, there must be something to scare them but what? Do you have superpowers that you're not telling me about?"

"Yeah, I wish." Sam says wistfully as he continues to stare at the entrance of the apartment. After a moment he mutters, "Strength and speed, I really wish that was true."

We sit in silence for a while and I watch Sam turn things over in his mind. "So, you've had more encounters with them than just seeing them through glass." His voice is flat, almost but not quite accusatory and he does not look at me.

"I'm sure you haven't told me *all* about your run-ins with them either." I point out. "You're the one who is convinced they're vampires."

"And you said the only time you saw one kill they didn't drink the blood."

“I guess we’re both holding back.” Silence settles between us, which is broken a few minutes later by the sound of rain hitting the roof of the car.

“Okay, we’ve both held back.” Sam says softly. “I’m guessing you’re doing it for the same reason as me.”

“And what reason is that?” I ask, wondering if vampires killed his wife.

“Too painful to talk about.” His soft reply feels like a knife wound.

With pain biting me, I stare out the window at the entrance to the apartment but I no longer see it. Instead, I see Josh tumbling off a bridge and Patty’s dead eyes staring at an unseen wall. My vision blurs a bit and I turn to look out the window on my right, hiding my eyes from Sam.

His hand gently squeezes my knee, “No questions but... well, whenever you’re ready.”

I nod unable to speak for a moment. Finally I whisper, “You too.”

Sam’s hand briefly tightens on my knee again before letting go. I surreptitiously brush away my tears but I doubt I succeed in fooling Sam. I turn to stare at the entrance again and notice out of the corner of my eye that Sam is staring out his side window covertly wiping his eyes. I have an irrational urge to laugh, two broken people trying to track down some dangerous predators.

We both sit up as we watch the predator walk out the entrance of the apartment building. She stands under the overhang and peers around before popping open an umbrella and marching briskly down the street, alone. She appears to be in a hurry. Relieved that she departed the party alone, we both slump in our seats for a moment.

“She said her name was Sarah,” Sam tells me as he starts the car. That simple sentence contains both an apology and an invitation.

## Chapter 41

I am home for only fifteen minutes when my phone rings, sounding ten times louder than normal. I experience a jolt of fear as I reach for my cell. Flipping it open, I see Sam's name, which actually makes me feel better.

"Hi, it's me. You're not going to believe what's happened."

"You remembered that you really do have superpowers?" I tease.

"No, I think I'm fucked. I drove past my apartment and there are three vampires standing on the corner." Tension fills his voice.

"What?" I demand, stunned by the news.

"Yeah, so I drove around the other way and there were two more on the other corner. They're all around my place."

"How the hell did they find you?"

"I don't know but I need to figure out what to do."

"Well, you can't go back to your place."

"You think?" he demands harshly.

I pause for a moment to restrain myself from replying in kind. "Find a hotel. I'm not sure you should go into work tomorrow. They found you at home and I think it would be easier to find you at work. Maybe that woman Sarah asked around at the party."

"Shit, you must be right. She must have mesmerised someone at the party and got my address from them." Sam sounds calmer, as if he is starting to think instead of panic.

"The truly frightening thing is how she was able to get so many other predators out on such short notice." I comment, trying to work through the implications.

"Well, obviously she phoned them."

"Yes, that is obvious but what I mean is how many were able to get to your place on such short notice. Think about it, we saw her leave the party so she's only had a half an hour to round them up."

"Christ, I hadn't thought of that. Look, I'm going to go. I have to find a hotel."

"Sam, make sure you call me." I know I will be stressing out about him until he is safe again.

"I'll check in every day. Good night."

“Be careful, good night.” I close my phone, knowing I will not be getting any sleep. *How many of them were in the city?* She was only the second one I had seen in Paris but clearly, there are a lot more running around the city than I originally thought. I pace around my apartment for a while then a rather amazing thought strikes me. The woman was afraid of Sam, so afraid that she called in back up. What the hell is he that scares her so? Could a dhampir be that much of a threat? What did Sam say? He said there are at least five predators around his place. Just how scary is he? Or me? If Sam is a dhampir then I probably am as well.

Oddly, fear begins to dissipate. Or maybe it's not so odd. Clearly, whatever we are, we frighten those predators. Josh's comment comes back to mind, *'When scary things are afraid it's time to be really scared.'* But what if the thing that the scary things are afraid of is you? Suddenly I feel like laughing.

## Chapter 42

I sit in Café de l'Alma, trying to work but in reality all I am doing is anxiously waiting for Sam to call when Andrew shows up. There is something a bit different about Andrew, he looks... good. Maybe he is just more relaxed around me now. He walks up and pulls out a chair saying, "Have you heard from Sam?"

"No, why?"

"Well, he was supposed to give me a call today but I haven't heard from him."

"Did you call him?"

"Yeah, but he didn't answer."

"Sorry, I haven't heard from him." I reply, my anxiety jumping up several degrees. Sam wouldn't avoid Andrew's call, or would he? Maybe he has a reason to avoid Andrew.

"Oh, well, I guess he'll call soon." Andrew responds. Just then, the waiter comes to ask if he wants anything. He glances at me to see if I will object to him joining me for a drink. I smile to indicate that he is welcome and Andrew orders a glass of the house red.

"So, did you enjoy the party last night?" he asks as the waiter walks away.

"Yes, although I have to admit I was hoping they were locals." I say with another smile.

"I know what you mean. It seems like I only meet ex-pats." Andrew's laugh is very charming but it disturbs me a little. I cannot put my finger on why. Maybe he is more worried about Sam than he admits.

My phone rings and I pull it out to see that Sam's name. I look at Andrew and say, "Sorry, I have to take this."

Andrew nods and leans back in his chair.

"Hello."

"Ann, it's me." Sam's voice is a lot calmer than the night before.

"Hi, I've been expecting your call," I reply carefully, trying to convey to Sam that I am not alone.

"Yeah, sorry it took so long. I think I'm safe now."

"That's good to hear." I say with a very neutral tone.



“Is something wrong?” Sam asks, sounding a little worried.

“No, it’s nothing important.”

“You’re not alone, are you?”

“That is correct.”

“When will you be alone?”

“Uh... One or two.”

“Hours?”

“Yes.”

“Call me as soon as you’re alone. I really need to talk to you.”

“Yes, I agree.” I say, glancing at Andrew.

“Bye.”

“I’ll talk to you soon.” I reply and then hang up and turn to Andrew. “Sorry, about that. I don’t usually have to talk to my clients but every once in a while.” The lie comes easy. Since Sam refused to speak to Andrew, I assume Sam does not want Andrew to know where he is now. I decide wait until I can talk it over with Sam before revealing anything to Andrew. Maybe Sam has a reason for not telling Andrew.

The waiter returns with Andrew’s drink and offers a few pleasantries. We all express surprise that the day is so sunny and warm after the rain the night before. As the waiter walks away, Andrew reaches for his glass and takes a sip. Once again I am struck by how much more relaxed he appears to be.

I smile at him, remembering how much people at the party like him. I put my laptop to sleep while I ask, “So, how long have you been in Paris?”

“A little over a year,” Andrew answers. “Sam transferred a little later. How about yourself?”

“About eight months,” I reply, noticing how much more appealing Andrew appears now that he is more comfortable with himself. “So were you just transferred out here by your company?”

“No, I asked when I saw there was an opening. I really wanted to get away from... get away for a bit.”

“And Paris is a great city to get transferred to.” I reply, politely pretending not to notice Andrew’s slip but it makes me wonder what he was really fleeing.

“Yeah, I love it here. I have so much more freedom... there’s a lot more here than in St John’s.” Andrew oscillates between revealing himself and keeping the conversation light.

As we talk, it occurs to me that Andrew or someone else talked to Sarah. It had to be someone who knew where Sam lived so maybe that explained Sam's reluctance to talk to Andrew. A little thrill of fear runs through me at the idea of Sarah using compulsion on Andrew. I yearn to ask him about her but I hold back, not wanting to divulge too much nor involve Andrew in this mess.

We talk for an hour or so and then something in Andrew's demeanour changes. He gets a little more physical; touching my hand or shoulder. After a few minutes, I realize that he is attracted to me. As we continue to talk, his hand lingers on my shoulder or knee longer and longer. Not ready to get involved with someone and not sure I would want to be involved with Andrew, his touches begin to make me more and more uncomfortable. Even as I consider how to approach the subject without hurting Andrew's feelings, he pulls back. Abruptly, Andrew checks his watch and informs me that he has to leave because of a prior commitment.

"I'd like to see you again," he declares, once again laying a hand on mine.

The touch and intensity make me a little nervous so I deflect his unasked question by saying, "I'm here most days, working."

"Well, maybe I'll see you tomorrow." He smiles and then practically runs off.

A couple of hours later, I call Sam and pace around my apartment waiting for him to answer his phone. Straightening things here and there, I try to burn off the excess energy boiling up inside me because of worry and stress. I get his voice mail, again. I set my phone down on the countertop and decide to make myself something to eat before calling him again. I pull out some bread and my phone rings.

"Hi, sorry, I was asleep." He sounds oddly alert for someone who was just asleep.

"I was worried. Are you okay? Have you seen any more of them?"

"I'm fine. I haven't seen any of them." As he speaks, wariness enters his voice.

"Are you sure you slept enough? You sound terrible."

"I definitely haven't slept enough." He says with a laugh and then we are both quiet for a moment.

"Sam, I saw Andrew today and he was really worried about you."

“That’s weird. I called Andrew and left a message with him, telling him I couldn’t meet him today.”

“That is odd.” I reply as worry starts to chomp through me again.

“How did Andrew get a hold of you?”

“I ran into him at the Café. I had the impression he was looking for me.” That thought only occurs to me as I say the words but I know it’s true.

“That worries me.”

“Why?”

“Well, someone at the party must have told that vampire, Sarah, where I live. If they also told her about you...”

“I thought of that.”

“Maybe you should be running too.”

“Or maybe they’re just looking for information about you.”

“Do you really want to take that chance?”

I dither. I am scared there is no denying that but I do not want to run. I marvel at my own refusal. While I stand in silence, *‘The thing scary things are afraid of’* flashes through my mind.

“Ann?”

“Yes, I’m still here.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t have the impression from Andrew that he was looking for me in particular. It was more like I was just a way for him to find you. And I’ve been thinking that maybe we don’t need to be running scared beca—”

“Jesus Christ!” Sam’s shocked expletive cuts me off.

“What’s the matter?”

“There’s a vampire walking around outside the hotel.”

“Seriously? Can you get out of there?” Silence. “Sam!” I call.

“Yes, I’m here.” There is another pause before he speaks but his voice has calmed back down. “I don’t understand how they found me.”

“You’re sure you lost them on your way there?”

“Yes, there was no one following me.” He is quiet again. “No, I must be wrong. Shit, I don’t know how to do this. Someone must have followed me.”

“Or...” I start but stop as thoughts of Josh fill my head. Josh and I had a lot of talks about what the cops could or couldn’t do to find us.

“Or what?”

“Your car, does it have one of those tracking devices? One of those things that allow cops to track your vehicle if it’s stolen?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Then they probably have someone here who is a cop like they do in Vancouver.”

“You’re saying they tracked my car? Wait, a vampire cop?”

“Yes, I bet that’s how they found you. The cops just have to pretend you reported your car stolen and the company will allow them to track it.”

“Yes,” Sam’s voice is incredulous. “But a vampire cop?”

“You’ll have to leave your car behind. It might be safer if you ditch your phone as well.”

“What?”

“Cell phones can be tracked. I’ve heard that cell phone companies are lax about the required paper work and allow cops to track them. Buy a prepaid phone.” I think for a moment.

“You’ll have to buy one as well.”

“That is what I have. The only problem is that you can’t buy prepaid phones in France.” Silent fills the distance between us for a moment before I tell him my idea. “Sam, I think maybe you should come here to hide.”

“What?”

“I’m serious. Look, we need information about these creatures and ourselves and we can’t do it by running away from the only lead we’ve had. Take some time to shake them off and then come to my place.”

“I could end up leading them to you. I don’t like it.”

“We can’t get any answers alone. If you do lead them here then we’ll run together.”

“I don’t know.”

“Look, I don’t want to lose contact with the only person I know can see these creatures.” I admit. “Think about it Sam. You’re the only person who can watch my back and I’m the only person—”

“Who can watch mine. Okay, I’ll come over.”

“Sam, be careful.”

“I don’t know how long I’ll be. I want to make sure I’m not being followed.”

“Just be careful. And don’t use your phone again. In fact, it might be better if you left it at the hotel. Then maybe they’ll think that you’re still there.”

“Okay but Ann, when I get there I hope you’ll tell me about the vampire cop.”

## Chapter 43

On the last day of August, I sit in Café de l'Alma trying to program. I have not heard from Sam in two days and anxiety and dread have been eroding my ability to get my work done. My lack of focus frustrates me as I try to figure out what is wrong with a particular piece of code. The program keeps spitting out the inverse of what I want so I know that somewhere in the code I have an equation that is backwards or inverted but I cannot find it. I sit back in my chair and drink my coffee, calming myself down and thinking that I will have to use a 'brute force' method to find the mistake. Maybe if I insert a line of code telling it to print the result after every line of code I will find the equation that is giving me trouble. Frustration fills me at the very thought. I check the time and decide to stop for the day.

I look around for the waitress to order a glass of wine to drown my irritation in when I see Andrew walking down the street. He appears to be heading directly to the Café. He spots me and waves. He looks relaxed and... really good. I watch him approach, remembering how... antsy he was at the end of our last conversation.

"Hello, again," Andrew says as he put his hands on the back of a chair.

"Hi, how are you doing?" It occurs to me that I encountered him around this same time a couple of days ago. Of course, it is after work so that may be the reason.

"I am good, except I still cannot get hold of Sam." Andrew makes a gesture that obliquely asks if he can join me.

I nod, "So you still haven't heard from him?"

"No, have you?" he inquires.

I shake my head no. "I'm starting to get worried too." I reply. I am very worried. If they got him... I tried phoning him but he never answered. I hope that means he ditched his phone. I hope that is all it means. Of course, if they got his phone then they might have my number. Maybe I should get a new phone at the same time as Sam does.

"I stopped by his place a couple of days ago but he wasn't there."

My heart skips a beat as Andrew tells me that but the predators must have left him alone otherwise he would not be sitting here with me.

“He’s done this before.” Andrew tries to reassure me. He must have misread my concern for him as worry about Sam.

“Really?” Curiosity pulls at me.

“Yeah, after he found his wife dead he took off for a couple of weeks.”

“Seriously?” I probe, wanting to know more about Sam’s past. “Did that cause him trouble at work?”

“No, not really. Sam called in and asked for two weeks off for personal reasons. Everyone was very understanding.”

“That seems reasonable to me. Your wife gets killed you would need a little time alone.”

“Yeah, especially when it was so horrific. I stopped by to see him during that time. You know, see if he needed anything.”

I nod my understanding, thinking that Andrew is a good friend. It makes me wonder why Sam ignores his calls. Is it to protect him?

“Well,” Andrew continues, “he wasn’t there.”

“Maybe he took off because he needed to get away from... all the reminders.” I reply. Clearly, this is not the first time Sam has taken off and not confided in Andrew. Maybe Sam *is* trying to protect Andrew by not getting him enmeshed in this mess. An image of Josh tumbling off the bridge flashes through my mind and I conclude Sam is right not to involve Andrew.

“Yeah, but I was still worried.” Andrew comments quietly.

“He turned up that time I’m sure he’ll turn up this time.”

Andrew nods and then makes a deliberate effort to change the subject. “So, I’ve never been to Vancouver. Is it as beautiful as people say?”

I respond with only half my mind on the subject. I wish I knew more about what happened with Sam’s wife. When did she die? Was it vampires? Sam is convinced they are vampires. Could that be the reason why?

As I tell Andrew about the mountains that surround Vancouver, I am surprised by how homesick I feel. Memories of Josh and Patty flood through me as I describe to Andrew hiking through those mountains, kayaking the inlets at their base, and the Hot Springs on Vancouver Island.

When Andrew's face lights up as I tell him about encountering whales on a boat ride to the Hot Springs, I find myself stunned by how attractive he is. How or when did that happen? Maybe it is just that I am getting to know him better. It has happened to me before. I meet someone and, as I start to know them, I think they get better looking. Of course, the opposite has also happened. I remember meeting a guy in university who I thought was gorgeous – until he started talking. I have always been amazed at the way our feelings about someone affect how we see that person.

As I tell Andrew, a story about hiking the Stein Valley his behaviour begins to change. He gets more physical, again; touching me on the arm and knee each time he responds to a question. Then Andrew's humour and energy becomes a little disjointed and just like a couple of days ago, he makes an excuse and leaves. As he strides away, I remember the night of the party he seemed to think Sam and I were there as a couple and apologized for Sam ignoring me. Could he be attracted to me but feeling guilty about his emotions because he believes Sam is interested? I understand about that.



## Chapter 44

Four hours later, I sit at home feeling worried and scared when there is a knock at the door. I peer through the eyepiece to see who it is. Sam has finally arrived. When I open the door, a weird thing happens. We stand there staring at each other for a moment, wanting to hug but unsure if it is okay. Then we both laugh and hug.

“God, I was so worried about you.” I tell him as we pull apart.

“Me too.” he says, stepping inside so I can close the door. “Worried about you I mean.”

“Me? Why me?” I ask, moving out of the way so he can see my whole apartment.

“Well, if anyone connected you to me...”

“I guess, but even if they did, not one of them knows where I live.”

“But some of them know your name.” he points out.

I smile, “I don’t rent this apartment under my real name.”

Sam visibly relaxes as I point that out, then he turns around, taking in my tiny apartment.

The living room and dining room are all one space that his eyes take in quickly. When he spots the ladder leaning against the wall he glances up to the small loft bedroom. He looks back at me with a smile on his face.

“I know it’s a little small for the two of us.” I comment. “But the couch turns into a bed.”

“That seems to be common here.”

“Or at least common for ‘vacation rentals’.”

“No kitchen?” he asks.

“Yes, it’s through that door.” I say, pointing to the door directly across from the entrance. “The one beside it is the bathroom.”

“Do you have anything to eat?”

“Sure,” I lead him into the tiny kitchen and start opening cupboard, looking for something to make.

“So what name do you use?” he asks, leaning against the counter, looking wary and exhausted.

“What?”

“What name do you use to rent this apartment?”

I study the contents of the cupboard for a moment and then answer. “I use my grandmother’s name.”

Sam gives me a quizzical look as I close the cupboard and then open up the fridge. I sort of shrug and explain, “I had my grandmother’s ID so I decided to use it when I came to Paris. I found someone who was willing to allow me to rent the apartment in her name. It was surprisingly easy.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I just told them that I was a starving artist. I told the landlord I had come to Paris for inspiration but had no money and my grandmother was willing to support me. All the bills are sent back to Canada where I pay them. It’s a bit complicated but it works out.”

“Aren’t you worried they’ll track down your grandmother?”

I stop what I am doing and look into Sam’s eyes, “She died a few of years ago.”

“Oh, sorry,” he says with a sigh.

“No worries,” I reply, considering the contents of the fridge again. I really need to do a bit of shopping.

“I guess you didn’t share the same last name.”

“No, she was my maternal grandmother.” I gaze at Sam. His black hair is a bit of a mess and he makes it a bit worse by running his fingers through it. The gesture reminds me strongly of Josh. Is that why Sam is here? Is that why I made the offer to run together? Is it because Sam reminds me of Josh that I feel I can trust him? That is not good. I need to make decisions about Sam based on Sam and not based on the fact that he reminds me of Josh.

“Need some help?” he asks, looking very appealing.

I shake my head, trying to dispel the feelings any thought of Josh brings up. I ask Sam, “Is pasta okay?”

## Chapter 45

**A**fter dinner, Sam washes the dishes while I dry them. We do not speak and the only sound in the apartment is the quiet noises of dishes being stacked. He wipes down the countertop and rinses out the sink as I put away the last pot.

“Can we talk about the vampire cop in Vancouver?”

“Well, I imagine he fights crime on the downtown eastside.” I quip.

Sam leans against the counter and looks at me. It is just a look, nothing accusatory, nothing pleading, just a look.

I stare at the floor.

“How about tea? Or hot chocolate? Or something like that? What the hell am I saying? This is your place...” He looks flustered now and whispers, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I pick up the kettle. “We’re going to have to tell the real stories sometime.”

“I...” he turns a bit and fidgets.

“Really, it’s okay.” I stare at the kettle as I fill it with water and consider what to tell him. “I was in the police station in Vancouver when I saw a... predator walk in. He seemed to be in charge. The cop I was there to see deferred to him.”

“Is that why you left Canada? He saw you?”

“No, not exactly,” I search for the hot chocolate. “I was... There was another predator named James who saw me... I overheard James and the cop talking in an alley. But this guy James saw me as I was leaving the police station. I figured he would tell the cop and that’s when I ran. It was clear to me that... well, that James wanted to kill me. He knew... knew I overheard him and the cop talking about a cover up... a conspiracy they are involved in. I thought James might be able to learn my name from the cop. Turns out, I was wrong. In Amsterdam I found out that they didn’t know ou— my name.”

“That’s the same James you told me about the other night? The one who called you a dhampir?” Sam pulls a couple of mugs out of another cupboard.

“Yes.” I put hot chocolate into the cups. “I met another... vampire in Amsterdam and she referred to James as a Prefect.”

“A Prefect? What the hell does that mean?”

“Well, I don’t know how they mean it but I know that in ancient Rome a Prefect was an official of some sort. Kind of like a governor.”

“So, they’re organised?” Sam’s voice is thoughtful.

“You haven’t encountered that?”

Sam focuses on pouring hot water into the cups. “Maybe but I never heard the word Prefect. I probably would have thought of a school prefect.”

“But you have seen signs that they’re organised?”

“Yes,” he sips his drink. “Can we sit down?”

I nod and walk into the living room. We both sit on my little green couch. After a moment, I pull my feet up and turn to Sam. “You said you saw signs that they are organised.” I prompt him.

“Yes, when they... when they attacked me they worked as a group.” Sam’s eyes have the thousand-yard stare.

“They attacked you and you survived?” Stunned the words come out in a whisper.

“Yes, they were about to kill me but someone had called the police. They managed to escape. But one of them said something a little odd. He said, ‘the others will not like it if a body is discovered’.”

“The others?”

“Yeah, I had the impression they were more afraid of the others finding out about that than they were afraid of the cops finding them.” Sam’s eyes finally focus on me.

“I can’t believe they attacked you and you got away. How did you do it?”

“Luck. I guess you would call it luck.” His words are bitter and his eyes drop to stare at the floor.

“So, you... you didn’t...” I can’t figure out how to phrase my question.

“No,” Sam looks me in the eye again. “I didn’t get away on my own. I was rescued by the police.”

The air in the apartment fills with too much emotion, too many things unsaid. Sam’s guilt and pain sit exposed on his face for anyone to read. I wonder if my pain and guilt are so visible. The thought makes me a little ill. I would like to be able to hide things like that whenever I want to but watching Sam’s face I doubt I am any more

successful at it than he is. I shift on the sofa and look for a way out of the emotional intensity that holds us like insects trapped in amber.

“Let’s assume that the part of the dhampir legend which says they can kill vampires is true.” My voice sounds a little hoarse in my own ears.

“That would explain why they reacted the way they did.” Sam appears relieved to move past the subject.

“Right but many of those legends are clearly wrong so we need to find out what other parts are true.”

“How?”

“No idea.” I reply and we both stare at the fireplace. “Of course, making the assumption that we can kill them might get us killed.”

## Chapter 46

**T**wo days of being stuck in my apartment has Sam pacing impatiently around the place. It is irritating and making it hard for me to concentrate on my work. I check the time and decide that one o'clock is a long enough workday. I shut down my laptop and quietly close it. Over the last two days, I have frequently found myself thinking about what Andrew told me and what Sam revealed. I want to know what happened to Sam. How did his wife die? Where did he go after her death? I think that last question is important but I keep losing my nerve and I never ask. I am a little afraid he will want me to tell him about Josh and Patty and I am not ready for that.

I stretch a little, feeling the soreness in my muscles. I dreamed of the bridge last night and I woke up stiff as if I had been running in my dream. As I test the soreness in my arms, I covertly watch Sam, suddenly reminded that he complained about a reoccurring dream and sore muscles yesterday.

Sam stops his restless pacing to look out the window by the fireplace, staring over the top of my head as I sit at the computer desk. I look directly at Sam, not surprised that he is so fidgety. Since he arrived, I have been the only one who has left the apartment. Yesterday I hopped a train out of France to buy us a couple of prepaid phones. It still stuns me how small European countries are. Since Paris does not sell prepaid phones, although they work if you buy them elsewhere in the EU, I had to pick up our phones from another country.

"Need to get out?" I ask, staring out the window at a beautiful sunny afternoon. It is the second day of September so this summery weather is not going to last. I won't mind going out and enjoying it.

"Yes, I need to do something."

I twist in my seat to look at him. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know... something." He almost shouts in his frustration and then goes back to pacing.

I glance away and then back at him. "I have a crazy idea."

"What?" he asks and stops dead, staring at me.

"We could go back to your place."

“What the hell good would that do?” he demands with that dimple flashing in his cheek as he speaks. He sounds more puzzled than angry and he runs his hands through his thick hair. It just makes it stand up in different directions, just the way Josh’s would after the same gesture.

“Well, we agree to learn more about ourselves but we can’t think of any way to do that so I thought... Well, I thought we could find out more from one of them and the easiest place to find one is at your place.”

“There’s too many of them. I saw five and there might be more.” Sam shakes his head and stares at his feet. “That’s just too many for only two of us.”

“Maybe.” I reply.

“There were a lot of them and they’re pretty strong. I don’t see how we could learn anything except how to run fast.” Sam responds, surprising me. I thought he would be eager to go after them.

“It’s been almost a week.” I point out. “And they seem to have jobs. I don’t think all of them would still be watching, maybe there’s only one or two left. They know you’re on the run so maybe they’re only watching your place in case you decide to return for something.”

Sam just nods but excitement fills his eyes. Actually, his green eyes seem to turn a bit yellow.

“I figure we approach carefully and check it out. If there are too many, we leave. If there’s only one maybe we can learn something.”

“Okay.” Sam grabs his wallet and opens the door.

I jump up, grab my keys, some money, and my sunglasses. As I lock the door I say to him, “We could be nuts.”

“Maybe but I can’t stand hiding anymore.” Sam says lightly. Then, while we walk down the stairwell, he comments, “It might also be the break that we need.”

Or it might be the break that gets us killed but I keep that thought to myself.

We decide to approach Sam’s apartment separately while keeping within sight of each other. So far, I have not seen any of them. Watching Sam, walking on the opposite side of the street, I notice that he looks like he is sneaking around so I resolve to try a different approach. I choose to go to Café le Malar. The café has a good view of Sam’s place and it will appear a little more natural if I am drinking a coffee while people watching. Surprise and fear fills me when I walk

up to the café and encounter a predator doing exactly that. When he does not react to me in anyway, I decide to go ahead with my plan. Taking a seat, I realize it makes sense for the predator to be sitting here for the same reason I chose this spot. I covertly watch him as I wait for the waitress to come by. He looks in my direction but the way he looks away strongly indicates that his search is for someone else. Now convinced he is searching for Sam, I check him out. He seems familiar. It takes me a few moments to realize that I saw him the same night I met Sam. What was his name? I know I overheard it.

Café le Malar gives me a good view of Sam slinking his way down the street but the predator does not seem to react in any way. It suddenly occurs to me that most of them do not know what Sam looks like. Sarah must have given them a description of Sam and his address but that does not mean they can spot him on sight. That would also explain why Sam was able to elude them, once he ditched his car and phone. If they have a cop in this city then, maybe they could get access to the picture on Sam's drivers licence and those are never very good. A waitress appears at my side and asks what I want so I order a coffee and a croissant as I watch Sam duck into a store. After a moment, my new phone rings.

"I'm not seeing any of them." Sam tells me without saying hi.

"There's one here in the café. He's watching for you."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes," I reply and quickly explain my idea. As the waitress returns to place my coffee and croissant on the table, I smile and thank her. I see the predator glance my way so I carefully avoid direct eye contact, forgetting that I am wearing sunglasses.

"Do you think there are more of them around?"

"I don't know but I bet you have to walk up to your front door before they'll do anything. Come join me in the café and maybe we can follow this guy."

"That's a bit of a risk."

"We might as well try it. I don't see any other predators around. Besides this is what we came here to do."

"Okay, be there in a sec."

I hang up and sip my coffee. A few minutes later, Sam walks out of the shop and heads towards the café. As he slips into a seat beside me, Sam quietly comments, "This is fucking crazy."



“Yeah, maybe, but I bet I’m right. The predator didn’t even bat an eye as you walked up.”

“So, now what?” Sam asks just before the waitress walks up to take his order.

I wait for the waitress to leave before answering. “I think we just watch him. I’m guessing he’ll contact one of the others or one of them will show up before he goes. Once he leaves we can follow him and get some answers.”

Sam scans the café. He manages to do it very casually. Although his gaze slides past the predator without stopping, I am sure Sam sees him.

“I’ve seen him before,” Sam observes, confirming that he spotted the predator.

“I know, the night we met.”

“His name was... Paul.”

“Right. I was trying to remember.” I agree, taking a sip of my coffee. “Do you have sunglasses with you?”

“No,” Sam replies with a wry smile. “They’re in my apartment.”

“Want to go get them?” I smile.

“I think I’ll pass.”

“Okay, I’ll watch Paul.”

It’s a little over an hour before I see a new predator approach at the café. I never saw the guy before but that kind of beauty could only mean one thing. As I covertly watch, the second guy briefly makes eye contact with Paul before he takes a table by himself. Paul gives the new guy a brief shake of the head, indicating that he has nothing to report. The new guy subtly shrugs and smiles a little rueful smile before taking a seat in the café several tables away from Paul. Sam starts digging in his pocket for money to pay our bill but I place my right hand on his arm and say, “No, we wait a moment. I think the second guy might get suspicious if someone who matches your description jumps up and follows.”

“Good thinking.” Sam sits back for a second. “How long?”

“I think we need to run the risk of losing him. We wait until we see him turn a corner... or at least until he gets half way down the block.” I respond and watch the new guy pull out a book to read.

“Get serious.”

"I am serious. We both know how strong they are. If the second guy follows we're in trouble."

"Okay," Sam's reply is a bit grudging.

"Look, if we lose him we can come back on a different day and try this again."

Sam relaxes and smiles, his dimple appearing in full force, "You're right. They'd just assume we live nearby. In fact, they'll probably pay even less attention to us." He calmly motions for the waitress to bring us the bill.

Paul is half a block down Rue Malar when the waitress presents our bill. We chat with her for a moment, before paying and setting out on Rue Malar. After a few steps, Sam casually puts his arm around me and whispers in my ear. "This was a good idea. If we just take our time we can make sure that other guy doesn't follow us."

Sam smells really good and his lips brush my ear as he speaks. It is very distracting, reminding me of times that Josh did the same thing while we were wondering around Amsterdam. I force myself to focus on Paul who makes a right hand turn at the end of the block.

"Should we hurry?" Sam asks, fortunately he does not whisper in my ear.

"No, this is what I meant about 'risk losing' him. When we turn the corner we can check if the other guy is following us."

As we turn the corner to follow Paul, Sam quickly searches for the other predator.

"He's still sitting at the café." Sam informs me as he takes his arm off my shoulder.

Up ahead, Paul turns another corner.

"Sam," I say. "You know this neighbourhood so it's up to you to pick a spot to confront him."

## Chapter 47

A few blocks later, Sam finally says, “there!” as he grabs my arm. “You wait for a bit and then follow him up the alley. I’ll run around to the other end and we can trap him.”

“How long?”

“Give me five minutes.”

I nod, trusting Sam to pick the right spot. I watch Sam take off down the road faster than I would have believed possible. He is a good runner. I check the time on my phone. I will give Sam five minutes to get into place and then start down the alley. I am always surprised by how slowly time passes when you are watching the clock. The road Paul turned down is not really an alley. At least it is not an alley like we have in Vancouver, with garbage cans and garbage everywhere. It is more like a very narrow street. I check the time.

A window display in a shop on the corner gives me something to pretend to peruse without really seeing it. I check the time. I double-check that the other vampire did not followed us. I do not see him anywhere. I check the time. Five minutes is not really that long for Sam to run around to the other end of the alley. I wonder if he will be able to get into position. I check the time. I will go on the five-minute mark. If Sam does not make it in time, I will just continue to follow Paul and call Sam to let him know. I check the time. A crowded street in the middle of the day makes it unlikely that Paul will do anything dangerous but that image of Josh tumbling off the bridge flashes into my mind. I will keep my distance just in case Paul turns out to be as bold as that predator. Of course, the alley Paul just turned into is far from crowded so there may be a greater risk. Then again, he has no reason to come after me. I check the time. Five minutes.

I start down the alley. I see Paul on the other side of the street and about half a block away but there is no sign of Sam. Paul stops dead, staring up the alley. I squint up the alley and see Sam walk around the corner. Paul peers around nervously. He starts to come my way, but glances back at Sam while I cross the road to block Paul’s escape. That move makes him a little nervous so, with a quick glance back at Sam, he crosses the street. I cross to match him. Once again, Paul stops

dead. Now his eyes flick back and forth between Sam and me as we approach him. He looks ready to fight. Fear thrills along my nerves, tingling with a rush of excitement. Paul pulls out his phone but Sam dashes up and yanks it out of Paul's hand. I stop dead. Sam moved so fast it was inhuman.

Paul's eyes dart around for an escape. An idea lights up his face as if a light bulb turned on over his head. Paul affects a casual air and sneers at me, "You have no idea what he is do you?"

"Why don't you tell me?" I respond stepping closer.

"He's an abomination. Evil." Paul really emphasises that last word.

"Evil?" I smile and move a little closer. "Evil how?"

## Chapter 48

“Evil,” Paul hisses the word, sending a shiver down my spine but suddenly I have an idea.

“Yeah, thanks. I got that part. Care to elaborate?” I ask biding my time, hoping he'll do what I think.

“He's an abomination; something that shouldn't exist.” Paul edges a bit nearer to me.

“Like you?” My question freezes Paul for a moment but he appears a little dismissive of me with most of his attention focused on Sam.

“Aren't you going to answer the question?” Sam prompts.

“Sure, I can explain.” Paul replies, sidling closer to me.

“I think you should keep away from her.” Sam warns him. I discretely gesture to Sam to let Paul act. I have a feeling I know what he is going to try.

“I have no intention of hurting her,” he replies to Sam. Shifting his gaze to me, Paul stretches out a hand to touch my bare arm. “I just want her help.”

“What kind of help do you expect from me?” I ask as his hand slides down my arm, making contact with bare skin. Sam's whole body tenses to spring but he holds himself back. Now is our opportunity to test if they can mesmerise us. Paul won't hold anything back, he's too afraid.

Paul's expression is one of triumph as he turns to look at Sam. “I want you to fight him.” Paul instructs me.

“And why would I do that?” I ask and feel Paul's grip on my arm tighten. In a flash, Paul pulls the glasses off my face and stares at me in horror.

“Two of you?” He exclaims and real fear colours his voice. Paul swings me around, slamming me into Sam. Although we both stumble, we manage to stay on our feet.

“Are you —” Sam begins but I cut him off by running after Paul. Sam follows me.

Paul runs for the main street but he keeps glancing back, which seems to slow him down a bit. Sam puts on an unbelievable turn of speed and succeeds in passing Paul so that we trap him between us

again. Paul's eyes dart around looking for an escape but there is nowhere for him to go.

"We just..." I start to say but stop when he sprints across the alley and leaps up to catch hold of the bottom rung of a fire ladder. He scrambles up one floor before we even move.

"Damn!" Sam mutters and attempts the same move as Paul. He misses the bottom rung. "Shit, there goes our chance."

"No, you can make it. Try again."

Sam backs up and runs for the ladder this time he manages to get hold of the rung. He swings his leg up and succeeds in pulling his body up onto the ladder. Sam looks up to see Paul near the roof. He glances back at me.

"Go," I tell him. "I'll be right behind you." I back up and wait for Sam to climb high enough to be out of the way then I run and catch the bottom rung. A couple of swings and I manage to hook a leg over. I press my other foot against the wall so I can lever myself up and grab hold of the next rung. A flash of insight makes me call out to Sam, "Watch out at the top, he might be waiting."

Sam glances down at me and then nods to indicate he heard. He sets off again but slows as he reaches the top. I climb as fast as I can but I assume that we have lost Paul. I look up and see Sam's feet disappearing over the top. I increase my speed; I don't want Sam to face Paul alone.

## Chapter 49

**P**ulling myself over the top, I scan around for Sam to find him standing a few feet away with his focus in another direction. I clamber over the roof to stand beside Sam, searching for the predator. The rooftop we stand on is one floor higher than the next one on the street but Paul managed to get onto that rooftop where he stands still as well, staring at someone else. I register the oddity of the tableau while my gaze travels to find what has captured Paul's attention. A little beyond Paul someone else stands facing him. I can see that the new guy is blonde but not much else. I clutch at Sam's arm, "Another one?"

"I don't think so," is the thoughtful reply.

"Why's that?"

"He looks afraid," Sam responds quietly, gesturing toward Paul. We just stand still and watch as Paul races to the edge of the rooftop and scrambles down another fire ladder. The new guy pursues him. At least, that is what it looks like. As the blonde disappears over the edge, Sam and I regard each other.

"What do you make of that?" Sam asks as his eyes drift back the spot where they disappeared.

"Beat's me. Maybe he owed him money."

"Very funny. It looked like Paul was afraid of the other guy, didn't it?"

"Yeah, but I have no idea why." I begin but stop as a thought stirs. "Unless..."

"Unless he's another dhampir." Sam turns to regard me.

I let go of Sam's arm. "I wonder if he knows more than we do."

"I wonder too," Sam replies thoughtfully. "It would be a big help to find someone else like us who does know what the hell is going on."

I nod as I gaze around me. "Wow, it's pretty cool up here."

Sam surveys the view and nods, "Nice." He exhales in an unhappy way, "Well, that was a bust."

I step away from him, turning around to take in the full panorama. "I don't think it was."

"Yeah, the view is worth it."

I smile at him and shake my head, “Not that I don’t agree but I think we also learned something.”

“What was that?”

“Sam, think about what we just did. We moved as fast as Paul, we made that jump to the ladder...”

“The ladder was nothing.”

“No, Sam, those ladders are designed to be too high for people to do what we just did. If they weren’t then people could break into the apartments easily.” I point out, shading my eyes as I continue to turn, taking in the view.

“You’re right.” Sam peers around. “It really is beautiful up here. Shall we take a seat?”

He turns around, then walks over the metal roof to where a chimney sticks up, and sits in the shade. I join him, making sure to sit where the metal is cooler.

“So,” Sam says quietly.

“So, superpowers.”

Silence. More silence.

More silence.

“That’s never happened to me before,” Sam murmurs and leans his head back against the chimneystack. “You?”

I remember Josh, lying in the hospital, pointing out that I had once fought two guys who were trying to rape me. Josh had commented several times that it was kind of amazing how I was able to fight two guys at once. I try to remember if I did anything unusual during that fight.

*One guy grabbed me from behind while the other walked towards me threatening with an oily voice, “Just relax, you might even enjoy it. But if you don’t behave we’ll just have to hurt you.”*

*“Now, why don’t I believe that?” I asked, trying to buy time, searching for a way out of this.*

*“Is it my friend?” and he waved a knife in front of his face, smiling.*

*“Well, the knife certainly makes you come off as hostile.”*

*His smile grew, “Hostile, that’s cute but a woman should know her place and that place ain’t making smartass remarks.”*

*I slammed my heel down on the foot of the guy who held me and he screamed but he did not let go so I threw all my weight backwards shoving him off balance. He fell back onto the pavement with me on top of him knocking the air out of his lungs. The guy with the knife*



*came at me but I managed to kick him in the arm, which was holding the knife. He yelled, clutching his arm while I scrambled to my feet. I quickly grabbed the knife and watched the two of them carefully. They were clearly still in pain but still looked eager to fight. The guy on the ground slowly got to his feet but I kicked him in the head...*

Sam stares at me, "You're awfully quiet."

"Maybe something like this has happened before," I respond slowly. "Not exactly the same but similar."

Puzzlement shows on Sam's face, "What do you mean?"

I tell him about how I got away from two guys who were trying to rape me.

"It never occurred to you that what you did was superhuman?"

"No, I thought it was just fear amping me up. You read about things like that all the time. But I don't think it was the same thing." I carefully examine the things I did during that fight. After a moment, I shake my head. "No, I think I was lucky more than I was strong. Has that kind of thing ever happened to you?"

"No, I've only been... no, it hasn't." Sam pauses for a minute. "It hasn't happened when you faced other vampires?"

"No, but then I..." I think back to that moment on the bridge when that predator broke Josh's neck. It happened so fast I didn't have time to think much less move. "I've never really had a chance to try." We sit in silence again until a thought occurs to me. "Sam, you didn't seem to notice that you out ran that guy Paul. Are you sure it hasn't happened to you before?"

Sam slowly turns to look me in the eye. I see a lot of pain there. He shakes his head, "No, I'm pretty sure it's never happened before."

I shrug, "Maybe there's a reason."

Despondency seems to come off him in waves. We sit with our shoulders almost touching and yet, it feels like he is a million miles away. I glance down and see his hands clenched into tight fists, shaking slightly. I place a hand gently over his left fist and the shaking stops. He inhales a deep breath and slowly lets it out. We remain in that position for several moments while Sam collects himself.

"There's something else we learned today," I say slowly.

"What?" Sam's voice reveals the tension still inside him.

"They can't mesmerise us." I feel Sam shift to look at me and I turn to gaze into his eyes. "Paul definitely tried to mesmerise me. In fact, he really expected it to work."

“Yeah,” Sam drawls the word as his eyes roam back out over the view. “And when he realized you weren’t mesmerised he pulled off your sunglasses to check your eyes as if...”

“As if he knew that his inability to compel me meant I was a dhampir.” I finish, realising Sam’s conclusion must be correct.

“Are.” Sam states.

“What?”

“Are. You are a dhampir not ‘was’.” His mouth quirks into a smile making the dimple jump into view.

“Right, I am a dhampir. At least we are dhampirs if they really are vampires.” I say expecting Sam to reiterate his statement that he knows they are vampires.

“We should get off this rooftop.” He says and rises to his feet.

I nod and stand to brush off my clothes. I watch Sam walk toward the edge of the roof. When he glances back at me, it strikes me how appealing Sam is. Shaking off the urge to kiss him, I amble over to join him while he waits at the top of the ladder. We descend the ladder quickly, with Sam going first.

As soon as I drop to the ground, Sam places a hand on my shoulder. “Maybe we can sneak into my place.”

I grin, “Sure, we can give it a try.” Excitement surges through me as I think about it. A rush of blood in my veins followed by a tingle of energy startles me as I worry about how much I enjoy the thrill of what we are about to do.

Sam shakes his head, “It might be really stupid but there are some things I’d like to get. Seriously, you don’t have to do it. It’s probably stupidly dangerous.”

I stare at him for a moment, sobering up and forcing myself to consider the risks involved with such an action. “I think now is the best time to do it.” I answer. “Once Paul reports back they’ll all know you’re in the area and that you have someone with you.”

“I was thinking the same thing. I was also thinking that we could go in from the roof.”

“Okay, but I’d like to grab my sunglasses if that guy Paul didn’t break them,” I say over my shoulder, walking back to search the ground.

Sam catches up to me and asks, “Do you think that dhampir was able to kill Paul.”

I look at Sam's face. Those green eyes so intent on the ground ahead of us while we walk back to find my sunglasses. "I don't know."

"Didn't you say that the legends say we're supposed to be able to do that?"

"Yes, but we don't know that other guy really is a dhampir and even if he is we can't assume he was able to kill Paul."

"Good point," Sam replies with his eyes searching the ground. Spotting my glasses, he takes a couple of quick steps and scoops them off the road. As he hands them back to me, he comments, "If he is a dhampir I'd really like to know."

## Chapter 50

“Do you know which ladder we should climb?” I ask as we approach the restaurant where we encountered Paul. I nudge Sam indicating the predator who still sits at one of the tables.

“No,” he mutters. “In fact, I can’t think of a single ladder or alley nearby.”

“Well, that makes things a little harder,” I comment, scanning around for a way to get closer without the predator spotting Sam.

“Come on,” he taps my shoulder and starts strolling east. “Let’s walk over one block to Rue Jean-Nicot.”

“How will that help?” I ask but have to hop a step to catch up to him as he strides down the street.

“We can head up to Rue de l’Université and approach from the other side.” Sam turns to look at me as I reach his side and fall into step with him.

“So, you’re assuming they’re just sitting in Café le Malar?” I ask while we walk straight past the café on Rue Malar.

“It’s still just the one guy and there isn’t a café at the other end of the block,” Sam remarks as he covertly checks out the chairs along the sidewalk. After we pass the café Sam asks, “Did he look edgy to you?”

I think about it for a moment, “No, he looked bored.”

“Probably a good sign.” Sam gestures that we should cross the street.

“I wonder what they do in the rain.” I muse as we turn on Rue Jean-Nicot.

“What do you mean?”

“Do they sit inside the café or sit outside in the rain? I guess the view of your front door would still be good from inside so long as they get a window seat.” I comment. As we walk northward on Rue Jean-Nicot, we pass a Pizza Hut and I wonder who would go there. With all the wonderful places to eat in Paris, why would anyone choose Pizza Hut? Maybe it is different here. Maybe the food is better. When we reach Rue de l’Université, we turn west and walk back to Rue Malar.

When we reach the corner Sam stops and turns to me, “Last chance to bail.”

I stare down the narrow street for a moment and then nudge Sam. "Let's walk on this side," I gesture to the left. "It'll be harder for that predator to see us on this side."

"You really think they don't know what I look like? That guy Paul seemed to recognize me in the alley."

"I really think all they have is a description. And Paul didn't recognize you while we were sitting in the café."

"No but I'm sure he did in that alley." Sam insists.

"I think... Could you see his eyes?"

"Yes, okay, I get it. Once he looked me in the eye he knew."

"Just like that woman, Sarah, at the party." I respond and hand Sam my sunglasses. "Wear these and give me your key."

"Why?" he asks as he takes the glasses.

"The sunglasses will hide your eyes. Paul didn't recognize me as a danger until he yanked off my sunglasses. This street is reasonably busy so I don't think that predator is going to do anything too obvious." I spot a small alcove across from the entrance to Sam's apartment building.

"Okay, that makes sense but why do you want my key?" Sam sounds puzzled as he dons my glasses. They look good on him. Make him look smart. Smart and sexy. I wonder what the hell is with me today. Several times, I have caught myself thinking of him in a sexual way.

"I'll approach your door first and get inside. I'll leave the door unlocked so you can get in quickly." The two of us step into the small alcove in the building across from Sam's place. The predator cannot see us from his position in the café on the corner.

"Alright," Sam pulls out his keys holding up one of them. "This is the front door."

"Okay," I acknowledge as I take the key. "When you walk up, try to look like you're in a hurry, but don't run."

"I get it."

"Okay, here we go," and I set off across the street. If I am right, the predator will not pay any attention to me. I casually unlock the door and enter. Holding my breath, I keep the door slightly ajar by pushing it closed just enough to prevent it from latching. Because it is made of solid wood, I cannot see Sam approach but I listen carefully in case someone accosts him. A tug on the door makes me let go, and Sam steps inside removing my sunglasses.

“So, far so good,” he comments, sounding confident and casual but his hands tremble slightly as he takes back his keys.

“Yeah, well, I think getting out is going to be the hard part.” I point out as we start climbing the stairs.

“You figure he’ll be on the alert?” Sam glances down at me from his position higher up the narrow staircase.

“Yes, and Paul might talk to them soon. In which case, there will more of them outside.”

“If that blonde guy wasn’t a dhampir.” Sam’s voice is almost a whisper.

“And if he didn’t kill Paul,” I respond. “And I think it’s safer if we assume Paul got away.”

“Okay, I agree, it’s probably safer to assume that. We have no idea what made Paul run away.” Sam turns onto the fourth floor and we walk down the hallway. “What do you think we should do?”

“I think we should hurry.” I reply as Sam unlocks his apartment. We both enter cautiously, peering into the living room. Nobody.

“Hurry,” I urge Sam and he quickly moves through his apartment, pulling out a backpack and then various other items. I do not know exactly what brought Sam back here but I have the feeling it is very personal so I give him some privacy while he packs. I quickly move to stand at the window and search the street below for activity. Sam’s apartment overlooks Rue Malar and the café is in clear view of the window. I gaze down and spot the predator still seated at the same table. Sitting forward on the edge of his chair, the predator seems alert but not tense. It occurs to me that he probably does not really believe Sam will return. And maybe, just maybe, he doesn’t really want to encounter Sam. Sarah seemed afraid when she met Sam and she called in a lot of backup. It is doubtful the predator down there really wants to meet Sam on his own. Will he call for backup?

I glance around Sam’s apartment, which is not much larger than my place. A small kitchen is next to the window where I stand. Between the kitchen and the living room is one of those bar style counters with two tall chairs. No dining room. I turn to look in the opposite direction and find a small bedroom that is more like an alcove than a true room but it looks like the wall slides so the room can be hidden.

I go back to looking out the window and speculate whether or not Paul has had the time to inform the others. I study the predator still sitting in the café. It looks like the same guy we saw earlier but it’s hard

for me to be sure since I'm peering through glass. He still appears to be scrutinising the entrance of the apartment building. Did he call for backup while we were climbing the stairs?

"See anything?" Sam asks as he walks into the living room, zipping up his backpack.

"Just the one we saw earlier. But he is watching this place pretty closely."

Sam steps up and peers over my shoulder. "Has he done anything to indicate he's called for reinforcements?"

"No, but he could have done that while we were walking up the stairs."

"Ideas?"

I shrug, "Yeah, I've got lots of them but not many are useful."

"So, do we dash out the door?" Sam asks.

"Can we get to the roof?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay, then out the front door we go."

"This isn't the way I was thinking it would go."

"Things are never the way I think they will go." I respond with a smile.

"No, this is too dangerous for you. We're kind of trapped here."

"No, we're not. Look, give me your backpack. I'll carry it out. You leave in the same way you came in but this time head to Rue Saint-Dominique."

"That'll take me right past him!" Sam hesitates in the act of handing me his backpack.

"Exactly, just remember to put the sunglasses back on."

"Oh, here are your sunglasses. I have mine."

"Thanks," I respond, staring at the small backpack as an actual plan starts to form in my mind. "Pack your clothes in a suitcase and I'll take that too."

"That's too dangerous." Sam objects.

"No, that guy isn't looking for me, he's looking for you. Just pack quick and I'll be gone as fast as I can."

This time I follow Sam into his bedroom as he continues to object, "That guy Paul will tell them about you soon."

"So, move faster. When I leave, you stay up here and watch that predator—"

"Vampire."

“Whatever. Watch what he does when I leave. If he follows me or makes a phone call, you can phone me and let me know. I’ll duck into someplace with a lot of people.”

“Okay,” Sam jams clothes into his suitcase as fast as he can. “That makes sense. If you get away clean, I’ll follow.”

“I’m going to go back up to Rue l’Université. We’ll meet at Café le Dôme.” I watch Sam carefully as he zips up his suitcase. I can see he is going to object again.

“This is just too dangerous for you. I can take my backpack and just forget the clothes.”

I smile at him, “In two days you’ll be kicking yourself for leaving the clothes behind.”

“I’m serious,” he reiterates.

“Sam, if you walk out of here with a backpack he’s more likely to think it’s you because you came to get something. But, if you leave empty handed you won’t look so suspicious and you might be able to talk your way out.”

“Okay, but be careful.” Sam advises me as he finally rolls his suitcase to the door and passes me the handle. “I’ll watch from here to make sure he doesn’t follow you.”

“Okay, but don’t wait too long to follow.”

“If he follows me I’ll have to ditch him.”

“Just call if you have trouble losing him.” I grab the door handle and then stop. Looking back at Sam I say, “If he approaches you try playing it cool, like you don’t know what he is. Maybe that will fool him.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“See you soon,” I reply and pull the door open.



## Chapter 51

**Anxiously** waiting in Café le Dôme, I survey the crowds of people for Sam or predators. It has been a couple of hours since Sam and I parted. I cannot stop searching for him. I coerce myself to relax and take a sip of my wine while the sun sets. Frustration fills me as I realize that forcing myself to relax is not working. Once again, my eyes roam over the crowd and streets. I stare at the Eiffel Tower just visible over the roof of one of the buildings with worry clawing at my stomach. Sam drops into the seat beside me.

“Jesus Christ, I was worried.” I scold him. “You could have called.”

“Sorry,” he mutters but pauses as the waitress approaches our table. Sam checks what I am drinking and orders the house red. He eyes the waitress until she is out of earshot and then he continues, “I had to do some running to shake him.”

I grant him a dirty look, “You still could have called.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. The vampire stopped me, pretending to ask for directions.”

“And?”

“He didn’t seem to recognize me. You were right about that. But he wasn’t entirely convinced either because he followed me and made a phone call. I thought at first that he had called for backup but no one showed up, at least not before I managed to ditch him.”

“Maybe he just called to get someone to cover your place while he tracked you.”

Sam thinks about it for a bit before replying, “That makes sense. It took me a while to lose him in a way that seemed casual. I didn’t want to call you because I was worried that he might think I had an accomplice.”

That mollifies me a bit but I point out, “They’re going to find out about me anyway once that guy Paul talks to them.”

“Oh, right,” he looks a little sheepish. “If Paul is still alive.”

“Your backpack and suitcase are under the table.” I inform him.

“Merci.” Sam directs his comment to the waitress as she sets his glass down. As she walks away, he taps my leg and says, “Thanks, I couldn’t have done it without you. I’m really glad you suggested this.”

“It was fun,” I smile.

“Fun and informative and, of course, fucking scary. Maybe we didn’t learn more about them but we sure learned about ourselves.”

Excitement hums in my veins as I nod. I feel... powerful. I have been feeling so scared by them, scared and powerless. Learning that we are a match for their strength and speed really injects energy through me. Although it also worries me because I wonder what other parts of the legends are true. Is my father really one of those things?

Sam places his arm across the back of my chair and leans over to whisper in my ear. “I think we should try going back and killing one.”

Well that pops my inflating bubble of wellbeing. I pull away to stare at him, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“They’re vampires and we have the strength to kill them. I think we should.” He does not try to whisper in my ear again but he pitches his voice low.

“But why should we kill them?”

“Because they kill people.”

“We don’t know that.”

“What the hell? You know they kill people.” Although his voice is low, his shock and dismay seem to ring out over the café and street. “They can’t be held by a normal prison.”

I sit in silence.

Sam shifts in his seat, “They have infiltrated the police. At least you know they have in Vancouver. I’m guessing they can’t let themselves be taken otherwise people will learn about them. They must work hard to keep their activities hidden from the public.”

“But we don’t know that they are all murderers.” I argue.

“What about the ones we do know?” Sam’s eyes stay on me, waiting for an answer.

“Sam... I... I don’t know... I’m uncomfortable with the idea of killing and what you’re talking about is cold-blooded murder.”

“They are murderers.”

“We don’t know that they are all murderers besides that doesn’t make it okay for us to murder just because they do.” My words come out in a hoarse whisper.

“A good guy vampire, is that what you’re thinking? This isn’t TV.”

“No, it’s not TV and murder is wrong.”

“What if it’s to save others?”

“But we don’t know that’s what we’re doing.”

“They’re vampires. They drink blood. They... Kill... People.”

“We don’t know that.” I insist.

“They killed my wife,” he hisses, momentarily losing control. He pulls back from me and stares off down the street.

I sit back and wait in silence while Sam pulls himself back together. He stares at his hands, twisting and wringing on the table. Very gently, I ask, “Sam?”

“I...”

I slowly reach up and place one hand on top of his hands to still their twisting and then gently squeeze. Sam brings up his eyes to meet mine. “We’ve both lost people. I... I understand the need for vengeance but...” I stop unable to continue.

“What if we only go after the ones we know kill people?” he asks quietly.

I am not sure how to answer so I decide to go with the mechanics. “Sam, we don’t know how to kill them.”

“Stake through the heart.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“It’s what the legends say.”

“Yeah, and those legends are wrong about so many things. For instance, they can be seen in a mirror.” I point out.

“The legends are right about us.”

“And they are also wrong about us.” I point out. “The truth is we don’t know enough. Maybe a stake through the heart will kill them and maybe it’ll just piss them off. We have to know more first. After all, we can’t help anyone if we’re dead.”

Sam pauses and I carefully study his face. Rage, grief, sadness, apathy and several other emotions chase each other across his face but the one that eventually stays in place is resignation. I think I have managed to reach him. Again, I wonder what exactly happened to his wife. He said he has seen them drink. A shudder tries to run through my body but I repress it as hard as I can so Sam does not feel it through my hands, which still hold his. Did he watch them drink his wife’s blood? Is that why he is so convinced that they are vampires?

“You’re right.” Sam interrupts my thoughts. “We still don’t know enough to act, or at least not enough to make good decisions.”

Relief floods me as I nod and say, “We still need to be cautious.”

Inside I worry what will happen between Sam and me. I do not want to kill but I also do not want to be alone again. Those months without Josh were a lot scarier than the last few days. While I was alone, truly alone, I was afraid to sleep, afraid to let my guard down for even a moment. It was not just scary it was exhausting. In a brutally unpleasant flash of insight, I recognize I cannot go on like that. Eventually, I would make a mistake, drop my guard and that would get me killed. I shiver with that admission. Even with the things I learned today, I am afraid of fighting this battle alone. I know it is a battle because I am sure that the predators will not ignore me, as I would like to ignore them.

## Chapter 52

I sit in Café de l'Alma trying to get some work done. Yesterday put me behind in my programming and I need time alone so I can complete the project. When I glance up and see Andrew approach, I know I am not going to get much done. Maybe I can go home and kick Sam out of the apartment for a while. No, that probably is not a good idea. Even though we now know we are a match for an individual predator, there are several looking for Sam so we decided he should continue to hide out and not push his luck. Maybe I should not be out here either but I left this morning while Sam was in the shower to avoid an argument.

"Hey, how are you doing?" Andrew asks, pulling out a chair with a clear assumption that he will be welcome. His confidence has certainly grown. Only a couple of days ago he would have been more deferential, checking with me before taking a seat.

"Good, how about you?" I respond, stifling my annoyance. I really need to finish my project so I can get paid.

"Good," Andrew says while gesturing to the waiter.

"You look good." I reply while the waiter walks over to take Andrew's order. As I watch Andrew, I realize he looks better than good he looks amazing. I glance around and notice women and a few men staring at him.

"Have you seen Sam?" His question jolts me out of my study of how he has changed.

"No, you still haven't heard from him?" I reply and give up on the idea of completing my program today.

"No, and I am really worried. I tried his cell yesterday and it was not in service anymore."

"That's weird but it must make you feel better." I respond, trying to allay his fears while I shut down my laptop.

"Why?" Andrew asks with a surprisingly surly edge in his tone while he toys with a napkin.

"Well, because Sam must be okay if he cancelled his phone."

Andrew sits back in surprise. "I had not thought of that. No, maybe his phone is just broken."

I shake my head, “You said it wasn’t in service that means it’s cancelled. If he just broke his phone or lost it then the message would have been unavailable.”

Strangely, Andrew does not look relieved. If anything, he seems frustrated.

“How’s work going?” I ask, trying to figure out what was going on and wishing I brought a coat with me. The afternoon is cooling off as the sun drops lower.

“Oh, you know, it is work.” Andrew retorts, his mind clearly elsewhere.

“Ah, would you excuse me for a moment. I have to use the bathroom.” I say, getting up.

“Yeah, sure.” He responds with a wave of his hand, annoyance and anger visible on his face.

I walk into the Café and pull out my phone. Sam answers on the second ring.

“What’s up?”

“I don’t know.” I reply slowly. “I just bumped into Andrew and something weird is going on.”

“What’d mean?”

“I’m not sur—” I start but cut off as I turn and look out the window at Andrew.

“Ann? Are you there?”

“Oh my god, Andrew.” I mutter unwilling to believe my eyes.

“What about him?”

I turn and quickly walk into the back of the café where Andrew cannot see me. “Sam, he’s one of them.”

“One of wh— No! How?” Horror colours Sam’s voice, making it husky and dark.

“I don’t know.” I almost whisper the words.

“Are you sure he’s—?”

“Yes, I was just looking at him through the window. He’s one of them.” I peer back toward the front of the café and just manage to spot Andrew fidgeting at our table.

“Fuck.” Sam curses softly. “Sarah must have bit him or something...”

“What do we do?” I ask, wondering how this could have happened.

“I don’t know. You have to get away from him.”

“No,” I respond. “I think I should talk to him.” Part of me wants this to be a dream but I know it is not so I will listen to the other part that wants answers.

“That’s too dangerous.”

“No, no, listen.” I pause while I try to calculate how long would be a reasonable amount of time.

“Listen to what?”

“Sorry, listen, why don’t I bring him back to the apartment. Maybe we can get some answers that way.”

“And I’ll be here to help you. Yeah, okay.”

“No, you go out. He might suspect something if you’re there when we arrive.”

Silence on the phone before he murmurs. “I don’t like it.”

“Look, give me an hour and then you go back to the apartment.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone with him for an hour!” Sam’s voice strains almost crackling with tension.

“I won’t be. I’ll be at the Café most of the time. I can’t leave right away because that would be suspicious.”

“Christ, Ann, you’re fucking nuts...”

“I’m doing it anyway,” I respond, determined to learn how Andrew was changed. A silence stretches out between us and I can almost hear Sam’s frustration with me.

“Okay but I’ll be keeping an eye on you.” Sam declares and hangs up.

I take a deep breath and walk back out to the table. Comments, words, small talk; my mind is elsewhere. Now that I know what he is, I can see it while sitting beside him. Andrew is a predator. When and how did it happen? I surreptitiously check the time and try to think of an excuse that will entice Andrew to return to my apartment with me.

## Chapter 53

I unlock the door and enter but Andrew hangs back with one hand resting on the outside of the doorframe, as he asks, “Are you going to invite me in?”

I say with exaggerated politeness, “Please come in.” I wonder if that means the invitation rule is real.

He smiles and walks through the door to stand looking around. I take off my coat and watch as Andrew moves towards the fireplace, surveying the room. I hang up my coat and turn to offer to do the same for him but I stop still, frozen by the look on his face.

“So, there’s some information I need from you before we get started.” He says, as he moves closer to me and reaches out a hand to stroke my cheek.

“Information?” I suppress a shudder as he touches me. “What information?” Andrew does not seem afraid or worried about me. His whole body looks relaxed. His confidence flows out like water pouring out from a burst dam. The deluge swamps me but confidence is not what seeps into me, it’s worry and a little fear. Andrew takes another step closer, fingers stroking my cheek, clearing believing himself in charge of the situation and me.

He smiles as he puts both hands on my shoulders then Andrew gently backs me up against the wall. Fear slams into me at the same moment my back touches the wall. Andrew presses his body up against mine, then slowly leans forward, and licks my neck. I reach up and grab hold of his upper arms to push him away but stop when he says, “Don’t even try that.”

Panic stabs me but I push it down. “What the hell is going on?” I ask, playing for time.

Andrew pulls back enough to look me in the eyes. His smile changes a bit, to something a little creepy. “First the information. I think you know where Sam is and I want him.”

“Sam? What makes you think I know where Sam is?” I force the questions out.

“You know,” he begins with a thoughtful tone to his voice. “Before, when I first met you, I wanted you. But of course, I could not



make a move because Sam wanted you. Best friend and all that. So I held back even though I wanted to make love to you. That is how I thought about it. Make love to you.” He keeps me trapped against the wall by pressing his body against mine but he uses his left hand to run his fingers lightly over my lips. “Make love to you.” He repeats with a laugh that makes my skin crawl. “Now,” he continued. “What I want to do is fuck you. It is strange how different it feels.”

“What happened to you?” I whisper the question I want the answer to.

“I was freed. Freed.” He repeats as he holds himself against me and I feel his excitement mounting. I start to push him away.

“Don’t do that,” he says, kissing me hard.

I decide to use a bit more strength to push him away and manage to shove him a couple of steps back. “What the hell is the matter with you?”

He licks his lips and smiles again. There is, momentarily, a look of surprise on his face, which is replaced by an intensity, an ugliness that is frightening to behold.

I step forward, grab his shoulders and shake him hard, “How?” I want to scream but the word comes out as a whisper, a hoarse desperate sounding whisper.

Andrew chuckles so I shake him again and ask quietly but with more force in my voice, “How?”

“Sarah.”

I hear the sound of a key in the lock. Sam has arrived.

## Chapter 54

**Andrew** knocks my hands away from his shoulders and grabs me by the throat, hauling me forward into the living room, “Who is it?” he whispers intently.

Before I answer, the door swings open and, calling my name, Sam enters. Andrew’s smile turns nasty at the sound of Sam’s voice, nasty and pleased, as he peers over my left shoulder to stare at Sam.

“What the hell is going on here?” Sam asks from behind me.

Andrew’s smile gets even bigger but he does not answer so I do. “Well, Andrew came over for a drink but it turns out he’s a predator.”

Andrew’s eyes shift back to me. “Predator, I like that.”

“Let her go.” Sam’s words come out clipped and hard.

“Sure, in a moment.” Andrew drawls the words out and the arm he holds me with relaxes a bit. “Sarah warned me that you would be stronger than a human.”

“Sarah.” Sam makes it sound like a statement but I think it is a question.

Andrew gives me a curiously gentle shove away and confronts Sam. “Yeah, Sarah. She asked me to find you. Well, really it was more than asked. One unpleasant side effect.”

“How did Sarah turn you into this?” I reiterate, my hand going to my throat.

Andrew’s eyes flick to me and then back to Sam. “Are you hoping that I will change you?” Although he continues to watch Sam, Andrew directs his words at me. “Well, I might. It would be nice to have someone I control.”

“Control?” I probe. “What does that mean?”

“Yeah, that might be fun.” Andrew muses as if he has not heard me. “But there are rules and I am... constrained.”

“Why are you here?” Sam questions him, while moving a little farther away from me.

“I was looking for you,” Andrew answers in a voice full of innocence. He stands, confronting Sam with a confidence he never possessed before. How could I have missed his transformation?

“Why?” Sam and I demand at the same time.

“Well, Sarah wants me to kill you,” Andrew directs his answer to Sam in a flat unemotional voice.

## Chapter 55

“Why?” I croak the word out just as Andrew lunges for Sam, pounding him into the fireplace. I jump forward and seize Andrew’s arm as he raises it. He hisses, twists in my grip and knocks me backwards over the coffee table. My head hits the couch. Fortunately, the couch is soft enough that my head just bounces off the cushions. Sam manages to shove Andrew back a couple of feet while I slowly get up, keeping my eyes on Andrew. Vertigo slows my movements and my dream flashes through my mind. I take a deep breath slowly releasing it as I remember my dizzying run on my dream bridge. Fucking meaningless dreams, I shake my head to dispel the memories.

“Why?” Sam asks him, the tension making his voice sound strained as he straightens up and pushes himself away from the mantle. “Why does Sarah want you to kill me?”

Andrew affects an air of relaxation. “You are a dhampir.”

“A what?” I ask, wanting to look at Sam but I know it would be a bad idea to take my eyes off Andrew.

Andrew smiles and stands up straighter. “He is a dhampir. The half-blood offspring of a vampire that was stupid enough to allow a woman to live.”

Well that is that. Andrew’s words feel like a slap in the face. There is truth to the legends. I do not want to think about the implications now so I try to focus on Andrew, shutting out everything else in an effort to keep calm. We have one answer maybe we can get a few more.

“Sarah told me that we have to kill you.” Andrew continues.

“But why?” Sam’s voice sounds very small and it scares me into looking at him to make sure he is all right.

Andrew suddenly looks nervous for a moment before stepping forward, right arm swinging for Sam’s head. “Because you are an abomination.”

Andrew’s punch manages to connect with Sam’s head and then slam Sam into the fireplace. Sam goes down, blood on his face. I step forward thinking, “throat, stomach, and groin” are the weak points of

the body. Hit one of those places I tell myself. I use my right hand to backhand Andrew. Oddly, I hit him in the face. Stupid move.

Andrew takes a step back and focuses on me. "What the fuck?" he mutters.

I know I should continue to press the attack but I am not mentally prepared to do that. My mind screams at me, 'this is all a mistake'. We can stop this, somehow. I hear Sam getting to his feet beside me but I keep my eyes on Andrew.

"Can't we talk about this?" Sam asks in an undertone and out of the corner of my eye I see him wipe the blood on his face.

"No." Andrew glances back and forth between the two of us. "Sarah... Sarah is making me do this. I... I have no choice." Andrew looks edgy as he carefully guards himself against the two of us.

In a flash of insight, I realize my slap made Andrew decide that I need watching. Deciding I know a way to take advantage of that, I slowly start to move to my right, giving Sam more space. I circle Andrew, forcing him to keep an eye on both of us, while allowing Sam and me to approach from two sides.

With a quick glance at me and then at Sam, Andrew explains to Sam, "I have no choice. You do not know. I have to do what Sarah wants."

"What the hell? I thought you came here to get away from your mother controlling you so why are you letting Sarah tell you what to do."

Suddenly, Andrew lunges forward, grabs Sam by the throat, and throws him against the ladder, breaking it. Andrew pulls Sam forward a little causing the ladder to splinter into several pieces with a sound like breaking bones. His hands tightening around Sam's throat, Andrew holds him close to his face and grins a horrifying smile before slamming Sam through the ladder debris into the wall. A loud thump rings out when Sam's head smacks against the wall. Sam's eyes glaze over as Andrew's shoulders hunch up while he strangles Sam.

"You do not understand," Andrew mutters to Sam. "There is no choice. I have to do what she wants."

His words make me shudder as I search around for something to stop Andrew. Choking sounds amp up my desperation and fear and then my eye falls on the iron poker by the fireplace but I hesitate. If I hit Andrew in the head with that, I could kill him.

Garbled sounds escape as Sam tries to breathe. Andrew glares into Sam's eyes and ferociously whispers, "I hate her, but I have no choice. I... I did not want this."

The poker suddenly in my hands, I bring it down on Andrew's arms as hard as I can. A loud crack sounds as Andrew screams and releases Sam to stumble backwards several steps.

"Are you okay?" I ask Sam while surveying the damage I inflicted on Andrew.

Sam nods and pushes himself off the wall, the broken ladder pieces falling away in a clatter except one side which remains standing propped up by the beam across the ceiling. Sam slowly circles around behind me and then to my right while I keep my eyes on Andrew. Clearly broken, Andrew's left arm hangs at an odd angle. I think I managed to break through both bones in the left forearm but I am not sure I have done any damage to the right arm. The sight of his arm is rather sickening and knowing I inflicted the damage makes my stomach roll over.

"You can't continue," Sam's voice is calm as he speaks to Andrew. "So why don't you just talk to us? Maybe we can help you."

Andrew's eyes dart around the room but I cannot tell if he is looking for a way out or some weapon.

"Tell us what happened," I say, duplicating Sam's tone.

Andrew moves towards me but then changes direction and dashes to my right. Sam shoulders Andrew to shove him back, to block his escape. But the shove pushes Andrew off balance and he stumbles back several feet before falling against the wall, impaling himself on one of the broken pieces of the ladder.

"No!" I am not sure which of us shouts that. I drop the poker, which suddenly seems to burn my hands and rush to Andrew's side to help Sam support him as Andrew slowly crumples to the ground, pulling Sam to the floor with him.

I touch his face, "Andrew" is all I say and I do not know what I mean by it but I feel something heavy settle inside me.

"Why? God damn it, why?" Sam's voice is very quiet but intense as blood drips off his face onto Andrew.

"Sarah told me I had to." Andrew murmurs. "I wanted... You are a dhampir that means you can kill us so we have to kill you. They will be looking... for... you."

Frantic, I start to get up to find my phone but Sam's hand on my arm stops me.

"It's too late," Sam's voice sounds hoarse and scratchy and I look up at him to find tears mingling with the blood dripping off his face onto Andrew's body.

My eyes fall down to stare at Andrew and I notice how calm he appears in death. I smell something and the smell slowly grows stronger, a horrible smell and yet somehow familiar. For a moment, I am transported back to that terrible morning when I opened Patty's bedroom door to find her dead body in a room painted in blood. I lift my eyes from Andrew to Sam and when he meets my eyes, I see the guilt he feels written all over his face.

"It was an accident," I try comfort him, reaching over Andrew's body and placing a hand on Sam's shoulder. *Lame, inadequate, meaningless, hollow, empty words* form in my mind but I do not give voice to them because I know they will not help Sam in his torment.

He nods, his eyes holding mine for a moment before he resolutely looks down at Andrew. Sam swears, scrambling away from Andrew's body.

I glance down to find Andrew decomposing. Backing away as fast as Sam did, I stare at Andrew's body for a moment. "What the hell?" The words escape my mouth before I even think them.

"He said he was a vampire, aren't they supposed to turn to dust?" Sam's voice quivers.

I feel quivery too as I look back at Andrew's body and watch it decompose. "That's not exactly turning to dust."

"No," Sam replies. We both continue to stare at Andrew's body as it slumps down, breaking into pieces. Horror momentarily overwhelms me and sweeps me away, like the swell of an ocean wave. I sit in my apartment but watch the disappearing shoreline of reality caused by the riptide of emotion dragging me out to sea. My vision dims and, from far away, I hear Sam's voice say, "We have to figure out some way to get rid of the body."

Those words stun me. A hammer of coldness and logic pounds my small raft floating out on the ocean of illusion. Sam's words are so cold, so callous and so at odds with what I feel. A jumble of emotions knot up, making it difficult to sort out what I do feel but I know it is not the cold dispassion of Sam's voice. It had not crossed my mind to get rid of the body. I turn to Sam to protest and see tears in his eyes.

My vision blurs as I crawl over to him. It seems to take forever to reach him, as if he is moving away from me while I inch towards him. I see him in a tunnel of darkness that threatens to overwhelm me before I reach him. Tears fill my eyes making Sam a blob somewhere on a distant horizon. Many hours later, I reach Sam and put my arms around him. He latches onto me with a desperation that feels like he is grasping a lifeline to save himself from drowning. Maybe we are both adrift on the same ocean of horror. My mind swirls around in circles.



## Chapter 56

“We need to get rid of the body,” Sam says again, as his grip on me eases off. I do not know how long we sat there holding each other but I notice stiffness in my limbs as I try to move away from Sam. His hand remains on my leg for a moment as we gaze at each other. I have an irrational urge to kiss him. Then a look of discomfort crosses his face and Sam glances towards the kitchen, snapping the impulse. We have to focus on what to do next.

“I think it would be safer if we just run.” I whisper.

“Run? That will just bring the cops after us.” Sam replies in an equally quiet voice. As if, after all the violence, keeping our voices down will keep us from being discovered.

“The apartment isn’t in my name and you’re not connected to it. They won’t know to look for us.”

“They’ll figure it out. It’s too big a risk.”

“What?” I feel stunned, “And trying to ditch a body isn’t a big risk?”

Sam peers at the floor, he seems to be considering my idea, but his next words disabuse me of that notion. “No one has come to the door to ask what was going on so we have a bit of time to decide.”

“Are you kidding? Maybe people don’t want to get involved in what they think is domestic violence but the smell will bring people pounding on the door.”

“Yeah, but I just mean we can take an hour or two to figure out our next move.”

“Oh, okay,” I reply, although I’m not happy with Sam’s idea. Just ditching Andrew’s body and then hanging around and hoping nobody pins it on us sounds crazy to me. The smell does not seem as bad as before but I figure we are just getting used to it. I get up and, keeping my eyes averted from Andrew’s body, open the window over the computer table. I stand there staring out at the building across the street with my mind blank. I hear Sam get up and approach me. After a moment, a hand rests on my shoulder.

“We have to figure out what to do but I think whatever we do we should do it together.” Sam pauses and I hear him take a deep breath.

“Ann, you’re the only person I know who is like me and I can’t lose you. I don’t want to face this on my own and you’re the only person who would believe me.”

Relief sweeps over me as I hear those words. True, Josh had believed me, but Josh was vulnerable because he could not see the vampires. Sam is a real partner. Someone I can count on, who can take care of himself, and help me get some real answers. And I want those answers. In fact, I desperately want those answers. I need to know the reason behind Patty’s murder. Why did the vampire in Amsterdam ask me to give her Josh? Did Andrew need to be invited into my apartment tonight? What else can these fucking vampires do? Yes, I need some answers. I feel that there is another reason for my reluctance but I cannot quite pull it out. I will think about it later. I twist around to gaze over my shoulder at Sam, “Okay, we figure out what to do together.”

As I make my statement, Sam visibly relaxes and flashes his dimple. “Okay, we need to figure out —” he begins but stops as he turns to look at Andrew’s body. Something on his face makes me turn to look as well.

Andrew’s body is still breaking apart. We stare at each other for a moment. “Maybe you’re right,” I whisper. “Maybe we can just dispose of the body.”

Sam’s hand grips my arm. “I can’t believe this is happening,” he mutters.

I nod even though Sam is not looking at me.

## Chapter 57

“Where are your garbage bags?” Sam asks me his tone flat and unemotional.

“I don’t have any. Or nothing big enough to fit a...” I cannot finish.

“Then we’ll have to go out to get some.” He sounds practical and distant as if he has to work hard to achieve the equilibrium needed to get him through the next few minutes.

I nod and lean the broom up against the wall where the ladder once stood. I feel bleak as we gather our coats to head out into the evening. Sam pauses at the door, “Should we leave the window open?”

I just look at him and open the door. A suddenly wash of anger moves through me as I walk through the door into the hallway.

Sam follows me muttering, “I could use a drink.”

Irrationally, Sam’s words just make me angrier. I try not to let it show as we descend the stairs and step out into the night. As soon as we reach the corner, Sam informs that he is going to find something to drink and dashes off. Although it is nearly midnight, it does not take me long to buy the bags so I end up waiting on the corner for Sam to come back. I still cannot believe we are sticking around. Should I run without him? I stand there, unable to move because I cannot really tear myself away from Sam. I search the streets but do not see him anywhere.

Vampires. Andrew confirmed my worst fear; my father was or is a vampire. What did my mother go through? I guess I now understand her fear of me. Even if she does not know what he was, I must have been a constant reminder. Did he rape her? Was he going to kill her? What saved her? Did my father allow her to live?

The sound of footsteps jolts me out of my reverie. It’s Sam. He approaches and I fall into step beside him as we head back to my apartment. I wonder what is going through Sam’s head. Is he thinking of his mother? He has never mentioned her to me. Was his childhood happy or more like mine?

When we enter the apartment, we find a large pile of dust on the floor where Andrew used to be. We exchange a look and quickly close

the door behind us. Both of us stand still unable to move, like flies caught in amber, just staring at the pile of dust. As we stare, the pile of dust visibly collapses a bit smaller. We look at each other for a moment and I can see my thoughts echoed on Sam's face; how small will the pile of dust get? Slipping out of our coats, we continue to stare at the pile. I wonder where to begin and, for a moment, I have an urge to run but when I look at Sam, that urge dies. I am afraid to be alone again. Finally, Sam walks over to the dining table and carefully sets his bottles down. Once again, we stare at each other without speaking in an endless tableau of fear and inaction.

Sam turns away and enters the kitchen. When he reappears, he holds the dustpan. He slowly and carefully sets the dustpan on the floor and then takes a couple of cautious steps over to Andrew's remains. He looks... beaten, tired. His whole body screams in pain, silently. He slowly raises his eyes to meet mine and then, with determination and sorrow, he starts sweeping. A few minutes later, I open a garbage bag as Sam sweeps the ashes into a dustpan. The pile of dust is smaller now. Andrew is disappearing from our lives, slowly disappearing and taking pieces of Sam and me with him.

"Wait," I say to Sam abruptly uneasy.

He gives me a look. It is just a look. There is no question in his eyes, no thought behind his gaze and no impatience in his attitude. It is just a look.

"I don't think we should use a garbage bag."

"Why?"

"I don't know." I hesitate. "It just feels... wrong... disrespectful, maybe... I don't know... Let me look for something else."

Sam continues to stand very still and an odd look emerges on his face.

"Wha—" I stop because I started to say what is wrong but there is so much wrong that I change my mind and say. "Uh, what is it?"

"I just want this over," Sam states without any emotion colouring his voice but his right hand starts to shake.

"Sam," I begin very gently. "Andrew was your friend. We can take a few minutes to show him we cared. Maybe at the end he was a vampire but before that, he was a person. Maybe... Maybe we should think about it as burying that person rather than this vampire."

Sam just stares blankly at the dust for a moment while the shaking in his hand stops and then he curtly nods. "You're right. Andrew got

mixed up in this because of me. It's the least I can do." He puts down the dustpan and leans the broom against the wall next to the broken ladder then glances helplessly around the room. Sam cannot do this. It is too much for him.

"Why don't you go wash your hands?" I offer as Sam's eyes stare sightlessly at the floor. After a moment, his eyes come up to meet mine. He nods and stiffly walks into the bathroom as I gently sweep the dust into the pan.

I stop for a moment and listen to Sam washing up in the bathroom. He starts the shower. I stare at the pile of dust. Just a pile of dust I repeat to myself and then start cleaning. I need a decent container for Andrew's ashes so I scan the room and spot a vase on the mantle. That will work I tell myself and set about finishing the job. After I sweep up all the dust and place it in the vase, I set the vase next to the fireplace. A thin film of dust that I cannot sweep up covers the floor so I grab a damp cloth out of the kitchen. As I wipe down the floor, I am thankful that I do not have carpets. Vacuuming at this time of night would be rude and yet I would not want to go to sleep with Andrew's ashes still on the floor.

Once I have wiped the floor clean I walk into the kitchen. I experience a moment of revulsion as I rinse out the cloth in the kitchen. I cannot take my eyes off the cloth. Dust, ashes flowing down the drain. Panic grabs me, pins me with my hands in the running water. I cannot use the cloth again so I throw it into the garbage. I stare at my hands the memory of dust dry and powdery caking them horrifies me. I quickly wash my hands with dish soap. Then I wash them a second time. I have to screw up my courage to enter the living room again.

I carefully place the vase back on the mantel of the fireplace and stare around the room. Sam emerges from the bathroom and glares for a moment before weariness causes his shoulders to slump. He moves slowly to the dining table and glowers at the bottles of whiskey sitting there. After a moment, he gives himself a shake and strides purposefully into the kitchen. I quickly walk into the bathroom to wash up. I realize washing my hands is not enough so I take a shower. When I step out of the bathroom, Sam is standing there with two glasses in his hands. He holds one out to me and as I take it, he raises his glass in salute.

"To Andrew," he says quietly.

“To Andrew,” I murmur and raise my glass before talking a swallow of whiskey. It is awful, tasting like a peat bog smells.

Sam downs his entire glass, picks up the bottle and walks unsteadily over to the couch. I slowly follow him, worry eating at me. I check the second bottle on the table but it is still full. I examine the bottle in his hand but it is full so Sam’s unsteady walk must be stress.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I’m... fine,” he responds but I definitely think he has looked better. “Ann, have you thought about what being a dhampir means?” he asks as I sits on the couch beside him.

“Yes,” I respond slowly. “I’ve thought a lot about what it might mean to have a vampire father.”

“Why would a vampire allow a woman to have a child if the child can see them?” Sam asks, pouring another shot into his glass. “See them and, more importantly, kill them.”

“I’m not really sure. I guess another question to ask would be, do they allow it to happen or is it a... mistake.”

“Andrew sure made it sound like it was a mistake. What did he call me? An abomination.” Sam lifts his drink and downs it in a single gulp.

“Or maybe that was just meant to be trash talk.” I worry that came out a bit flip. What the hell is the matter with me?

“Trash talk?” Sam’s voice is dry while he pours another drink for himself.

I glance over at him to see he is actually smiling. I shrug, “What the hell do I know. It could have been trash talk.”

He laughs but there is a bit of an edge to it. “Join me,” he gestures to the glass in front of me. “It’s a good whiskey.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever had whiskey.” I comment as I pick up the glass and stare into the liquid.

“Well, cheers!” and Sam taps his glass to mine.

I sip, “Blah, sorry but that’s disgusting.”

“What are ya talkin’ about darling, ‘tis good whiskey.” Sam lays on the accent quite thick and downs another drink.

“It tastes like a peat bog,” I comment.

“You drink a lot of peat bogs, then?” He pours another glass. His accent now sounds very Irish.

I smile at him. “Okay, it tastes the way a peat bog smells.”

Sam grabs my knee and places his chin on it to look at me, “What if that’s how they really think of us?”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“What if vampires really think we are abominations?”

“Well, sticks and stones. I’m sure I’ll get over it.” Sam’s eyes stay on me as I say that. “Sam, of course they would hate us if we are the threat the legends say.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true.” He lifts his chin off my knee and turns to stare at the vase on the mantel. “Andrew didn’t sound like he wanted to do it.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“He kept repeating that Sarah was making him do it.” Sam’s voice is soft and his eyes far away.

I make no comment but wait for him to continue because I can see Sam wants to talk, needs to talk. He downs the contents of his glass and pours another one.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe they aren’t all killers.” He says, raising his glass but this time he only sips it.

“Maybe,” I reply as Sam throws back his drink.

“You’re not keeping up,” He tells me and gently bites my knee.

“I was thinking you should slow down. Once this stuff hits you you’re going to be wasted.”

“Nope, never happen.” Sam assures me and pours another whiskey.

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you noticed how hard it is to get drunk?”

I think about it for a moment. “Well... I’ve never really tried to get drunk.”

“I used to think I just... honestly I don’t know what I thought but now I’m wondering if the difficulty is because I’m a dhampir. You know, superhuman so I need a superhuman amount of alcohol.” Silence reigns for a moment and then Sam whispers, “They killed her right in front of me. Drank her dry... Tied me up... they rap— all, right in front of me. I didn’t have the strength to break free. Why?”

Sam places his forehead on my knee and continues, “Why didn’t I have the strength then? Why do I have it now? I tried but...”

How do I answer that? I do not know why I was not fast enough to save Josh. I should have been able to catch her on the streets but I did not. Why? Was it just that I did not know I could? There must be a

reason. I know I wanted to save Josh and I feel certain that Sam wanted to save his wife. So why were we unable to do so?

I reach out and touch his hand on my knee. Sam clutches my hand tightly, his face still hidden against my knees. He sits up and pours another whiskey. Tossing that one back, he pours another and lifts it to drink while staring at the broken ladder leaning against the wall. "Maybe I can give you a boost up to your bed." His words are a clear indication he wants to change the subject.

I force a laugh, "You know, I'd be willing to try jumping but I'm afraid of bumping my head on the ceiling."

We both gaze at my broken ladder. "We can find you a new one tomorrow." Sam says quietly.

"Sure, but that won't get me up to my bed tonight so let's try the boost."

Sam gives me a smile, "Or maybe a chair would work better. No, I have an idea. Stand on your computer table and I'll support you up the next step."

"What am I supposed to do step on your shoulder?"

"Sure, that might work." He laughs, sounding a little drunk.

Sam holds up the whiskey bottle. "Not enough," he complains. "There's just not enough to make it right again." He tips the bottle back and drinks all of it.

I silently watch him place the bottle on the coffee table; slowly, carefully he adjusts its position.

"Ann, what the hell are we going to do?"



## Chapter 58

I do not know how to respond to that. I watch Sam stare at the whiskey bottle. A thought occurs to me.

“Are you going to tell Andrew’s mother?” I ask.

“I... I don’t know.” Sam continues to stare at the bottle. “I think Andrew would prefer to remain here. If I talk to his mother, she would want his body... How would I even tell her?”

I lift my eyes to the vase on the mantel. “How about spreading his ashes on the river?”

Sam looks at me, “Yes, that’s... I think he would like that. He really loved Paris. He often told me how much he loved it here and how lucky he thought he was that he was able to transfer to a city like Paris.” Sam’s eyes slowly drift over to the vase. “He loved being so far from his mother. He would hate to be sent back to her.”

“*Freed.*” I whisper.

“What?”

“Something Andrew said before you arrived. When I asked him what had happened to him he said he was freed,” I reply, remembering the intensity with which Andrew spoke the word.

“But he said Sarah was making him do it.”

“Maybe he just meant he was freed from his mother.”

Sam eyes remain on the vase, after a moment he nods. “So tomorrow we spread his ashes on the river. Won’t that look a bit strange?”

“We’ll have to do it late at night.”

Sam nods. All his energy is gone. If he is feeling the alcohol at all, I cannot see any signs of it. He picks up his glass and the bottle and takes them over to the dining table. I watch him as he turns to look out the open window. The evenings are cooling off and a faint breeze blows cool air into the apartment. The noise of the city continues, the sounds of normal people doing normal things. Sam moves over to the window, weaving a bit. The alcohol must be affecting him a little. He reaches up and slowly and very deliberately closes the window. Shutting the world out, cutting us off from normal activity and normal life, isolating the two of us in our own private hell.

Later, lying in my bed staring up at the ceiling I think about the things Sam told me. His wife killed in front of him while he was unable to help. If we have the power to stop vampires, why were we unable to stop them from killing people we love? Why did they appear when we confronted Paul? Still so many things we do not have the answers to. Andrew had settled the question of whether or not those predators were vampires but that still tells us so little.

I remember Andrew standing in the doorway asking to be invited in. Did that mean they need to be invited in or was he just playing a game? He kept saying that Sarah was making him kill Sam but was Andrew's reluctance because he did not want to do it or because he was afraid to face a dhampir. Paul was certainly afraid. And Sarah clearly didn't want to face Sam. She used proxies to go after him. In fact, we have not seen Sarah since the night of the party. Sarah was able to send in others to do something they were afraid to do. Did that mean she was somehow in control in Paris? Was she the prefect of Paris? From what the vampire in Amsterdam said, a prefect does have a certain amount of control over the vampires in their area.

Suddenly a part of the conversation between Mr Nordic and James flashes in my mind.

"I followed the rules. I called the cleaners. They did not have time." Mr Nordic reiterated while Josh and I exchanged stunned looks.

"Yes, but you called them too late for them to have time." James shot back.

"I had some trouble. Work called." Mr Nordic said in a flat voice.

"You still should have called immediately. Mistakes like that put us all in danger." James continued in a soothing tone. "Look, you are in an important position and we would not want to you to jeopardise that but the cleaners are important too."

"Yes, of course, James." was the sarcastic reply. "But they still sent you to warn me."

"It is protocol." I heard James state while Josh and I stared at each other, not moving.

"Okay, I have received the message." Mr Nordic replies. "Everyone can relax; no one is going to learn anything about us."

I feel surprise at how much more I understand the comments they made on that night. James referenced 'the cleaners'. He must have meant that they have a crew who go in and clean up the bodies. The idea makes me shudder; a crew whose purpose is to dispose of bodies

left by vampires. Of course, the comment about Mr Nordic being in an important position became clear to me a long time ago. But Mr Nordic's comment 'but they still sent you to warn me' indicates that others, perhaps higher up, sent James to deliver the warning. That would make James just a messenger.

The vampire in Amsterdam said the prefect in Vancouver had told her about me. I assumed it was James that she was referring to but maybe it wasn't. I struggle to recall the conversation clearly, placing myself back in time, the moment I entered the café.

I stood just behind the hunter when she commanded Josh, "Tell me your names."

Josh shook his head and horror filled me when I saw the blank expression in his eyes.

"Josh?" I addressed him.

The vampire twisted to look at me and then hissed. "Ah, the prefect in Vancouver told me he had encountered you."

Encountered me; that could only be James and he definitely sounded like he was the one in charge. If James was the prefect in Vancouver and he acted as a messenger then the others Mr Nordic referred to must be higher up. I wonder if they used the same ancient Roman hierarchy. It might be useful to know the various levels of their... organisation. The vampire in Amsterdam was clearly worried about how her prefect would react to her actions but we could not be sure that the same restraint exists for a prefect. Or should I be thinking of them as Prefects.

I shake my head. What a stupid thing to focus on; prefects or Prefects. Maybe I am focusing on things like that so I do not have to think about the other confirmation Sam and I had tonight. Andrew telling us that we are the half-human offspring of a vampire and a human. Somewhere out there is my vampire father. A gut-wrenching feeling always accompanies that thought. Hard on the heels of that thought always follows a horrible image of what my mother must have gone through. God! I scream silently inside my head. I do not want to think. I want to sleep.

I try to think of something else, to relax. My mind just runs in circles and, after a while, I just accept that sleep will elude me. Oddly, that thought does relax me and I begin to drift off. At some point during that half-awake, half-asleep phase I realize I misunderstood what Mr Nordic said. Just because the "others" sent James to talk to Mr

Nordic that did not mean they had power over James. It could just mean that the others had complained about Mr Nordic's actions. Hell, maybe the cleaners protested to James that they did not have time to get their job done.

## Chapter 59

**Dazzling** sunlight fills my eyes and I close them against the brilliance. I lie there a moment longer, breathing, enjoying the warmth, and then roll over onto my hands to discover green grass as I open my eyes. I push myself up to my knees and peer around. Green grass stretches out in every direction as far as I can see. I get to my feet and rotate in a circle, noting flowers and butterflies all around me. I hear a... noise that sends a spasm of tension up my spine, making my muscles go taut.

I slowly start to move but a feeling of being watched crawls over my skin. I peer around, looking for anyone or anything that may be watching but there is nothing but green grass as far as I can see. Making a full circle, I notice that the light seems dimmer. I look up at a clear blue sky. No clouds block my view of the sun directly overhead. The eerie feeling of being stalked creeps over my skin like insects. As I turn in another circle a sound in the distance yanks my attention back to one particular area, but without any landmarks I cannot take my eyes off it or I will lose the spot. I start walking but then stop for moment as the unsettling feeling of eyes following me grows stronger. I hear the noise again and my feet are moving in that direction before I even think about it.

I think I am walking in a straight line but I cannot be sure. Nothing changes as I continue to move toward the horizon. I stop and check my shadow on the ground but it is still the same; the sun has not moved. Reluctance fills me; I do not want to move. I stand, weaving back and forth on my feet, peering around at the sameness of my surrounds. The sun grows a little dimmer causing me to glance up, searching for a cloud. Nothing has changed so I take a deep breath and force my feet to move.

Hours later, tired and thirsty, nothing has changed. I wonder if I have been walking in circles. I remember reading that without landmarks people will walk in circles. I stop moving. Nothing. No sound, no wind, no changes. I turn in a circle suddenly afraid I have missed a landmark but it is all the same endless field of green grass, white daisies, blue lupines, and butterflies. The sun grows dimmer. I am afraid to

look up afraid that there will be no reason why the sun dimmed. I sneak a peek at the sun like a child surreptitiously trying to watch TV by peeking into the living room after they were sent to bed. Nothing covers the sun. My feet move in a stumbling fashion as fear tingles up my spine. Each time I stop the sun dims. No, it must be my imagination.

My feet stop dead. Something is different, something... changed. I turn and examine everything I can see. Nothing. Nothing but green grass, white daisies, blue lupines and... and something red. The sun dims, sending a shiver through my body. I glance up at the sun as I force myself to walk over to the red... thing. The distance seems to grow, making the journey longer than it should be. It is a... flower. Brilliant red, the size of two hands, it bobs in place as if being blown about by wind but the air is perfectly calm. Dead calm. The sun dims. I peer around seeking other red flowers but everything else is the same. I am reluctant to leave the flower, the only landmark, the only difference as far as I can see. The sun dims. I search for help, direction, something, anything. I turn several circles, making myself dizzy in an effort to find something, anything different. Panic seizes me as I spin searching for a way out of this... snow globe. That is what it feel like; a snow globe. I move but nothing changes. The sun dims. Nothing changes except the red flower, my touchstone, my only landmark on a featureless field. My eyes drop down to gaze at the flower but I jump back in horror as the petals fall off one by one. No! I leap forward to catch the petals as if that will keep them on the flower. On my knees, I cup my hands around the flower but the petals drift slowly to the ground as if the law of gravity has changed allowing the petals to sink at their own rate. The last petal floats to the ground and a scream seems to rip open the sky.

I am on my feet running away from the sound. I hear nothing but the pounding of my blood and the soft thumping of my shoes through the grass. Another scream rips open the sky directly in front of me. I change my direction trying to escape the sound and the snow globe. Another scream slashes through my ears. Again, the sound is directly in front of me. I veer off on a new course. Another scream cleaves the air straight in front of me. I have to twist hard to find a path that heads away from the screams. I run, my breath coming in dry painful gasps. Another scream, I trip jerking my hands out in front of me to save my face and wake up with a start in bed.

My heart pounds while I stare up at the ceiling. Fear courses through my body as I think about the dream. Trapped, trapped in a snow globe. Or trapped with murder, vampires, and a body to get rid of. No matter how I ran I could not get away.

## Chapter 60

In the morning Sam and I do not speak. We make breakfast in silence. We eat breakfast in silence. We clean up after breakfast in silence. It hovers over us all morning. The silence consumes us. The trapped feeling of the dream sits on me like a heavy blanket. Sam picks up the pieces of the broken ladder and turns them over in his hands. His close examination makes me wonder if he is searching for Andrew's blood on one of the pieces. There is not any. I guess the blood turned to dust at the same time Andrew did.

I turn to stare at my desk for a moment and then down at my laptop tucked away in my backpack but I know I will not be able to work, not today, not with what we have to do. Inside my backpack are two laptops, Josh's and mine — I cannot give up Josh's laptop although it is completely useless to me. I never asked Josh what his password is so it sits there and yet I cannot let it go. Just like I can't give up his passport; they are all I have left of him.

Last night's dream left me with an uneasy feeling, making it hard for me to form words. Sam has a tired, worn look as if a heavy burden landed on him, bowing him down. I watch Sam for a few minutes, noting his reluctance to talk. The silence holds us in a tight grip while my mind runs in circles. There are so many things we need to talk about but today is just not the day for it.

Today we have to bury Andrew.

"I guess we should go get you a new ladder," Sam says startling me out of my reverie.

I nod and, without saying another word, we prepare to leave. A quick look outside shows a dark and gloomy sky so I grab my umbrella as well as a jacket. We stroll through the streets in a leisurely way because I do not know where to buy a new ladder and I am not in a hurry. I feel relief at getting out of the apartment for a while. Meandering around with no fixed direction gives me time to think and my mind runs over the conversation with Andrew from the night before. I guess I learned a lot but the knowing does not make me feel better. Once again, I wish I had yesterday back. Yesterday felt so carefree compared to today. I wonder if a day will come where things begin to feel easier.



After a while, I understand Sam does have a destination in mind and we enter a hardware store. Wandering through the store in silence, Sam and I end up separated when he indicates that he will search for a ladder. I spot some paint and, realising we will have to paint my new ladder white like the old one I make a gesture toward the paint section letting Sam know where to find me. I head into the paint section thinking about how little we have spoken this morning and I see... him.

I have to tear my eyes away from him in order to avoid attracting attention. Slipping down an aisle, I try surreptitiously to watch him. He is not a vampire but he is not human so I have no idea what he is. He is... otherworldly. There is no way I can ever use that term to describe a vampire again; not now that I have seen him. He radiates sex appeal. I see other women, and one guy, affected by it as he walks past them. He rather reminds me of a guy I saw in Amsterdam but only sort of. The guy in Amsterdam still seemed human but this guy...

He has black hair and beautiful dark skin that almost glows. I follow him down an aisle pretending to look at paint colours while trying to see his eyes clearly. I get lucky and our eyes meet. As soon as that happens, my Canadian reflexes kick in and I automatically smile. He smiles back. Dark green eyes like cool shade in a deep verdant forest on a hot day hold my eyes captive for a moment. Recognition enters his eyes and his smile broadens. Somehow, I know he has identified me as a dhampir but he is clearly not worried about it. Perhaps six one or six two, he is tall and lithe his whole body projecting a lovely strength and grace. He is more like the epitome of a perfect man than he is a man.

I follow him through the aisles while scanning for Sam. The man glances back and smiles at me again. My eyes dart around, searching for Sam. I want Sam to see this guy and tell me I am not crazy. Even after the things, I have seen this guy is something completely different. He turns down an aisle and I follow, trying to keep him in sight until I find Sam. Maybe the two of us can talk to him and find out what the hell he is. I turn the corner and enter the aisle to find it empty of people. He must have seen me and run. Damn. I dash to the end of the aisle and collide with Sam as he walks around the corner.

“What the hell?” Sam asks, moving the ladder he holds to his side and out of the way.

“Sorry, I was following a guy,” I tell him peering in both directions. “Which way did he go?”

“What guy?”

“The guy who just came out this aisle,” I respond, impatiently.

Sam gives me an odd look, “No one came out of this aisle.”

“What the hell? That can’t be. He wasn’t that far ahead of me. You must have seen him.”

“No one came out of the aisle.” Sam insists. “What the hell is going on?”

“I wish to god I knew.” I reply. “Let’s pay for the ladder and get out of here.”

“Are you going to tell me about it?”

“Yes, but not here.”

Sam nods and as we start walking. As we return down the same aisle I just ran up Sam says to me, “Didn’t you get white paint for the ladder?”

“Uh, no, sorry, that’s where I was when...” I feel flustered as I lead Sam back to the paint department. It takes us a few minutes to pick out a quart of paint and the whole time my mind keeps returning to my encounter with... well whatever he is.

Once we are out on the street I try to describe what I saw but words fail me especially when I try to describe those incredible eyes.

“And you’re sure he wasn’t a...” Sam pauses and glances around the crowded street.

“Yes, I’m positive.” I confirm with an emphatic nod and we start walking home again.

“And you think he saw you?” Sam asks, carrying the ladder upright so he will not hit anyone with it. I carry the paint supplies so Sam has both hands to handle the ladder as we stride down the crowded sidewalks.

“I’m certain he did. He looked at me and smiled. I think... I had the impression that he knew what I am.”

“Next time phone me or send a text.”

I stop dead in the street stunned by Sam’s simple comment. “God, I’m such an idiot.” I shake my head and start walking again. “Why the hell didn’t I think of that?”

“Maybe because it caught you by surprise.” Sam offers.

“Yeah, we can’t afford to be stupid like that.”

Sam is silent while we walk. The silence continues with us to the end of the block as Sam manages to keep the ladder from smacking anyone in the head.

“You’re right,” He says quietly. “We have to remember to call for backup.”

Backup? I do not like the sound of that but he is right. We will both have to get into the habit of calling for backup or one of us will wind up dead.

“Ann,” the way Sam says my name I know he is looking for confirmation that I will do it in the future.

I nod, “Yes, I agree. I’ll try to remember next time.” I smile at Sam in order to reassure him just as we arrive at the door to my building.

Sam smiles back, “Yeah, I guess it’s just remembering when you’re in the middle of a shock.”

“It was definitely a shock,” I respond while getting the door open and holding it as Sam manoeuvres the ladder inside. I stay well back as Sam ascends the stairs because the ladder appears to be after my head. A few bangs and near misses later we reach my floor and I scoot past Sam while he holds the ladder still so I can open the apartment.

Once we are back in my apartment, we go through all the details I can recall about my strange encounter as I busy myself with painting the ladder. Sam picks up the pieces of the broken ladder and examines them. I think that he intends to toss them out but instead he pulls out a chair from the table with a couple of the smaller pieces in his hands. He studies them again and then sets one side. Reaching into the store bag, he pulls out a knife and starts whittling the wood. I look away and focus on my painting because I am pretty sure I know what he is making.

I finish the first coat of paint and check outside. It is raining, not hard but the rain has certainly cooled things down. I want to close the window but the smell of the paint is still a bit too strong. Other than discussing the guy I encountered, Sam and I have remained quiet throughout the day. I don’t think either one of us is looking forward to tonight.

I go into the kitchen to get a glass of water and as I open the cupboard it occurs to me that the silence has not been an uncomfortable one but rather just a mutual understanding that we each need time to think. A part of me still wants to run. The trapped feeling of my dream hovers over me like someone’s hand that is a hair’s breath away from

my back. I just do not believe we can stick around here. I pour a second glass of water for Sam and take it into the dining room. I place the glass on the table by Sam and then walk over to sit on the couch, staring at the new ladder.

“Do you think midnight will be late enough?” Sam asks.

“Yes, that should be fine.” I reply and glance up at the vase with Andrew’s ashes.

## Chapter 61

At midnight, we set out towards the Eiffel Tower, both of us continuing the silence. Sam decided that Andrew would like to have his ashes spread near that famous landmark so we plan to spread the ashes on the river as near the tower as we can. We walk through streets wet from the rain earlier in the evening. The temperature has cooled off a lot — the end of summer and the end of Andrew.

As we pass Café l'Alma, I see two guys who radiate sex appeal sitting outside at one of the small tables. They both seem familiar but I cannot place them. They remind me of... I cannot pull it out of my memory but the feeling lingers. One of the guys glances my way and when our eyes meet, I feel sure I have met him somewhere before. In fact, I think I see recognition in his eyes, recognition and surprise. I glance at his companion and he seems familiar as well but not in the same way. An image of the man in the hardware store flashes in my mind and I realize they remind me of him only they look human. They are both very sexy but human sexy, not otherworldly sexy. Or maybe it would be better to describe them as humanish sexy. In the same way that Sam's good looks are humanish good looks and not vampirish. I wonder how many kinds of creatures are out there.

Sam and I keep walking into the park and then turn towards the river. Suddenly it hits me. The companion was John. The guy who saved the woman named Ann on the night I met Sam. Knowing that still does not help me place the other guy and he is the one who seems more familiar than John does.

Sam pauses to stare up at the tower. "I remember when I arrived in Paris. Andrew picked me up from the airport."

Sam words snap me out of my contemplation of the two guys at the restaurant. I gaze at him as he continues to stare at the tower.

"It felt like a new lease on life." His words are soft and sad. "It was away from everything that had been going on back home. All the horror I lived through. And when I got here I thought I could relax, that I had gotten away from it. Andrew encouraged me to come, said it would be a good break for me." Sam's turns a bit dry with irony at that last sentence.

I feel a little out of place. I did not know Andrew that well and yet here I am one of only two people at his “funeral”. Andrew deserved better in life. Actually what Andrew deserved was a life. A life lived, whole, complete and long. Melancholy infuses me, seeping into every pore as I think that Andrew was only one of the people I have known who deserved more life.

“Andrew was really happy here. I don’t think I’ve seen him so happy in his life.” Sam’s eyes meet mine, “I don’t think Andrew ever spoke to his mother once he was here. He would ignore her calls and I’m sure he never called her.” Sam twists and his eyes drift back to look up at the tower and he quietly mutters, “I’ve never seen him so happy.”

I look back up at the tower unwilling to tell Sam that I have not called my mother since before I came to Europe. I tighten my coat, feeling a chill as we stare up at the lights. September, it has been almost a year since Patty’s murder and I still do not know if I was right to run. Should I have stayed in Vancouver?

“Could you hold this?” Sam holds out the vase. I take it and we start walking to the river while Sam buttons up his coat. He offers to take back the vase but I indicate that I will carry it. Earlier we had agreed to try under the bridge first so Sam leads us across the Quai Branly. We exchange a glance and then continue walking so we are under the Pont D’Iena where the bridge obscures our view of the Palais de Chaillot across the river.

With the Eiffel Tower at our backs, we stand at the river’s edge and gaze down into the water. The Seine looks dark and quiet, almost as if the water is not moving. I stare into the still dark feeling overwhelmed. Too much has happened in the last day and I cannot keep up. My mind is still trying to put it all together but I think Sam is right. Andrew’s transformation into a vampire was because of his connection to Sam. Sarah must have found out they were friends at the party and then tracked Andrew down. Or maybe she asked Andrew for his phone number at the party as soon as she knew of their relationship. In any event, Sarah must have decided to use Andrew to track Sam and poor Andrew died because of it.

I turn to Sam, “Is there anything you want to say?”

He nods. I wait and time seems to stretch out. Silence expands to fill the space between us again. After a few minutes, Sam gestures for me to pour Andrew’s ashes onto the river. I do it slowly. Watching the

dust spread across the surface of the river, I feel the responsibility of Andrew's death settle onto me the same way the dust settles onto the surface of the river. Another death I will have to wear for the rest of my life because that does not wash off the way I washed off the dust last night. When the last of the ashes spills out, I drop the vase into the water as well. I cannot take that back with me. I watch it float for a moment and then it starts to fill with water.

"Andrew, I'm sorry." Sam's voice sounds broken. "I will try to find a way to do... something. I... I let you down. I won't do that again, not if I can help it."

"Maudlin," a voice says behind me.

I start to turn and something slams into my back, between the shoulder blades, and I hit the water. The wind knocked out of me, I involuntarily try to pull in some air only to get a lung full of water. I choke. I struggle for air. My coat, soaked with water, weights a tonne. I fight for the surface but the waterlogged coat pulls me down. I struggle to get out of the coat but it clings to me as if it has hands. I strain for air but my head goes under. I attempt to calm myself so I can get back to the surface. My head breaks free of the water. Air! I pull in a lung full before my head goes under again. The weight of the coat is too much! I fight for the surface again but the coat holds onto me, dragging me down. I strive for a breath of air but get another lung full of water. The coat is too heavy but each time I stop thrashing for the surface to take the coat off the damned thing pulls me down. I fight for calm. Forget the coat. I need to reach the edge of the water. I swim for the surface and manage to lift my head above the water. Air, I need air! The coat yanks me back down into the black.

## Chapter 62

I feel myself hauled out of the water. It takes a moment before I realize someone grabbed the collar of my coat to pull me out of the river. Someone rolls me onto my side but then the person disappears. I cough and struggle for air and cough some more. I attempt to raise my head but it is as if I forgot how so I try to focus my eyes, labouring to pull air into my lungs. Instead, I cough up more water. I hear a growl and attempt to shake my head again. I am not having any luck with movement or focus and yet my mind is clear enough to remember the danger. Someone shoved me into the river. I need to move. I hear sounds of a fight and then a dog barks. Am I hearing things? I cough again and breathe in. Air, wonderful air. I hear running footsteps, heavy breathing, and then my eyes focus enough to see a dog's paws just in front of me. Finally able to lift my head, I peer straight into the eyes of a wolf. Shock numbs me. I thought Europeans killed off all the wolves. What is it doing here?

"I know you," I mutter as soon as the awareness hits me.

The dog seems to smile. Suddenly, the dog is pure flame and then, just as suddenly, there is a guy standing in front of me. His short black hair and dark green eyes are part of a very ordinary face. Well, sort of ordinary. He is not good looking but he is... sexy. I glance around. When my eyes come back to him I realize he is one of the guys I saw a short while ago at Café l'Alma.

"You're safe," the guy assures me as he holds out a hand to help me up.

"Thanks," I reply and without thinking reach out to take his hand. As our hands touch, an electric shock tingles through my fingers followed by a wave of warmth.

He pulls me up with one hand and steadies me with the other. "How are you? Breathing okay?"

"I'm not sure. I... uh... feel a little strange." I cough again but my lungs feel a bit better.

"Maybe we should take you into a hospital?"



“No, let’s wait for a bit.” I scan around, searching for Sam. I do not really want to explain to any type of authority why I got dumped into the river.

“Your friend is okay. He and my brother are following the vampires that attacked you.”

“Vampires. Right.” I nod and stand up straighter. The guy lets go of me but he appears ready to catch me if I should start to fall.

“That’s what they are, aren’t they?”

“Uh, I didn’t get a chance to see them... Never mind. Who are you?”

“My name is Kelly.” He says, holding out his hand again to shake. He smiles and I notice a very small scar near the centre of his top lip. The scar is not ugly. In fact, it makes him look a little... raffish. Cute would be a good description for Kelly, but a very sexy cute.

“I’m Ann,” I respond, looking at the hand he holds out to me. I feel hesitant to make contact but I do it. The second time we touch I do not feel an electrical shock but it is... tingly.

“Maybe it only happens once,” Kelly comments as if he can read my mind. He twists his head a bit as if listening.

“We’ve met before,” the words slip out before I even think about them.

Kelly’s smile gets even bigger, stretching the scar, making it a bit more noticeable.

“I don’t know where. I don’t even remember seeing your face before, except a little while ago over at Café l’Alma.”

“We met in Vancouver. You were with some guy at the corner of Broadway and Main.”

Suddenly, I remember the night Josh and I followed James and Mr Nordic. I also remember the comment James made, about having a dog with me. I stare at Kelly.

“Yeah,” he says, impishly. “That was me.”

“You were a Husky.”

“Yeah, it turns out that the legends about werewolves aren’t all that accurate.”

## Chapter 63

The sound of footsteps echoes quietly down to where we stand at the river's edge. As we both turn to see who it is, I say to Kelly, "So, you can turn into any canine, is that it?" The words are a bit hard to get out with my lungs feeling so battered.

"Yes," he replies with his eyes staring intently towards the sound.

Finally, I see two shapes in the shadows, moving towards us. Even before I can see them clearly, I know one is Sam by the way he walks. After another moment, I see the other guy's appearance is enough like Kelly that I feel confident he is the brother Kelly referenced just a couple of minutes earlier.

"Are you okay?" Sam asks me as soon as he is near me.

"Yeah, I feel a bit like someone hammered my chest but I can breathe again so it's all good."

"I'm John," states the other guy, holding out a hand to shake. "John Maynard." It sounds a bit like Bond, James Bond, which makes me wonder if I will like this guy.

I regard John's extended hand for a moment and then exchange a quick glance with Kelly. Kelly's face tells me that he has no idea what will happen. I hesitantly reach out to touch John, my fingers anticipating the shock. Time seems to slow down as my hand nears his. I have to push my hand forward almost like putting my hand into a nest of power cords knowing I will get an electrical shock. And.... nothing happens. Again, I look at Kelly to see the same surprise I feel.

"What's going on?" Sam directs his question to Kelly and me while he shifts his gaze back and forth between us. Worry pinches his eyes as his feet shift uncomfortably.

Kelly gives me a look indicating that I should explain.

"Uh, well... when Kelly and I first touched we felt a sort of...."

"Tingle," Kelly finishes not quite telling the whole truth.

"I was expecting the same thing to happen when I shook hands with John but —" I begin.

"It didn't happen," Kelly sums up with a shrug.

John's eyes cut back and forth between Kelly and me while Sam continues, with an odd look on his face, to watch the two of us. When

Sam's eyes meet mine, I give him a shrug. I have no explanation for what is going on. I turn to John and ask, "You are a werewolf too, aren't you?"

"Yes," he replies. "Actually, Kelly and I are twins."

"Twins?" I say aloud, but the thought that leaps to mind is 'litter'.

"Maybe we should get off the street before continuing this discussion," Sam comments, pointedly looking around. "Or at least move away from the river."

"Where should we go?" I ask.

## Chapter 64

“We could go to our place,” John responds, looking me in the eye in a way that makes me nervous.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” I shiver a bit. Maybe I would be willing to talk to them in a café or pub but not their apartment.

“You need to get warm,” John says in a way that indicates he is used to taking charge.

“I’m fine,” I reply. I give Sam a look that says, I do not I want to wander into a werewolf’s lair.

Relief flashes across Sam’s face as he steps around Kelly to stand beside me. “Thanks for your help but I think I should get Ann home where she can dry off.”

“Look if we’d wanted to kill you we could have just let those vampires have you,” John steps forward.

Kelly reaches out to stop John from closing on Sam and me. “John, they’re right. We all need to be careful here. Let’s just move back from the river in case those vampires come back.”

“I thought you said she was the one,” John directs his comment to Kelly who nods his agreement.

“She is,” Kelly affirms as he gestures John to back up. John complies by walking over to the base of the bridge.

“You were looking for me?” Stunned, I follow them to the pillar while wringing water out of my hair. “Why?”

Kelly walks backwards as he replies to me, “Because I was sure you were a dhampir.”

“How did you know that? Could you tell by my eyes?” I remember squatting and looking the husky in the eye or I guess I looked Kelly in the eye.

“Eyes? No, it was when you followed that vampire in Vancouver that I thought you must be a dhampir.” Kelly appears nonplussed as we all stop at the base of the bridge.

“So, you can see them too.” I glance back and forth between John and Kelly.

“No,” Kelly responds, shaking his head.

“Then why did you follow me?” I cough. It still feels like there is a bit of water in my lungs.

“I wanted to help. I heard your conversation with your friend.” Kelly’s charming smile flashes back into existence and his voice takes on a bantering tone. “It’s easy to eavesdrop when you’re a dog. Strangely, no one ever thinks they’re being over heard.”

“Funny,” I comment. “So you didn’t know that those guys were vampires?”

“No, but the things you said to your friend told me that you were seeing something that your friend didn’t see and I couldn’t see.”

“Wait a second,” Sam interrupts, surprise colouring his voice. “You’ve met before?”

“I’ve met Kelly before...” we exchange glances and then Kelly starts to speak.

“We met in Vancouver. I was...” Kelly stops. He appears to be re-considering his words carefully before continuing. I have the impression that there is a story behind why Kelly was on the corner of Broadway and Main in the shape of a dog but he is not going to tell it tonight. “I happened to overhear Ann talking to another guy. It was clear to me that she was seeing something her friend couldn’t. Something I couldn’t see. So, I thought she might be a dhampir.”

“But you can’t see vampires?” I ask.

“No, only a dhampir can do that.” John responds and then he nods to Kelly, indicating he should continue his story.

“I was curious so I followed her when she followed the vampires.” Kelly explains to Sam. “Of course, I didn’t know for sure they were vampires I just thought I would follow to make sure she was okay.” Kelly pauses.

“It turned out to be lucky for me.” I jump in. “I think James recognized Kelly and he was reluctant to face both of us.”

Kelly nods, “Yeah, that vampire’s comment about ‘having a dog with you’ sort of indicated he recognized what I am.”

“Yes,” John jumps in, “I’ve wanted to meet a dhampir for a while but when Kelly told me the story later it sounded like werewolves and dhampirs have joined forces before. It also sounded like the vampires don’t really like that.”

My mind flashes back to the night as it has so many times over the past eight months.

I remember I ran around the corner to find Josh confronting James. I... took another step forward and James glared straight into my eyes. Then he suddenly hissed and with unbelievable speed, he reached out to grab Josh by the upper arms, pinning them. James then muttered something that I thought sounded like ‘damn fool’, but must have been dhampir. James threw Josh against the wall and... and I heard a growl beside me making me glance to my left while James did the same.

“Of course you have a dog safeguarding you,” James said with derision and he backed away, keeping his eyes on us until he disappeared around the corner.

“Ann?” Sam gently touches my arm while I gaze at John.

“Yes, although I think it was more the way James said it than what he said.” I correct John, and glance towards Sam. “It sounded like he had encountered it before and that he didn’t like it. He sounded... mocking.”

“I thought so too,” Kelly agrees as he crosses his arms and leans against the bridge pylon.

“Really?” Sam does not look very comfortable with the situation.

“Yeah,” I turn to Sam and try to get the inflection right, “James said, ‘of course, you have a dog safeguarding you’ it was... almost as if he expected it.”

“Like it was... common,” Kelly adds.

Sam nods and takes a breath, “So, you were looking for us?”

“Well, her actually. We didn’t know anything about you.” John gives Sam a quizzical look. “Are you saying you’re a dhampir too?”

Sam nods, “I can see vampires.”

“Wait, I’ve seen you before too.” I point to John. “Here, in Paris.”

“With a woman named Ann.” Sam finishes the thought for me. Surprise and recognition chase each other across his face as he makes the connection.

John looks a little abashed while Kelly chuckles. “We were looking for you but John got a little side-tracked by another woman named Ann.”

“How did you know to look for me in Paris?” Just the idea makes me feel a little queasy. If they know I am here who else does? Had Josh and I been that easy to follow?

“We didn’t,” John supplies. “At least not until Kelly saw you walking around one day.”

“But I lost you, so we’ve been hoping to find you ever since.” Kelly chimes in.

I stare at Kelly, “I don’t get it, why were you looking for me?”

“To help us kill vampires.” John replies. Kelly shifts his body but says nothing.

“I’m sorry; you want me to kill vampires?” Incredulous and wondering if they will join Sam in pressuring me to kill vampires, I begin to turn intending to walk away.

“Yes, we can’t do it alone. We can’t even see them.” John’s words pin me in place.

“We can’t just go around killing people.” I object.

“They’re not people, they’re vampires.” John sounds a bit... aggressive.

“So...” I respond growing convinced that John will not be one of my favourite people.

“So, they’re killers. They kill people and the cops can’t stop them it has to be a dhampir.” John’s temper rises making his words sound like he is biting them off.

“We don’t know that they all kill people.” I step back, wanting to leave.

“Of course we do.” John says sarcastically but then his voice switches to a reasonable tone. “They’re vampires. They drink blood. They have to kill people to survive. All the legends say so.”

I take another step back, “Look, you can’t believe all that stuff in the legends.”

“She’s right,” surprisingly Kelly is the one who backs me up.

“Yeah, those werewolf legends aren’t very accurate, are they?” I say derisively.

“No, they’re not.” Kelly replies with a glance at John. The two of them tense up. I guess they have had this fight before.

“So, were you bitten?” Sam asks, breaking the tension. “That’s how the legends say you get turned into a werewolf.”

An uneasy silence descends while Kelly and John stare at each other until finally John shifts his eyes to Sam and answers, “No, we were born this way.”

Kelly sighs and then explains. “We have a sister but she’s not a werewolf. John thinks it might be only men who are born that way.” I note that Kelly said ‘John thinks’ as if his thoughts might be different.

“We don’t know if biting would turn someone into a werewolf.” John picks up the conversation. “Neither of us is willing to do that to someone.”

“I can understand that,” Sam comments, his voice incredibly neutral.

“It’s not like in the stories,” Kelly says. “We don’t lose ourselves when we change and we’re not driven to kill.”

“And clearly changing is voluntary unlike the legends,” I say dryly while wringing some more of the water out of my hair. “Look, as fun as this has been I’m going to go home and dry off.”

“Wait, what about the vampires?” John challenges while taking an involuntary step toward me.

I point at him, “You just said you’re not driven to kill so maybe they’re not either. Maybe being ‘evil’ is a choice. But you haven’t convinced me they need killing so I’m not going to do it.”

“What the hell are you going to do?” John demands.

I hold up my hands in a gesture of helplessness and smile sweetly, “I’m going to go home to dry off and get warm.” I turn my back on them and walk a couple of steps away before spinning back to point to John and Kelly. “Don’t follow me.”

After a few minutes, I feel Sam fall into step beside me and then place a hand on my shoulder.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” he whispers.

“Yes,” I reply just as quietly. “I’m cold but okay.”

“You should get out of those wet clothes. Take off your coat and take mine.”

I twist a bit to look at Sam, “No, I’m okay and we don’t have far to go. Somehow I thought you’d want to join John in his... fight.”

Sam stops walking and stares at me, “You want me to leave?”

I shake my head, regretting my flippancy. “No, I don’t. I just thought the two of you agree that killing vampires is the right thing to do.”

“I did... Before.” He replies and starts moving again.

“Before? What changed?”

“The things Andrew said. Them.” Sam points with his thumb over his shoulder.

I stop dead to consider him.



Sam stops walking and shrugs, “Actually it was what you said back there. They claim that they don’t have to kill so maybe the vampires don’t either. I don’t want to go around killing people randomly.”

I nod and start plodding back to my apartment. My coat is still incredibly heavy with water.

“Of course, that doesn’t mean I don’t want to kill the ones... the ones who are feeding on people.”

My mind flashes back to Josh casually tossed off the bridge and rage burns through me. Do I want to kill her? I shove both the thought and the emotion away. Even if I wanted her dead I... well, I am not sure I could do it. She should be brought to justice but that is unlikely to happen. I wonder what would happen if one of them were on trial. Would the other vampires kill that one in an effort to make sure their secret remained hidden? I stride faster and cross my arms, trying to stay warm. Water drips off my coat, leaving a trail. Those werewolf brothers would be able to follow the trail of water straight to my door, like following the trail of a slug. Disgusting thought.

Suddenly Sam says, “I need a drink.” It sounds heartfelt.

## Chapter 65

I finish blow-drying my hair and check the time. It is 3 o'clock in the morning. I walk into the living room to find Sam sitting on the couch with his laptop open apparently reading something.

"Research?" I ask.

"Yeah, looking up the werewolf legends," he sighs and begins shutting down his computer. His laptop must have been one of things he collected while we were at his place. "I'm not sure why I'm bothering."

I curl up on the couch and watch Sam, "My guess is that you're trying to figure out if we can trust them."

He places the laptop on the coffee table and leans forward to put his face in his hands. Sam radiates tension while I feel oddly relaxed. Since my immersion in the river, I have felt... ready. I do not know what for but I feel ready for whatever comes next. Dhampir; the word trickles through my mind. Somewhere out there is my vampire father.

Sam over at me, "Are you feeling better?"

I nod, "Actually, I feel pretty good. How about you?"

"I... I don't know how I feel." He gets up and walks into the kitchen. I hear cupboard doors closing and glasses tinkling and he comes back into the room with a whiskey bottle in one hand and two glasses in the other. Sitting back down beside me he slowly pours out two shots although the one in front of him is at least double the size of the shot in front of me. He picks both up and hands me one.

"To surprises," then he taps his glass against mine.

"To surprises," I echo and take a tiny sip. "Blah, I don't think I'm going to get used to this stuff."

"What do you think?" Sam asks me. "About the werewolves?"

"I... I really don't know. Kelly has helped me twice and that comment by James does suggest that vampires don't like werewolves."

"So, you think we can trust them?" Sam sets his glass on the coffee table and rotates it back and forth.

I openly stare at Sam until he looks up at me. "Why should I trust you?"

"Are you saying that you don't?" His whole body tenses up.

“No... or maybe.” I pause and sip the whiskey. “Blah, no I guess my point is more about trust than trustworthiness.”

Puzzlement lights up Sam’s face as he softly asks, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, the question you want the answer to is ‘will they betray us’? But the truth is we could ask that question of any human being in any situation. I don’t know whether or not werewolves are trustworthy but I do know that Kelly has voluntarily helped me twice when he had no reason to.”

“Twice?”

“Yes, he said it tonight. Back in Vancouver, he followed me because he was worried and when I confronted James, he didn’t leave. No, in fact, he joined me. And tonight, they could have walked away from that fight but they chose to join us. It probably means we can trust them to help save us from vampires. On the other hand, it doesn’t mean we can ‘trust’ them to do what we want them to.”

“So, you figure we can trust that they are not intrinsically evil just because they are werewolves?”

“Yes, I guess I’m just not comfortable with judging people based on their...” I hunted around for a word.

“Species?”

“I’m not sure I like that word.”

“Well, they are werewolves not human.”

“And we’re only half human.” I point out.

“Okay,” he says in a mollifying tone. “So, you’re saying we should judge them based on how they act.”

“Yes, isn’t that how you would judge any other human being?”

“So you think we should go ahead and trust them based on the fact that they rescued us tonight and that guy Kelly helped you in Vancouver.”

“Yes, I guess that is what I’m saying.”

“That kind of trust could get us killed.”

“And not trusting anyone could get us killed.”

“What’s with you tonight?”

“I don’t know... I feel lighter... not so worried.”

“Really? Didn’t some vampire try to kill us earlier tonight?” Sam asks and then finishes his drink.

“Yeah, but... Sam, those vampires are scared. I mean really scared. Sarah didn’t call out one or two bullies to take care of you; she

called in at least five. And, she turned Andrew into one of them to try to trap you. All that, just for you. She didn't know about me; that was all for you. How dangerous are you?"

Sam straightens up and then, using his glass, he points to me and then to himself. "We, my darlin', how dangerous are we?"

"Yes, we." I agree and sip the whiskey. "Blah." I place the glass on the coffee table.

Sam watches that action and then tells me with a smile. "Soon you'll love the stuff." He holds up his glass in a salute and takes a sip then stares thoughtfully at the floor. His dimple slowly disappears, as his face grows sombre before he looks up at me with a light in his eyes. "Are you saying you're not scared anymore?"

"No, I'm scared but it means we aren't helpless. I don't know... maybe it's just because it's been close to a year that I have been living in fear, running scared. Now... now I know that I'm the thing that vampires fear. I'm the thing scary things are afraid of. I guess I feel like I have control of my life again." I pause. "Who knows, maybe the feeling will disappear by morning and I'll be back to cowering in fear, afraid to take a risk." But even as I say those words I know they are not true.

"Well, trusting those werewolves might be a pretty big risk."

I stare at Sam for a while. "Sam, if you never trust anyone you go through life without anyone."

"It's still a big risk."

"Maybe but I'm not joking. If you never trust anyone you will always be alone." I pause for a moment. "I guess I also believe that every person should be allowed to screw up."

Sam pours a small shot of whiskey into his glass, "Yeah but their screwup could get us killed."

"Look, just forget they are werewolves for a moment." Sam looks me in the eye as I continue. "If I had followed your philosophy then you wouldn't be sitting in this room. I decided to trust you. I decided. I hear women whine about how some guy did them wrong and they were fools to trust those men so they don't trust the next guy. And you know what? The next relationship turns out badly too but not because the guy was an asshole but because the woman's inability to trust caused so many problems that the relationship ended."

"That's different. That's just a relationship it's not life or death."

“I’m not so sure it is. All people are entitled to be treated as worthy of trust until they prove themselves untrustworthy.”

“Hah! But you wouldn’t go to the werewolves place because you didn’t trust them.”

I shake my head, “Sam, there are varying levels of trust and everyone deserves the first level. When you meet someone you think might be a friend, you don’t push to learn their deep dark secrets the very next time you see them. That level of trust must be built.” I stare at the drink sitting on the coffee table and decide against taking another sip so I leave it sitting there. “Actually, I think people who try to force confidences don’t trust other people and that’s why they want to know all your deep dark secrets immediately.”

“So you’re saying that we should give the werewolf brothers the benefit of the doubt.”

“Yes, we give them the same chance we gave each other.”

## Chapter 66

**Sam** leans back on the couch and lets out a long sigh. His black hair, messed up from the fight, gets worse as he reaches up to scrub his fingers through it. He leans forwards and picks up his glass again. I can see that there is more bothering him than the werewolf brothers.

I look at the floor. Paris; it is supposed to be romantic and relaxed but not for me. Since the night of Patty's death, I have been stumbling down blind alley ways, searching for answers, searching for truth but I never feel prepared for the answers. I realize that somehow, somewhere, in the back of my mind I thought that once I had the answers I would be able to leave this craziness behind me. The answers would free me to live my life again. To live it the way it was before all this started but I know now that that will never happen. Patty is dead, Josh is dead, and I am a dhampir - things will never be what they were. Somewhere during the walk between drowning and arriving in this room, I crossed a line, a line that I would never be able to cross again.

I set my hopes on answers and looking at Sam I wonder if he had set his hopes on killing the vampires. Losing his moral justification seems to have left him dangling out over a cliff. He sounds so lost. His eyes are staring at the fireplace but he does not see anything — it is the thousand-yard stare.

I get up and walk over to look out the window over the computer table. A little bit of fog has moved in and it shrouds the top of the tower. The lights create little halos in the fog. It is incredibly beautiful. Beautiful and serene but, to me, that serenity feels like a lie.

“Do you think they’ll come after us?” Sam’s query pours over me like syrup. Thick and heavy, it is a sticky question.

I peer down at the street and see one person hurrying along, a blurry outline in the fog. All my energy drains away and so I say very quietly, “Yes, I think they will. Andrew said he had to kill you because you’re a dhampir so I think Sarah will send others.”

“Sarah will send?” Sam’s question is equally soft.

“Yes,” I turn to gaze at Sam one hand holding onto the chair back to steady me as a deep lassitude seeps through my veins. “I think she

sends others to do her work. She has not come looking for you herself. She sent those others to watch your place and Andrew to kill you.”

“Maybe she’s the local... what word was that?”

“Prefect, and yeah, maybe she is,” I sigh and then give a tired little laugh. “Even after all we learned over the last few days we still don’t really know much.”

“You’re right, but you can probably walk away from this. They’re after me not you.”

“I don’t think that’s true. That guy Paul must have told them I’m a dhampir by now. And even if he didn’t there are a couple of vampires back in Vancouver who know I exist and one in Amsterdam who knows about me. There’s no more hiding.”

“Wow, I forgot about Paul.” Sam sounds stunned and he is silent for a moment, then he shakes his head. “It feels like it happened a million years ago. So you figure they’re after both of us now.”

“Yes, I think tonight kind of proved that.”

“In what way?”

“Well, they shoved me into the river.”

“So?”

“Well, it’s a good way to improve the odds. Toss me in the river then they can deal with just you. Once you’re gone, they can deal with me. Well, that is if I didn’t drown in the water.”

“You can’t swim?” he sounds surprised.

I smile, “No, I can swim although the weight of the coat soaked with water was incredibly heavy. I just mean that it’s an effective way to... divide and conquer.”

“Oh, right, of course.” Sam picks up his glass and stares into it. “Christ, you nearly drowned.” His eyes come back up to peer into mine. “I’m sorry, this is all my fault.”

The Eiffel Tower lights pull my eyes back to gaze out the window while I think before replying. “No, Sam you’re wrong.”

“Sure it is.”

“No, those other vampires know I exist even if they don’t know I’m in Paris. I can’t run from this.” I turn back to see Sam staring at me. “I’ve tried, god knows I’ve tried but it’s never going to work.” I walk back to sit beside Sam.

“You think they’ll come after you.” Sam sits forward with his elbows on his knees and stares at me.

“Certainly some of them will. We don’t know how many want us dead for what we are but we know that Sarah does.”

“And the ones that circled my place.”

“Yes, and running will only change the battlefield not the battle. Sooner or later we will have to deal with Sarah and her group.”

“So we’re back to the same question we had before; what do we do?” Sam’s dimple goes to full strength as he smiles at me in memory of the number of times during our short association that we have asked that question.

“We stay alive. At least that’s my first priority.” My answer is a bit glib in an effort to lighten the mood.

Sam laughs, “I’ll second that.”

“And our second priority is to learn more about them. Not knowing enough is going to get us killed.” As I say those words, I see sparks in Sam’s eyes.

Sam’s smile and dimple finally create a truly cheerful look, “Okay, so we are back to the same other question; how do we do that?”

I smile, “We get information from the only source that we can.”

“From the vampires themselves.” He nods and I know that he is coming out of his funk, that the dimples and smiles are not running a campaign of false advertising.

“Yes, and now we know a bit about what we can do so we can be a little more aggressive.”

“So we go on the attack?”

“Yup,” I nod. “And there’s only one place we know we can go to find them.”

Sam’s smile turns a little diabolical, “My place.”



## Chapter 67

**Sam** was still sleeping when I left the apartment so I write a note, telling him I would be at Café l'Alma trying to get some work done. Sitting down I order espresso and a croissant while setting up my laptop. The last couple of days I have not been able to get any programming done and I need to get some work finished or rent will be a bit difficult to manage. I suddenly realize that I need to return to Canada for a while. As a Canadian citizen, I have to return every three months or I will be kicked out of France.

I glance around the café checking for vampires but I am not particularly worried about encountering one since it is mid-morning and people fill the streets. I figure Sarah's gang will wait a bit longer before coming after us again. Of course, I'm also pretty sure Sarah and company still don't know where I live.

I succeed in working for an hour when a familiar voice interrupts me by saying, "Hi."

I look up to see Kelly standing next to my table. I have the sinking feel that I will not get much done today.

"Can I join you?"

I nod, shifting my laptop a bit to make room for him. "I thought I told you not to follow me last night."

Kelly flashes his engaging grin stretching the scar, "I didn't. I followed your trail this morning. I can smell you."

"Okay, that's a little creepy. I mean the smelling thing more than the following."

"It's useful at times," Kelly shrugs.

I sit back and look at him. According to legends, he should appear hairier than the average human but he is not. Kelly has very dark green eyes that restlessly scan the sidewalk and surroundings. Un-styled short black hair, unshaven jaw, and a slightly round face means he looks cute but not quite in the category of good-looking. But there is that strong sex appeal that I noticed last night. The small scar on his top lip just to the right of centre does not detract from his looks. In fact, it makes him more appealing. Sexy is the word that keeps leaping to mind when I look at him.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” he inquires, shifting a bit under my scrutiny.

“If you can smell my trail why didn’t you track me in Vancouver?”

“I did. I went back to the spot in the alley and followed you...”

Kelly sits back for a moment as the waitress approaches. She notices Kelly’s sex appeal and gives me an envious little smile. That smile makes me like her and as I smile back, I think about what her reaction indicates. She finds Kelly attractive but the thought of going after him has not crossed her mind because he appears to be with another woman. Kelly orders a coffee and watches her as she gives me one last smile and then walks away. Once she is out of earshot, Kelly turns back to me, “I followed your trail to your apartment in Vancouver but you never showed up.”

“To my apartment? Josh and I caught a cab at Broadway and Main.”

“Oh, that explains it. I should have thought of that. Your friend did look hurt that night. Was he okay?”

“Yeah, he had a slight concussion but other than that he was fine. So how were you able to follow my trail to my apartment?” I slide past the topic of Josh as fast as I can, unwilling to discuss him with a stranger, even a stranger who saved my life. The different levels of trust.

“Well, maybe it wasn’t your apartment but it was still a place you went to a lot.” Kelly shifts in his chair as the waitress returns and sets down his coffee. She flashes me another envious smile but Kelly seems oblivious to the byplay. He waits until she is out of earshot before continuing his story. “So, I followed your trail back to Broadway and Main where I met you but a quick scan around allowed me to pick up your trail from hours earlier. At the time, I thought maybe you went back into Caffè Barney. I figured I would follow your trail backwards to your apartment. I was just hoping that you didn’t go straight to the pub from work.”

I remember standing in my apartment that last day and looking out the window. I saw a guy walking down my street who seemed to be interested in my apartment building but that guy did not look like Kelly. At least I do not think he looked like Kelly. I wonder if Kelly would look different through glass. Would he lose his sexiness? After a moment, I ask, “Were you hanging around my place, in Vancouver I mean?”

“Well, I walked by a few times the day after we met but I didn’t see you.” He shifts in his seat for a bit. “It rained two days later and then John and I gave up after a couple days. It was clear you hadn’t been there.”

“You could tell by the smell?”

“Yeah, it fades with time. After the rain, I could tell that you hadn’t been home.”

“You could tell but not John?”

“Have you ever noticed how hard it is to describe a smell?” Kelly’s grin shows up in full force. “Even though we could both smell the same scents, it was hard for me to describe exactly which one was yours.”

I smile, “Yeah, okay. So you couldn’t describe my scent to John.”

“No, if you had walked someplace where there were no other scents I could have shown him but you didn’t. In a city it’s pretty much always like that.” Kelly’s last sentence sounds a bit sad.

“Well, you tracked me down now so I assume you have something you want to tell me,” I say and lean back in my chair, deliberately continuing to eye him so he looks uncomfortable.

“Look,” Kelly pauses. “I don’t agree with John.”

“Okay,” I respond, slowly leaning forward to take a sip of coffee and wondering what he really wants.

“John believes in the big, epic battle.”

Puzzled I say, “I don’t know what that means.”

“Uh...” He fiddles with the cutlery on the table then hunches forward, lowering his voice as he continues. “You have to understand. Our mother told... well that doesn’t matter I guess. John believes in good versus evil, an epic battle that we must fight. That it’s our duty to ‘save the world from evil’ and that we have to get you to join us because you can see the vam...” He looks around for a moment and then changes what he was about to say. “You can see them and that way we can get them all.”

“John believes?” I look around before asking, “So you don’t believe in the epic battle, G versus E?”

Kelly flashes that appealing grin, briefly stretching the scar on his lip. He toys with his coffee and takes a sip. “I don’t believe in the epic battle but I do think you’re in trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“Those three vam— those three guys tried to kill you and your friend last night. I think they’ll come after you again.”

“Yeah, we thought of that.”

“So where’s your friend?”

“He’s around.”

Kelly frowns, “You don’t seem to be taking this too seriously.”

“We take it seriously...” I trail off not wanting to give offense.

“But you don’t trust me and my brother.” Kelly leans back and scans around. He actually looks a bit worried.

I laugh, “Actually, Sam and I had a talk about trust.”

“And you decided not to.” He says flatly.

“No, that’s not how the conversation went.”

Kelly gives me a puzzled look.

“Let’s just say that we are... cautiously optimistic.”

“Okay, so we have the benefit of the doubt.” He laughs. “Well, that sounds fair. Maybe even more than fair considering the things we know and the things we don’t know.” The look of worry crawls back on his face. Those dark green eyes seem restless as they search the people around us.

“Is something up?”

“Yeah, something’s up. Those... guys mean business and I think they’ll try again soon.”

“So, they don’t know where I live and they can’t smell their way to my place.”

“Are you sure about that?”

A little shiver of fear runs through me. I had not thought of that.

“Look my brother puts more stock in the legends than I do. I’m not willing to make assumptions about what they can and can’t do.”

I nod and then decide to see how he will respond to a question. “Look, I don’t believe those legends either but that also means I should be cautious about trusting you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, a lot of legends say werewolves are driven to kill. And a lot of them say that they are unwilling killers but still killers. Most of those legends say that the human side has no memory of what happens on the night of a full moon. So alright, you say the first legend isn’t true and I can believe that. But what if the second one is true? What if the two of you don’t know that you run out and kill on full moons?”

Kelly's voice is very dry as he tells me, "Well, aside from the fact that we do remember everything we do when we change I think one of the many girls John has slept with would have complained that he disappeared in the middle of the night."

I laugh, "Bit of a playboy, eh? I can see that. There's som—" A woman walks by the café. As she turns and smirks at me I realize she is the vampire who killed Josh and rage surges through my veins. "Jesus Christ," I whisper in shock and anger. "What the hell is she doing here?"

## Chapter 68

“What’s the matter?” Kelly demands, his whole body suddenly on alert.

She clearly recognizes me and worse it appears she is unsurprised to see me. I can see it in her face. I immediately back up my files to a memory stick and then shut down my laptop. I need to get back to Sam.

Kelly grabs my elbow and whispers urgently, “What is it?”

“That woman there,” I try to make a discreet gesture under the table while I wait for my computer to finish shutting down. “She’s a vampire except...” I cannot make sense of why she is here now.

“Except what?”

“I saw her in Amsterdam.” Confusion pounds through my head, emotions jumbled and intense.

“And now she’s here.” Kelly’s tone somehow reflects my thoughts as he pulls money out of his pockets and dumps some on the table. “That just doesn’t sound good. Do you think they called in reinforcements?”

“God, I don’t know. That’s the fucking problem isn’t it?” Frustration evident in my voice, I try to force calm into my thoughts. I assume Kelly’s guess is correct so I quickly slide my laptop into its case and then into my backpack.

“That is *exactly* the problem.” Kelly agrees.

“I have to get back to Sam.” I pause to consider Kelly. Can I trust him? After my big speech to Sam, will I have the guts to follow through with what I said?

“Call Sam now.” Kelly instructs me. “If he knows he can prepare.”

I pull out my phone and make the call. Oddly, Kelly’s bit of advice makes me trust him a little more.

“Ann.” Sam’s voice sounds a little muzzy.

I quickly explain about Kelly and the vampire.

“From Amsterdam? That doesn’t sound good.” Sam pauses. “Ann, I think I should come to you. You’re safer in the café and we don’t want to risk her finding your apartment.”

“Okay, I can wait here for you.” I respond, checking the position of the vampire. She crosses the street but stops on the corner, pulling out a phone. That does not look good so I nudge Kelly under the table. He nods his understanding of the problem.

“What about Kelly? You don’t believe you can trust him, do you?” A desperate edge colours Sam’s voice.

“I’m sticking to what I said last night.” I reply while directly making eye contact with Kelly. He smiles, knowing what Sam just asked me.

“Jesus Christ. Don’t let him leave and don’t let him make any calls.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Sam assures me and then the line goes dead.

I feel cut off. I stare at Kelly wondering what to do with him.

Kelly smiles, “I’m not going anywhere so if you’re trying to think of a way to get rid of me you can forget it.”

“How’d you get your scar?”

“My brother hit me.”

“Seriously?” Of all the answers he could have given that was not one I expected.

“Yeah,” Kelly’s engaging grin flashes back into existence. “We didn’t always get along. You know what it’s like to have siblings.”

“No, actually, I don’t.” I reply absently while watching the vampire.

“Do you carry a stake?”

“No, I never planned on killing anyone.”

## Chapter 69

“Yeah, me neither.” Kelly sits back for a moment and then says, “She is over to the right.”

“I see her. Does she look different to you now that you know?” I ask curiously.

“No,” he says the word slowly while openly staring at the vampire. “I have to take your word for it.”

“Really? I could be lying.” It occurs to me that Kelly is taking a lot on faith as well. The trust goes both ways.

“Yeah, but why would you do that?” His voice drops to a whisper before he continues. “You’re squeamish about killing vampires so I highly doubt you’d be eager to kill humans.”

I smile while searching for Sam, “That’s a very good point.”

“Does that vampire know Sam?”

“I... I don’t think so.” I ponder for a moment, “But she must have been called in because they know they have two dhampirs in town.”

“Why do you say that?” Kelly’s face changes to inquisitive although there are still flashes of wary watchfulness as his eyes roam around.

“Well, Sam and I confronted a vampire who called himself Paul and Paul saw me.”

“So you think he told the rest of them.”

“Exactly.”

“Call Sam back and tell him to pick a spot where we can lead her into a trap.”

“I’m not sure he’ll go for that.”

“Why not? It makes the mo— It’s me, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn it,” Kelly mutters. “It would be better if we could take her out before reinforcements arrive.”

“Sam won’t be long.”

Kelly’s whole body relaxes as I point that out. “You’re right,” he says. “You live nearby. So long as Sam doesn’t encou—”

“There he is,” I nod in Sam’s direction but Kelly clearly does not need my help to spot him.



“Thank god,” Kelly whispers as the two of us get up and walk over to meet Sam.

“Where is she?” Sam demands as we approach him.

“Over there,” I point, figuring that there is no reason to try for discretion. That vampire knows me so I do not need to hide the fact that we are onto her.

“I think we should take her out before her backup arrives.” Kelly offers.

“How do you know backup is coming,” Sam’s voice oozes suspicion.

“Because we’ve been watching her make phone calls,” I respond to head off any fighting.

Sam leans towards me, “Do you really think we can trust him.”

I slip my backpack on and start walking away, “I guess I can trust him as much as I trust you.”

Sam looks hurt. “How can you say that?” he asks as he catches up to me.

A bit exasperated I tell him, “I’m not saying I don’t trust you.” I weave my way down the sidewalk, leaving the two of them behind. Once they catch up to me, I forestall their arguments by commenting, “Look, like it or not we are in this together at the moment.” I turn towards the river. “Besides, back in Vancouver that guy James did seem to be worried about facing both Kelly and me; not to mention that Kelly has helped me twice. I think that earns him a little trust. And Kelly’s presence just might make her think twice.”

“Are you seriously going to risk your life on that flimsy bit of info?” Sam’s words sound a bit harsh but I can see that he does not really believe them. He is saying them for Kelly’s benefit.

I keep walking while I think about why I am willing to take the chance. “In the end, that’s what trust is. We never know, not for sure. I use to think that one day I would have the answers and those answers would simplify my life. But that’s just bullshit. We can’t know how any individual will act in any situation. We can’t, not really so all we can do is trust. Or I guess we could decide not to trust and then spend the rest of our lives alone. Well, I’ve decided to trust you, both of you. I think you both want out of this alive. And I think keeping each other alive will help us do that.” I stop walking and turn to face them, “So where do we trap her?”

“I have an idea,” Kelly replies and he takes the lead. I set off after him and Sam is only a step behind.

I glance over my shoulder, “I’m glad you decided to stay with us.”

“Maybe I’m just not willing to let you get yourself killed.” Sam mutters but I know I really did win him over to my way of thinking last night. Sam’s protests are only to let Kelly know that I come first on Sam’s list of loyalties.

## Chapter 70

“*Sam*, I hope you brought a stake with you.” Kelly glances over his shoulder.

“Yeah, I did. Actually I brought two.”

“Give one to Ann and you keep the other. I don’t need one to fight.”

We turn down a small alley, which does not appear to have any shops on it although there is a hotel entrance and a couple of alcoves. While he walks, he lays out his idea for trapping her. If we can kill her quickly, we should be able to get away before her backup arrives.

“That’s assuming they can’t follow us by smell,” I point out.

“What?” Sam looks stunned.

“That’s how Kelly found me today. And we don’t know that they can’t follow a scent.” I explain.

“So, we get away from here and hop in a cab.” Kelly smiles, “I can’t follow that and I don’t see how they could.”

“Smart,” Sam remarks while twisting the stake in his hand.

Silence descends on us while we walk down the road, well silence except for all the street sounds of Paris. But those sounds are distant, a hum of activity in a large city. Energy pumps through me. If I had stopped to think about it, I would have expected to feel fear at this moment but I’m oddly exhilarated. I hear the sounds of high heels clicking down the alley. And I turn to see the vampire approaching. She is too far away to see her face clearly but I imagine that dammed smirk on her lips.

Kelly nudges me, “A little farther.” Just up ahead the road makes a left turn, creating a corner. Once again, it is a smart idea by Kelly. Once we are in the corner, we will have an easier time watching both directions and no one will be able to come at us from behind. I can see the advantage now that we are standing here but it would never have occurred to me. If we manage kill her, and get away before her backup arrives and get into a cab, we might be able to get out of this alive.

As we reach the corner Kelly says, “Here,” and flashes to pure flame and then into a wolf. It takes only a second for Kelly’s transformation. In movies and books, and those useless legends, the were-

wolf transformation is a slow and painful process. Yet another thing that is wrong.

I watch as the vampire hangs back a bit. Clearly stalling to give her backup time to arrive, she smirks at me and decided to talk, "I see you found your dog again."

I smile, thinking that we will have to take the fight to her because she is not going to come to us.

"And you picked up a new toy." She nods her head toward Sam, "He is very beautiful, much better looking than the other one although I do like blondes."

Anger almost overwhelms me but I grab it and shove it away. I refuse to play into her hand. "You don't really expect such lame tactics to work, do you?" I ask while scanning for her backup.

"It was worth a shot." She shrugs, "That blonde you had with you was beautiful. I really wanted him for myself but you forced my hand."

Kelly growls and she nervously glances to her left to look at him. I briefly wonder if Kelly gets the connection. Does he know that she is referring to Josh, the guy he met in Vancouver? Or is Kelly just angry at the callous way she talks about murder?

"Forced? Josh asked you for a truce. You decided to kill him." I advance on her, squeezing the stake in my right hand hard enough that the rough edges cut into my skin. "You decided. You can't evade it by claiming you were 'forced' into it."

"You have changed," she responds and I see a thread of worry appear in her eyes.

"We all grow up sometime." I answer.

"Really, I try to avoid that." A voice says from above us.

## Chapter 71

**Suddenly**, beside me, a blonde guy drops to the sidewalk, landing in a crouch with one hand touching the ground. Kelly lunges for him but I jump in front to block Kelly. “He’s not a vampire.”

“That is right, I am not.” He agrees as he straightens up. “I might be here to help.” He’s eyes look into Sam’s. “I am a dhampir, like him.” He announces and the vampire starts backing away.

“What the fuck?” Sam jumps forward and touches my shoulder in a protective way.

There is a flash of heat and Kelly, back in human form, demands, “You’re a dhampir? And you just happened to be in the neighbourhood?”

“I was nowhere near this neighbourhood.” He glances around at the three of us. “But I think explanations can wait. I followed five vampires here.”

“Five,” Kelly whispers.

“So how did you get here first?” Sam challenges.

“I did not. They have surrounded the alley.” The blonde guy gestures in both directions and sure enough two have entered the alley behind the vampire from Amsterdam and another three have entered from the opposite direction. The blonde guy squints at Sam, “You must be the dhampir they are searching for.”

“Why do you say that?” Sam demands.

“Can we talk about this later?” Kelly interrupts and gestures to the approaching vampires. A moment of searing heat hits me and then Kelly is a wolf again.

“I agree,” the blonde throws a look over his shoulder as he walks toward the vampire from Amsterdam. “Keep her in the corner if you want to protect her.” And the blonde streaks forward, past the woman, to confront the two guys coming up behind her. The blonde dhampir moves faster than Sam does. The fight is a blur, taking place at a bewildering speed. It is... ferocious is the only word I can come up with to describe what is going on before my eyes. The blonde jumps at the vampire on the right and swings his fist in an odd backhanded fashion

at the vampire's chest but the creature leaps back so his fist never makes contact. Punch follows punch but then the second vampire jumps into the fray. The blonde guy snatches the arm of one vampire who attempts to punch him. Holding onto the arm, he swings the one vampire into the other with a vicious sort of glee. He appears to revel in the violence.

I glance over to Sam and Kelly to find the two of them are having difficulty. Two of the vampires have managed to pin Sam's arms while the third kicks Kelly in the ribs and lunges towards Sam. Kelly flies a few feet behind Sam and the vampires. He shakes his head and jumps forward, biting deep into the calf of one of the vampires who grips Sam's arm. The vampire screams and Sam shakes him off just in time to punch the vampire lunging at him.

My eyes snap back to the blonde guy just in time to watch him swing his fist in that odd fashion again. This time he connects and the vampire falls back... dead.

"But he is blonde," an incredulous voice comments.

I turn to the female vampire. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I... I was called in to help find a black haired—" and her eyes briefly land on Sam before snapping back to me. "Jesus Christ, there are three of you!" She blurts out with true terror in her voice. Her eyes frantically search for a way out; all thoughts of killing us have fled her mind and all she wants is to get out alive. She spots the fire escape ladder and dashes for it. I leap forward and manage to grab the back of her collar, yanking her around to spill her onto the ground.

I walk over as she jumps to her feet. I shake my head, "I guess you vampires are used to being in control, having all the advantages."

"We are superior," she replies in a matter of fact kind of way that chills me to the bone.

"Why did you kill him?" I ask while trying to find the anger or moral justification or... something that will give me the ability to kill her. Or, maybe I am trying not to kill her.

"Why?" She says the word as if she can taste it. "I really wanted him for myself. I am allowed to make one and I wanted him but you interfered. He was beautiful and intriguing. And the way he tasted... well it was an experience." She smiles her nasty smile, "And he loved you. It would have been fun to turn him and then send him after you. But mostly, I just wanted him."

Confusion rocks me, as a chill runs through my veins. She wanted to turn Josh into a vampire. When I asked the question, a part of me hoped the answer would invoke a killing rage in me but it does not. It makes me feel like crying but another part of me feels as if I passed a test. We stare at each other and, for a moment, we... connect with a feeling of utter futility. In a weird way, we both wanted the same thing — Josh. And, in that moment, we cross a line together, each recognising the end of something. She straightens up. I know I will let her escape when she tries. I will not be able to follow her, I cannot. I want to sit down and cry. I want to scream at the uncaring universe. I want Josh alive and anger pounds through my veins.

She senses something and steps back. The pounding of my blood is so loud I cannot hear anything else around me. I want Josh alive and this creature killed him. I want... her dead.

She gasps and steps forward. Blood appears on her bottom lip and her eyes glaze over. My eyes follow her as she pitches forward, face first, onto the ground at my feet. I look up to see the blonde dhampir standing there.

“You have to press the attack,” he tells me while staring down at her body.

Emptiness. That’s all. Emptiness. I float in emptiness. No sound, no light, just a vampire lying dead at my feet. The moment, the very moment, I wanted her dead, she was. Glancing behind the blonde dhampir, I see Kelly transform back to human and grab the last vampire from behind while Sam rushes forwards and stakes him. My eyes come back to the blonde dhampir as he turns around to check on the fight.

“They are done,” he mutters and then calls out, “We should get the hell out of here. There may be more on the way.”

Sam and Kelly race back to join us by the body of the woman. Sam reaches out a hand to touch my shoulder, “Are you okay?”

“Let’s get out of here,” I reply, an odd feeling coursing through me.

## Chapter 72

The blonde dhampir leads the way, jumping up to catch the bottom rung on the escape ladder. Kelly looks at Sam and me, “Do we follow?”

“Yes,” Sam answers him. “Once we’re on the roof we can split up but if there are more vampires coming they’ll probably be coming at street level.”

Kelly nods but looks sceptical. “That’s a long way up.”

“Try it,” Sam insists. “If you can’t make it, Ann and I will get you up there.”

Kelly jumps but I can see that his effort lacked commitment. “Kelly, you can make it.”

“Just go for it,” Sam urges and Kelly nods, then readies himself for another leap and this time succeeds in grasping the bottom rung. A couple of moments later, he races up the ladder for the roof. Sam and I exchange a look, “You next.” Not wanting to waste time, I follow Kelly as quickly as I can.

Looking up, I see Kelly’s feet disappear over the roof. With him out of my way, I speed up and reach the roof just behind him. I crawl over the top slowly. The blonde dhampir stands about ten feet away from the ladder. For the first time I have a moment to really look at him, and he is unbelievably gorgeous. As I study him, I realize his hair colour is the same golden blonde as mine but that is where the similarity ends. He has a very full and sensual mouth, strong cheek bones and a perfect jaw. Slightly heavy eyebrows and a nose that was obviously broken in the past make his face less than perfect and yet better than perfection; as if the slight deviation is what is really needed to make someone truly beautiful. He possesses a... sexiness that is not quite the same as Kelly’s but it is not far off either.

I feel Sam walk up behind me a bit to my right as he says, “Thanks for your help.”

“But how did you know to show up?” Kelly asks edging a little farther to the left.

The blonde dhampir shrugs, “A few days ago I killed a couple of vampires that were hanging out at the corner of Rue Malar and Rue



Saint Dominique. I went past there the next day and found more of them hanging out there. I thought it was a bit odd but I went ahead and lured one out so I could kill him. While I was fighting him, he told me that I did not look like the dhampir he was sent after. So, I figured there must be another one in town. Yesterday something changed. Instead of just one or two vampires at the corner, there were five. I decided to watch them instead of killing him. Today they got calls and took off together so I followed them here.”

“What made you come over the roof?” I ask but what I really want to know is how he can be so casual about killing.

Another shrug as he examines Kelly. “I followed them for several blocks and then they split up. I figured they were going to try boxing in the other dhampir so I decided to try the roof. It was a bit of a gamble because those fire escape ladders are not that common but I could see the buildings are not that high in this neighbourhood so I figured I could find a spot to jump down.”

“I’m Ann,” I say but do not offer to shake hands. I have the feeling that he would not reciprocate although his posture relaxes marginally as I introduce myself.

“I’m Kelly,” and he shifts slightly as he announces his name. I have the feeling that Kelly had to work hard to repress the offer of a handshake. I glance over at him as affection blossoms in me.

“I’m Sam,” and Sam’s hand lightly touches the small of my back, as if he is trying to warn me about something.

“I am Mike,” the blonde dhampir informs us. He looks directly at Sam, “I have never met another dhampir before.” He relaxes a bit more and steps forward.

“Maybe we should get out of here,” Kelly says. “What if the vampires can follow us by smell?”

Mike gives him a strange look, “Follow us by smell? No one can do that.”

“I can,” Kelly declares.

“How?” the new dhampir asks and looks genuinely interested in and... nervous about the answer.

“Well, I guess it’s because I’m a werewolf.”

Mike smiles at that but it is an odd smile, as if he does not do it very often. There is something... stretched and awkward about it. Mike takes another step forward, looking closely at Kelly and then his eyes drift over to Sam before landing on mine. Shocked recognition

appears in his eyes and this time his step forward is involuntary. “You are a dhampir!”

I nod, puzzled by his astonishment.

“So why did you not kill that bitch?”

The venom in his tone takes me aback. “I...”

Sam steps forward with one hand held out in a placating way, “Calm down, she’s never killed anyone before.”

Sam’s statement works magic on Mike. “Sorry,” he apologizes to me. “I did not know. I forgot that the first time is hard.” Mike looks me directly in the eye as he offers his apology and I see something painful and wary inside him. And something... kindred. I find the feeling uncomfortable.

“By the way, there is no such thing as werewolves.” Mike turns and runs off over the rooftops.

## Chapter 73

“I think that guy might not be right in the head,” Kelly comments as we watch Mike disappear.

“Maybe,” I reply, “Or maybe he knows something we don’t.”

“What else would Kelly be?” Sam asks me.

I shake my head, “I don’t know but I think we should get away from here. If anyone finds those vampires...” I leave it hanging.

Kelly and Sam nod in agreement and the three of us set off across the rooftop, following in Mike’s path.

“Wow, it’s really beautiful up here.” Kelly says as he stops at the edge of the roof. Sam and I exchange a smile. Another fire escape sits directly in front of us so the three of us quickly descend to street level.

As I drop to the street, Kelly asks, “So now what?”

“I say we grab a drink,” Sam offers with his dimple twinkling in his cheek as he speaks.

Kelly’s charming smile spreads across his face, stretching the small scar on his upper lip. “I could be talked into that.”

“Maybe you should call your brother to join us,” Sam’s suggestion indicates a change in his attitude towards the werewolf brothers. I guess the two of them taking on those vampires together created a bond.

“He won’t be happy that he missed out on the action,” Kelly’s voice sounds amused as he pulls out his phone to make the call.

An hour later, we sit in Café l’Alma drinking wine and explaining to John what happened as his face clearly shows his annoyance at missing the fight. As Kelly tells him about Mike’s parting comment that werewolves do not exist, John bursts out laughing. The sound surprises me because it is so... honest. Maybe John won’t drive me crazy.

“He really said that?” John asks still chuckling.

“Yeah,” Kelly sips his wine. Somehow, the wine looks wrong on Kelly. He really looks like a beer drinker; in fact, he looks like a guy who should be in a beer-drinking ad.

“Did he see you change?” John inquires the smile on his face makes him more approachable.

“He must have,” Sam replies with a shrug. “He wasn’t that observant. He didn’t notice that Ann is a dhampir.”

“I thought you could recognize each other,” John’s voice sounds a little puzzled.

“We can, at least Ann and I can so he must be able to.” Sam sips his wine.

“I’m not sure he’s all together there.” Kelly’s voice turns thoughtful.

“Why do you say that?” Sam’s eyes are on Kelly’s face.

“I don’t know... there was something a bit odd... he had a strange way of speaking... it was...” Kelly shrugs and reaches for his wine again. “I don’t know.”

“Well clearly we do exist,” John responds while his eyes drift over to check out our waitress.

“I think he knows something we don’t,” I say blandly. Suddenly all eyes turn toward me and I shrug.

“Why do you say that?” Sam asks as one of his fingers strokes my forearm.

I ignore the tingle that touch causes and explain, “Because he did see Kelly change. And when Kelly changed he wasn’t surprised.”

Sam gives my arm a little tap as he sits up in his chair, “So he must know that people...”

“Shape shift,” I supply.

“Yeah, he must know people who shape shift exist but he doesn’t think they’re werewolves.”

“That’s nuts,” John responds with some heat. “What else could we be?”

John’s question is a good one but I don’t have a good answer. My mind wanders back over Mike’s fighting style; it spoke of practice and knowledge. I look at the three men sitting at the table with me and recall the look of envy on the waitress’ face. Each one is appealing. Sam’s black hair and green eyes match up with the brothers. In fact, I must look like the odd one out with my blonde hair and blue eyes.

“What are you thinking,” Sam asks his beautiful eyes intent on my face.

I shrug, “I think that dhampir knows more than we do.”

## Chapter 74

I sit in Café l'Alma, enjoying the sunshine. I have a vague feeling that this warm sunny day is... wrong. My eyes roam over the streets and people while I take a sip of my coffee. I feel someone pull out a chair beside but I am afraid to look at them.

"It's a beautiful day," a familiar voice says quietly.

"Yes, it is," I agree and take another sip of my coffee.

"Do you feel better?" he asks.

I shake my head, "No, I feel... honestly I don't know what I feel."

"Things have been confusing for a while," his voice soothes me.

"She's dead." I reply and wait for his reaction. I am unable to continue until I know how he feels. Deeply afraid of what he thinks of me, I fidget with my coffee cup.

"I know. You needn't worry."

"I was worried you'd be disappointed in me."

"Why, because you wanted her dead?"

"Yes, she killed you," and with those words I turn to look at Josh sitting calmly beside me.

Josh shakes his head, his thick blonde hair swaying with the motion. "I never wanted you to kill anyone but it was always more important to me that you stay alive."

"I... really wanted her dead. She... deserved death but... I tried not to kill her."

"You succeeded."

"I don't know what to do."

Josh laughs his dimple flashing into existence, "Ann, there isn't anyone who knows what to do all the time."

I smile and reach out to touch him. Solid. Why did I expect my hand to pass through him? He is here. He is real. I clasp his hand in mine. "What should I do?"

"Sorry, I don't have any answers for you." Josh smiles his beautiful dimpled smile. "After all, I'm not really here."

I hold tighter to his hand because I know he will leave soon and I want it to last as long as possible. Josh moves his chair and gently pulls me into a hug. I breathe him in, soak up the sensation of his arms, his

heart beating, and his... reality. I never want the moment to end. I cling to the moment. I want to stay here in his arms, feeling his love.

“Ann, do me a favour. Whatever happens, don’t let yourself be killed.” I feel the warm breath of his words in my hair and I squeeze tighter, not wanting to let go, afraid the moment is passing and he will be gone soon, far too soon. Embracing him, I try to push away the real world so that he can stay with me. I feel it slipping away so I grip him tighter. No, no, no, stay I silently plead. Losing, slipping, falling, my hold grows desperate.

“It will be fine,” he assures me as I feel myself plummet back to reality.

I wake up in my bed staring at the ceiling surrounded by the smell of Josh in the room and the warm lingering pressure of his arms around me.



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## About the Author

Wanda La Claire received an Astrophysics degree at the University of British Columbia. She began writing documentaries for small science theatres and discovered a love for reaching out and connecting with her audiences by breaking down complex ideas and making them more relatable. She moved on to editing other authors' work before deciding to take on writing novels herself.

When not busy writing, Wanda enjoys hiking and rock climbing in the beautiful province of British Columbia. She is currently working on her second novel.

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## “Prey”

For an excerpt turn the page





A woman hurries down the street bundled up against the recent rain. I absently watch her through the window until suddenly Kelly says, "That's Sarah."

"Is it?" I ask, looking a little closer.

"You can't tell?" Kelly's voice and face are all stunned surprise.

"No," I respond, trying to see past the glass. "Through glass they look human to me."

Kelly leans back, "Seriously?"

"Yeah, I think they appear as they did before they became..." I glance around the café to make sure no one can hear. "... vampires."

"That's weird."

"Yeah, because everything else has been normal." My voice is dry.

"Maybe we should go talk to her, tell her to call off the other vampires."

"I doubt she will. She wants us all dead."

"Yeah, but maybe we can learn a little more."

"Like if she really tried to mesmerize you or if she just faked it."

Kelly shrugs on his jacket and flashes his grin at me, "Yes."

I pull on my coat, grab my umbrella and follow Kelly to the door. As we walk out onto the street, I notice the waitress's look of envy. Lucky me, I am leaving with an incredibly sexy werewolf to chase down a vampire. If only she knew, I feel certain the look on her face would not be one of envy. We turn and hurry after Sarah. I glance up at the rooftops, checking to see if anyone is up there. Then I carefully scan the streets.

Kelly discerns what I am doing, "Worried?"

"Yeah, leading us into a trap makes sense, doesn't it?"

"It does. If only I could turn into a bird. I could check out the situation."

Kelly's words startle me into stopping dead on the street.

"What's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing. Just a crazy idea." I say and set out after Sarah again. Can they change into birds? John always makes me think of a falcon while Kelly makes me think of a dog. Is that because John can change into a bird? "Kelly, have you ever tried changing into a bird?"

"What? No, that would be crazy."

"Yeah, because turning into a dog is so normal." I dryly comment.

Sarah turns left down a narrow street. Kelly and I glance at each other and then take off after her. In Vancouver, we would call this road an alley although it is cleaner than an alley would be. Very constricted, only wide enough to allow one vehicle through at a time, the street still has narrow sidewalks for us to walk on. Half way down the block, some construction makes the alley narrower by taping off an area where they are replacing the bricks of the sidewalk. Kelly and I quickly check that there are no other vampires around, making sure to check the roofline.

“Sarah!” I call out.

She spins around, startled. “You! What are you doing here?”

“We wanted to talk to you.” Kelly states while slowly moving towards her.

“We want you to call off your...” I search for a word. “your people.”

She smiles an evil sort of smile. “My people wish revenge, especially Drake. He was very fond of his little toy. And I am not inclined to let you live.”

“Well, it was worth a shot,” Kelly shrugs. We glance at each other, unsure how to proceed. We did not think this through properly.

Sarah lunges with blinding speed and snatches me off my feet. “Everyone is after the two of you.” She says as she holds me up off the ground. Regarding me like an insect, she is about to speak when suddenly she screams and flings me away.

My head hits the wall hard. I see stars swimming in little circles before my eyes. Stars? Or are they fireflies? I try to focus, what the hell are those things twirling around. Lights making little circles but then lights fade out as they complete their pirouettes only to be replaced by new ones doing the same dance. Am I in a cartoon? Am I a cartoon? I give my head a shake but it makes the stars move faster. I hear growling. Growling? I have the feeling that noise is important. Is danger nearby? More growling and scuffling sounds penetrate through the fog in my head. I reach out with my right hand and find the wall, then using it for balance I stand up. My vision clears up. I see a Husky attacking Sarah. He tries to bite her face while she has her hands around his neck, pushing him away. Sarah is unable to strangle Kelly because she cannot get her hands all the way around his neck while he is in his dog form. I search around me for a weapon.

The alley is fairly clean so there isn't much to use but then my eye falls on some pieces of wood within the construction zone. Stake through the heart is what all the stories say. I am not sure if that is what I need to do but it would kill a human being so I hope it will work on a vampire. I edge my way over to the taped off area to grab one of the pieces of wood. I give my head another shake, trying to clear it. What am I thinking? I already know that a stake through the heart kills them. I grab a small chunk of two-by-four and, using dhampir strength, snap it in two, hoping to create a point. The piece breaks into two uneven stakes. Keeping the larger piece in my right hand, I look back at Kelly and the vampire, cursing myself. Sam was right. I should have been working harder at learning how to fight. I put my hands down at my sides, hoping Sarah will not notice the stakes. Her struggle with Kelly keeps her focus on him as I creep around behind her.

As Sarah stumbles about, trying to fend off Kelly's teeth as he snaps at her, I notice she favours her right leg. Blood seeps through her pant leg and the pain affects her ability to maintain her balance. Kelly must have transformed and bit her while she held me. Abruptly, Sarah shoves hard, forcing the dog back a few feet, before kicking him and managing to throw the husky several metres away. Then quick as a shot, she pulls out a gun and fires. The sound of the gun echoes through the alley and in my head. The husky squeals. I cry out as I jump forward and drive the splintered wood into Sarah's back. As her body crumples, I leap over it and scurry to Kelly who is lying on his side, still.

"No, no, no, no," I whisper, running my hands through his bloody fur. "Kelly, Kelly, you have to change. You have to change back to human so I can take you to a hospital. Kelly, can you hear me? You have to change. You have to change." My bloody hands search through his fur for the bullet wound. What the hell do I do if he can't change back to human?