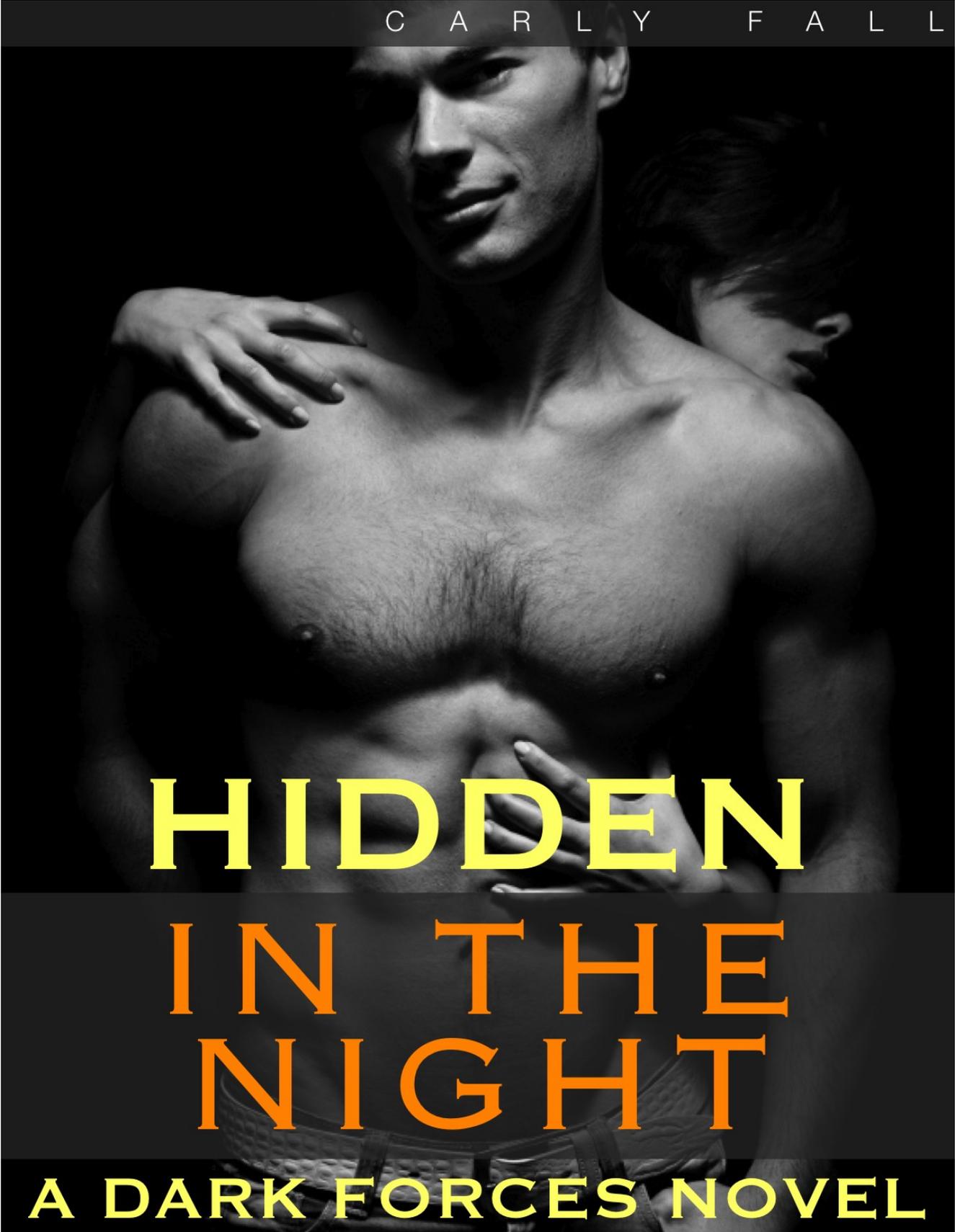


C A R L Y F A L L



HIDDEN

**IN THE
NIGHT**

A DARK FORCES NOVEL

Hidden in the Night
A Dark Forces Novel – Book 2

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Praise for Shackled to the Night and Carly Fall

"Your narrative voice is so strong and unique, raw and honest..."

"Shackled to the Night was a great introduction to the "dark side!" It was very hard to put away, I look forward to more of Carly's work."

"This was a great story. It's very well written. The author has a great writing style that is easy to follow & pulls you in. If you enjoy steamy, dark novels, you'll enjoy this book."

"I LOVED this book! I can tell this is going to be another great series in the paranormal romance genre. I can't wait to read the next in the series, which I am going to guess has to be about Aiden. Hurry up and write, Carly!"

"That book was absolutely wonderful! I gave it 5 stars. When will the series continue? Oh PLEASE don't make me wait too long!"

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Chapter 1

Natalie didn't mind being dead. She really didn't. After a brutal death ten years ago, she resided in Heaven. Actually she resided in the prime real estate of Heaven— the Inner Circle. It was where those who had led exemplary lives ended up after death.

It was pretty. Large buildings made out of crystal housed those who lived there. The residents walked on white clouds. She could eat if she wanted, but she didn't need to. She could sleep or shower if she desired, but she didn't have to. She admired the beauty, and she lived comfortably, but she wasn't happy. No, in fact, she was downright miserable.

The cause of that misery still lived on Earth and went by the name of Aiden. Well, she couldn't even call it living—he simply existed, and he really didn't do a very good job at that. He had closed himself off from everyone except their son, Robert. Beautiful Robert, her son she never got to meet.

She remembered the first time she had laid eyes on Aiden. She had been bartending in a small place on the side of a Texas highway. She had felt eyes on her, and when she turned to the door, there he was. He was tall, dressed in black camo pants, combat boots, a black t-shirt, and a leather biker jacket. He stood somewhere between six and a half to seven feet tall, and weighed between two-fifty and three hundred pounds. His black hair hung to his shoulders, and his whiskey colored eyes seemed to burn her as he looked her over from the doorway. As he got closer, she noted the diamond studs just below his lower lip and on the side of his nose. They glowed in the lights against his chocolate skin. He was raw menace and sex. She had watched as he kicked a drunk man off a stool at the bar and put him in a cab. That had really made her mad because the drunk guy hadn't paid his tab. She confronted him on it, and he had just stared at her.

“Can you hear me, or are you just an asshole?” she had said.

After a moment, he said quietly, “I will take care of his tab.”

Satisfied, she then asked him what he wanted to drink.

“Whiskey,” he said gruffly, “whatever you have.”

“You want the cheap stuff or the good stuff?” she asked.

“The good stuff, please,” he said.

She thought that she had finally a customer with a little bit of class, not to mention money in his wallet.

Their romance had developed slowly. He was at the bar every night she worked. In between her waiting on customers, they talked. She had told him about her life, and told him she liked roses, and that her favorite color was blue. He showed up with blue roses. They talked about the serious, such as her father's death, and how her mother had left when Natalie was only four. Aiden had been kind and

gentle, his brown eyes practically lighting her up with affection, but she noticed how he kept his past to himself.

One time, she had thought she had seen him outside the window of her apartment in the early morning hours, but dismissed the vision. He wouldn't be the type to watch her while she slept. Would he?

Besides the interest in her, she felt a sexual tension between them. She found herself letting her fingers linger as she handed him his drinks, and he held her gaze a little longer than he should. Whenever they touched, or her eyes met his, a jolt ran through her body. She started taking the time to do something with her long, brown hair, and also putting a little make-up on her pale skin. She had to admit, Aiden was raw, bad boy sex, and she should probably stay away from him. Yet, the way he acted was a direct contradiction to the way he looked. He was always the perfect gentleman.

He stayed at the bar every night to walk her to her car, and watched her drive away.

This went on for weeks.

One night as he walked her to her car, she had looked him right in the eye and said, "Are you ever going to kiss me?"

She remembered the look of complete and utter shock that passed over his face, but it eventually faded, and he kissed her. They ended up in her bed for a night that she had never experienced before. It had been amazing.

She remembered what he had said when she told him she thought she was falling in love with him.

He cleared his throat and whispered, "I have been in love with you since the second I laid eyes on you."

Her heart swelled, and she was walking on clouds, similar to what she did now in Heaven, except in the metaphorical sense.

That was until two days later.

He had neglected to mention throughout all their time together that he was a vampire.

Oops.

Of course, she did what any normal girl would do when confronted with that piece of information: She flipped out and told him to get the hell away from her.

Three days later, she couldn't take the ache in her chest any longer. She called in sick to work because her broken heart had really made her physically ill, and she had done nothing but think about her situation.

He had plenty of opportunity to hurt her. They had been alone numerous times. If he wanted to drink her dry and bury her body, as all vampire lore she had heard indicated, he would have done it

already.

Aiden had done nothing to danger her. In fact, he was terribly protective. She noticed how he eyed everyone who came into the bar, how he sneered at anyone who talked to her more than ordering a drink. And the way he walked her to her car every night, his eyes scanning the parking lot, she felt like she was royalty being protected by her honor guard.

But putting all that aside, she missed him. She missed his warm eyes and his big arms around her. She missed his attentiveness, the way he hung on every word she said, the way they made each other laugh.

And sweeping all that under the rug, was there really *that* big of a difference between them? He looked human and he acted human. Maybe there wasn't as much to the whole vampire thing as she thought. She decided to go and find out. She called him, and went to his apartment.

He had told her of his childhood at the hands of a full-bred vampire, or his "bitch mother" as he referred to her. He told her stories of him being in charge of his brothers while his mother was out looking for another mate, and how he had basically shut down emotionally...that was until he met her.

He explained the Behavior Doctrine—the rules the Vampire Nation lived by. It was simple: Humans were never to know about the Vampire Race, and that humans were to never be killed, but revered.

He had told her that the first time he laid eyes on her, he felt a fissure in that wall he had put up around his heart, and that she had quickly eradicated it.

She asked if he wanted to drink from her.

He had been honest, and said yes. She appreciated that honesty, but it sent a spear of fear through her.

They ended up in bed, and she decided to give him the ultimate test. She was desperate to totally trust him, so desperate, that she told him to bite her. She felt so lost, so incomplete without him, she didn't care if she died in his arms.

After a slight hesitancy, he had bitten her. It was an amazing experience to be nourishing the one who she loved, not to mention the heat that coursed through her veins, the lust that licked throughout her body.

They had joked about it later that night.

Aiden actually told her a vampire joke, a bad one, but it was a joke that had them both laughing until the tears came.

Three vampires went into a bar and sat down.

The barmaid came over to take their orders. "And what would you, er, gentlemen like tonight?"

The first vampire said, "I'll have a mug of blood."

The second vampire said, "I'll have a mug of blood."

The third vampire shook his head at his companions and said, "I will have a glass of plasma."

The barmaid wrote down each order, went to the bar and called to the bartender, "Two bloods and a blood light."

On a more serious note, Aiden decided that they needed to leave, to fall off the grid, so to speak. He explained that if he were to be caught with a human female who knew that vampires actually existed, they both would die.

Okay, off the grid was good with her, especially if it meant avoiding death. She didn't have anything tethering her to the area. Besides, she was wholly in love with Aiden, and couldn't imagine a life that didn't include him. Wherever he went, she would follow.

The next night they left on his Harley and headed to Mexico. They had ended up at a small town just over the border. After finding a small cottage for them to live in, they had found out she was pregnant.

The pregnancy had been a huge surprise, but an amazing experience for her. She marveled at the changes in her body, and she probably did a little, okay, a lot of grousing as well. Aiden worshipped her each day, kissing their growing baby, or babe, as he called it. It seemed that the bigger she got, the happier he was. He waited on her hand and foot, always attentive to whatever she may need. He even learned how to do a pregnancy massage, and she bet she was the only pregnant female on the planet that didn't have a sore back. He also rubbed her feet whenever she asked, and helped her indulge in her cravings.

One night, just before dawn, he came through the door with a bag of Candy Corn, her newest craving.

"I had to ride for fifteen miles to track these down for you," he grumbled with a smile on his face. She knew that although he complained, he loved making her happy. And Candy Corn made her very, very happy.

Then, one day, two weeks before her due date, she had decided to go out for a walk in the late afternoon sun. Aiden couldn't go with her as vampires couldn't go in the sun. Secretively, she had been happy for the small amount of alone time. She loved Aiden with everything in her being, but every now and then she just needed a bit of space.

She walked by the flower shop, and just as the sun dipped over the horizon and began to turn the

sky dark, someone had grabbed her from the alley and dragged her in. She remembered the pain from the first knife wound, and resolved that whoever it was, would not destroy her babe. She had fought, but the knife kept coming at her. But she noticed the attacker had deliberately avoided her belly, and seemed hell bent on destroying her. When she finally fell to the ground, not quite ready to accept her death, she heard people at the mouth of the alley. Her attacker fled. She watched faces of strangers loom above her, one on a cell phone, the rest trying to stop the bleeding. She saw a blackness descend on her from above, but oddly, she wasn't afraid. It had been slow, as if it was unsure if it was supposed to claim her. She heard the people above her screaming, someone was crying. She didn't know how many people were there, and she didn't care. She just watched the blackness.

She knew in her heart that if she let go, it would descend on her, engulf her, and that would be it for her time on Earth. But if she fought, she may be able to hold it off. She tried to breath, but she didn't have any fight left in her.

"Your son will live," a large, deep and kind voice told her from the blackness. "But it is your time to come to me."

She nodded, felt a tear trickle down her face. Images of Aiden and a son she would never meet swam in front of her eyes. The heartache she experienced was so strong, it almost hurt worse than the stab wounds in her body. She shut her eyes, let the tears roll down her cheeks and gave up the fight.

Once she reached Heaven, she didn't understand why she hurt so badly. She had thought that all pain would be left on Earth, and that Heaven was nothing but love, happiness, joy, and puppy kisses.

Saint Peter set her straight.

"You loved deeply on Earth," he had said, scanning a clipboard, his grey beard rustling in the heavenly breeze.

She nodded.

He shook his head.

"I have seen this just a few times," he said quietly, his deep blue eyes meeting her gray ones, his brilliant white robe dancing around his ankles. "Your love has transcended."

Natalie wasn't sure what that meant.

Saint Peter nodded and sighed. "Think of it this way: your connection to your love down on Earth cannot be broken unless he lets you go. Until then, you won't have peace. You will feel the pain he feels at your loss." He then touched her cheek, concern in his eyes

"I'm sorry, my dear." He turned to go back to his duty of who decided to get in to Heaven and who didn't.

It broke her heart to feel Aiden in so much pain, and it hurt her. It physically hurt. They had been

so in love when she resided on Earth, that his pain at her death transcended time, space, and dimensions. She could feel what he felt.

She quickly grew tired of the pain that swirled through her. It was debilitating.

She hoped each day that the pain would ease, and sometimes she thought that maybe it had. Then it would come back with such a force it would knock her to her knees. She was so done with all of it, and so a month into her residency in Heaven, she decided to do something about it.

The problem was that she couldn't leave Heaven. Those in the Inner Circle were kept in Heaven. The Creator wanted them safe, so he put the kibosh on any visits to Earth, except for the Guardian Angels, of course.

She had heard about The Fringe, a place on the outskirts of the Inner Circle. It was also a part of Heaven, but it was where those who had lived lives on Earth that didn't quite qualify for Hell resided. The residents of The Fringe didn't walk on clouds, but nice grass. Their buildings weren't made out of crystal, but the place looked like an old western town with wooden buildings. They even had a bar there. Motorcycles buzzed up and down the grassy spaces, where men clad in leather, and few women, roamed the streets.

Those of The Fringe were free to come and go as they pleased because it was up for discussion as to whether they actually belonged in Heaven or not. No one cared what they did. She envied their ability to leave, and she went there multiple times looking for someone to help her. She wanted someone to go down to Earth and help Aiden get over her so that he could go on living without the pain, and in return, she wouldn't be subject to the pain either.

Those from the Inner Circle weren't allowed to cross to The Fringe. Heaven had some pretty stringent rules.

No one paid much attention to her. At first.

Then one day a big male dressed in leather pants and boots and a gray t-shirt with a flop of red hair came over to her. He introduced himself as Mark, and asked why she was always at the border between The Fringe and the Inner Circle. She explained what she wanted him to do, and she also had a message for him to give to Aiden regarding her murderer. She knew who had killed her. The information had been given to her upon her check-in to Heaven, and it was important for Aiden to know.

Why, she didn't know, but he'd agreed. And Mark the Angel went down to Earth to find her beloved Aiden and hopefully talk some sense into him, and give him the message.

Except, he couldn't find him. Natalie kept checking the death records, but it showed Aiden was still alive. Mark looked for ten years, it becoming less of a favor to Natalie and more of a personal

mission for him. And then he found Aiden at his brother Thaddeus's house. Mark had become good friend with Thaddeus during his time on Earth searching for Aiden.

Heaven recently upgraded its ability to monitor Earth. For those who still had ties to Earth, or those who were assigned as Guardian Angels, they could watch the happenings of their loved ones or their charges on large, flat screen TVs that had been installed in all the residences. It was far more convenient than the Pool of Destiny they used to gather around to watch the happenings of Earth.

She had been told that the stronger the ties to Earth, the clearer the picture on the TV would be.

Natalie watched on her flat screen as Mark treated Aiden to a left hook that brought him to his knees on some nice hardwood floors that belonged to Aiden's brother, Thaddeus. The picture was crystal clear.

Mark stood over him. "I have been looking for you for ten years, you fucker."

Natalie covered her face with her hands, her heart breaking at seeing Aiden. He looked wrecked, destroyed. She watched between her fingers as Aiden took the news that a man named Victor Marano had killed her. She watched as he stormed out of the house, and had to look away when he fed from a prostitute. She jumped from the couch as Aiden was attacked on the street by two teenagers with a tire iron, and left on the sidewalk to bleed out. She heard him say her name, a tear trickled down her face, and the pain she felt lanced through her leaving her gasping for air.

The pain eventually faded, and she turned off the TV. She hoped she had done the right thing by sending Mark down there. She prayed that Mark could steer him in the right direction. She knew the only way for her to find peace was through Aiden finding his peace.

Chapter 2

Holly closed the patient chart she had been working on and stretched her arms above her head. As nurse at Saint Mary's Hospital in downtown Reno, Nevada, the end of her night shift was approaching and she looked forward to heading home and getting some shut eye. It had been a busy night, and there was one more bed available on her floor. She hoped she would be able to vacate the hospital before anyone was brought up to fill that bed.

She looked up from behind the desk as the elevator doors opened. John, one of the hospital orderlies, looked at her from the end of the bed he was pushing out into the hall and smiled. Holly groaned inwardly. Her floor was now full.

"Special delivery for the cutest nurse in the hospital," John said. He had asked her out dozens of times, and she had gently turned him down each time. He was sweet, charming, and good looking, but he was also human and she was of the Vampire Nation. She felt there was no point in starting something that couldn't go anywhere. As a member of the Vampire Nation, she had been taught from the time she was old enough to understand the English language to follow the Behavior Doctrine that stated two things: humans must never know about the vampires who lived among them, and humans were to be revered. She didn't have a problem with the latter, but if the former rule was broken, it was punishable by death by those God forsaken soldiers, the Dark Forces, that served The Council. She didn't understand how a relationship with a human could work with that rule hanging over her head. To make her situation even more dire, she was a female vampire, a rarity in her race.

For reasons unknown to anyone in the race, female vampires had stopped being born. There were intelligent guesses that it had to do with a defect in the vampire DNA, but no one knew for sure. There were very few females left of her race, and those who did exist had disappeared from the Vampire Nation. No one knew of their whereabouts. Some had taken to live solitary lives, while others, such as Holly, had decided to hide in plain sight. That was because The Council, the leaders of her race, had decided that they needed to gather up all the female vampires and start breeding them whether they were willing or not. The races numbers needed to be bolstered. Holly wasn't having any of that, and so she went into hiding in plain sight.

She lived among the humans, had a human job, and did human activities with her human roommate. Sure, she still needed blood, but she had found a way around that by using blood from a blood bank and jabbing herself with an IV so she didn't need to go out to feed from a live source—a human. And yes, she couldn't go out in the sun. Telling everyone that she had a terrible and rare skin disease, Xeroderma Pigmentosum, had come naturally to her. If she did in fact have Xeroderma Pigmentosum, she would have developed multiple skin cancers quickly, so people understood why she

did most of her activities at night. She worked the night shift at the hospital. She did her grocery shopping at night. On the rare occasion she decided to go out socially, it was done at night.

If she had really gone out in the sun, the results would have been far more damaging than skin cancer. Since vampires fried in direct sunlight, it would have been instant death.

“What do you have, John?” she asked, walking around the counter to look at the patient.

“Guy found on the sidewalk about a block down. He’s been beaten pretty badly. Concussion, a few broken ribs. He hasn’t come to, no I.D., so he’s a John Doe at this point.”

Holly motioned for John to follow her to the empty room, frustrated. She had been swamped all night long and had literally sat down for the first time that night when John showed up. They had been short one nurse, and things had been just shy of crazy. She was tired and really wanted to go home. She loved her job, loved helping the sick become healthy, loved helping the injured mend. It was also convenient with getting the blood she needed to survive, but as the saying went, stick a fork in her because she was done. For tonight at least.

John grunted as he began pushing the bed. “Jesus, this guy is heavy.”

Once the bed was in place, Holly began looking at the chart. After a quick review, she looked at the patient.

He almost dwarfed the bed. His wide shoulders almost stretched the width of the bed, and he was so tall his feet just about peeked out the bottom of the blanket. His chocolate skin was a stark contrast to the stark white linen that covered him.

She sighed and said, “Thanks, John. I’ll take it from here.”

“Are you sure I can’t interest you in a cup of coffee after your shift ends?” John asked hopefully.

She smiled and shook her head. How many times did she need to reject him until he got the message? She did give him points for perseverance though.

John shrugged and left. Holly pulled the curtain to give her and her new patient privacy. She quickly examined the bandage on his head, and then pulled down the sheet to examine the rib area. ER had done a nice wrap job on his ribs, she thought. She couldn’t help but notice the grooves and plains that indicated a heavy muscular build under the dark skin all the way down his torso. She studied the tattoo that rested over his heart—a snake gripping a heart, squeezing it. The snake’s body slithered up his chest, and its head rested just below the male’s ear.

His face had fine features, and she looked at the piercing just below his lower lip and the one on the side of his nose. Both piercings were diamonds. *At least he has good taste*, she thought. She studied him closer and realized that even while resting, his face indicated that he was a very hard man, perhaps even a cruel, dangerous man. But he didn’t scare her. Working as nurse for as long as she had,

which would be ninety-nine years, thank you very much, she had come across some pretty tough guys and she knew she could take care of herself. She often found that the bigger the guy, the tougher they looked, the bigger babies they were when it came to injuries and healing. Especially needles. She had seen guys this size cringe in fear when she brought in a needle.

She made her notes in the chart and looked at her watch. It was an hour before dawn, and the ache that signaled to those of her kind that the sun was fast approaching began to take up residence in her spine.

She looked down at the patient and gently brushed his cheek. “What happened to you, buddy?” she whispered.

And then she saw it—a small V on the side of his neck. She gasped and drew her hand away. All male vampires were born with that marking on their necks. She looked over him again, at the sheer size of him. He had to be one of the soldiers who were dedicated to protecting the Vampire Nation, one of the sons of Rusalka of The Council, one of the Dark Forces. If that was the case, then she needed to get away from him. The last she had heard, The Council wanted to herd up all the female vampires and mate them, whether they wanted to or not, to build up the dwindling races numbers. It was at that point that Holly had picked up and moved from New York and began her trek across country, eventually ending up in Reno, Nevada. She didn’t want to be found by The Council, any of their soldiers, or anyone of her race. She had made herself disappear within the human population. She would not be used as baby maker. She had no family—she had been orphaned as a child—and she hadn’t talked to another vampire in a hundred years. It was too risky. She couldn’t trust anyone.

As she stared at the big male in front of her, she felt like her heart may explode from her chest from fear. She hadn’t been afraid of him before, but now she had realized that she was staring at one of her own race, who most likely was a soldier for the Dark Forces, and there was a difficult dilemma that she needed to solve quickly. She couldn’t very well leave him here—he would go up in smoke once the early morning sunrays came through the window. She couldn’t allow the humans to see that happen. But she didn’t want him to know about her either.

So, what should she do with him?

Her duty as a nurse, sworn to protect life, overrode her need for self-preservation. She needed to get him out of there, needed to take him somewhere to heal. If need be, she would disappear again and go somewhere and start her life over after he was better.

She checked her watch again and began formulating a plan. She had forty-five minutes to make her exit. The day shift hadn’t arrived yet, and her floor was quiet. She thought she could probably get him to the elevator and take him down to the morgue. From there, if she was lucky, she could slip him

out the back and get him into her car that was parked close to the back. She parked there because that side of the building faced east, and it was the last place to receive the sun's rays. If she ever got held up, that was her best chance of making it out of the building without turning to ash. So far, she had been terribly lucky, and if asked to work during the day, she always fell back on her pretend case of Xeroderma Pigmentosum. That little mouthful had allowed her to always get in and out of the hospital without seeing daylight.

To make her plan work, she was going to need his help. He was far too large for her to haul into her car. He must have stood at six and a half feet and weighed around two-hundred and fifty pounds. She was five-foot-four if she stretched and barely tipped the scale at one hundred ten pounds wet. He was going to have to pull his own weight if they were going to get out of there. Alive.

She took a deep breath and placed her hand on his shoulder, gently shaking him and leaned down to his ear. "C'mon, big guy. I'm going to need your help to get out of here," she whispered softly.

No response.

She shook him a little harder. "Wake up!" she whispered more harshly.

No response.

She stood up, beginning to panic. As a nurse, she did not panic. She oozed the calm, cool, and collected thing. Nothing shook her. Until now.

"Shit," she said under her breath. "Shit, shit, shit!" Very rarely did she swear, but she felt this situation called for it.

She looked around the room trying to come up with a plan B. Her position was very precarious. If she didn't get out of there herself, she would be up in flames as well. She simply couldn't leave him though.

She turned back to him and leaned down to his ear again. "Wake up, now!" she hissed.

She watched as the eyelids fluttered, and she gasped when they opened. If she had thought he looked cruel and dangerous before, he looked lethally scary with his eyes open. His eyes were a light brown and showed no emotion except pain and anger. She took a step back from him, her hand going to her mouth. She had a passing thought that perhaps she should have left him for the sun.

He looked at her, and then gazed around the room. As he processed where he was, his eyes flared, and Holly thought she saw a flicker of something related to fear pass over his face, but it faded as fast as it had come. She wasn't sure she had seen it at all.

She willed some steel into her spine and stepped toward the bed again. She cleared her throat and spoke in a low tone, knowing he could hear her with his superior hearing.

"I know what you are," she said. "And the sun is going to be up in under an hour. I think I can

get us out of here, but I need your help.” She took a deep breath and continued. “I know you're hurt, but I obviously can't lift you. I'll need you to walk a little bit.”

He looked at her, his brown eyes questioning. He swallowed and said in a dry whisper, “And what do you think I am?”

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you with me or not, vampire? We have to get moving or we're both going to go up in smoke.”

His eyebrows lifted, curiosity now flaring in his eyes. “Are you...?”

She let out a sigh. “Yes. Can we discuss it later? Please? I'm telling you, we're running out of time and us sitting here shooting the bull is doing nothing but wasting it.”

He nodded and began to haul his upper body off the bed. Pain lanced across his face as sweat broke out on his brow. She gently put her hand on his shoulder and lightly pushed him back down. He breathed heavily.

“Not yet,” she said. She explained her plan of rolling him out down to the morgue. “When we get to the door leading outside, then I'll need you to walk a few steps to my car. I'm taking you back to my house. It's the only way to save you.”

He nodded again and closed his eyes.

She undid the breaks on the bed, flung back the curtain, and pushed him out. John had been right; he was heavy. Even though she was small, she still had the strength of a human male. She had almost made it to the elevator when the morning nurse supervisor came around the corner. Her scrubs matched her red hair that was perfectly coiffed around her head, her big body jiggling with each step. Holly always thought the woman looked like the apple from the old *Fruit of the Loom* men's underwear commercials when she wore the red scrubs.

Holly swore again under her breath and felt her stomach jitterbug from nerves. She could be very busted right now.

“Oh, hey Holly,” she said, looking questioningly at the huge man lying on the bed.

“Hi Shari,” Holly said, pushing the button to summon the elevator.

“Does he have tests or something?” Shari asked.

Holly nodded. “The doctor ordered a cat scan on him, but the orderlies are really busy right now and said it would be about a half hour before they could make it up here. I checked this guys pupils and thought he should have that cat scan sooner than later.”

“That's too bad,” Shari said. “Mind if I take a look?”

Holly felt herself pale. She knew damn well there wasn't anything wrong with the male's eyes. She had never liked Shari. Shari liked being in charge and second-guessed all of the nurses, but Holly

couldn't say no to the supervisor. Besides, it would only draw more attention to the situation, making Shari more inquisitive.

Shari approached the bed and said, "Maybe you won't have to take him down. Let's see if he really can wait."

As she leaned over the bed, the man's hand whipped up and grabbed her arm. She gasped as she looked at him, and then calmed.

Holly watched as the male on the bed held the stare of Shari. She knew what he was doing; she had heard about first generation half-vampires having special psychic abilities, like being able to read minds, put humans in light trances, or erase memories of both vampires and humans. She knew there were some that could even dematerialize, or sense others feelings. She knew from what she had read while studying the history of her species, and what she had witnessed before when she actually associated with those of her own species, that he was putting Shari in a light trance. She certainly didn't possess any psychic skills herself. Watching him as he did his voodoo on Shari sealed the suspicion that he was a direct descendent of The Council and a soldier of her race, a member of the Dark Forces. She felt her insides tighten, and wondered what she had gotten herself into.

"Once the elevator comes," the male said in a whisper, his eyes locked into Shari's, "you will help Holly push this bed in. Then you will go to the desk and sit down, unaware that you ever saw Holly or me. You will then go into the computer and erase any records that pertain to me. Do you understand?"

Shari nodded, and as if on cue, the ding signaled the elevator's arrival, and the doors slid open.

The male had released Shari and was lying quietly with his eyes closed.

Thankfully, the elevator was empty. Holly and a tranced-out Shari pushed in the bed, and Holly watched as Shari went over to the desk and sat down. The elevator doors closed, and Holly let out a sigh.

"That was close," she said more to herself than to the patient.

His eyes opened and he stared up at her. "What's next?" he asked hoarsely.

"Basement. Morgue. Out the back door and into the car. I live a few miles away, but we should make it back to my house before dawn. Once we're there, you're going to have to go down some stairs, but then that's it."

He nodded and shut his eyes again.

As the elevator took them down to the ground floor, Holly found herself staring at the vampire. Yes, his face was hard, and he had an air of danger around him, but there was also an undertone of raw sex. A bad boy, she thought to herself. A hard, dangerous, terribly sexy bad boy. She bet he went

through women faster than she went through Kleenex when she had a cold.

He is your patient, the nurse in her scolded. *Not to mention, he does the bidding of The Council. Forget any undertones, sexual or otherwise. Get him well and get him out of your life.*

The doors opened to the basement. She pushed the bed out onto the cement flooring, silently cursing the wheel that squeaked slightly. She saw the door to freedom straight ahead, that big, red exit sign above it a beacon. It looked as though it were miles away. She found herself pushing the bed faster, and threw up a little prayer that they didn't run into anyone.

As she pulled the bed to a stop by the door, she put her arms under his armpits and began to help him up. His face strained with pain as he sat up. He began to bring his legs to the side of the bed to get off. The sheet crawled up his legs, showing off the strong lines of his thighs, and then she realized he was naked. Of course he was naked. They had cut off his clothes in the Emergency Room, and she hadn't put a hospital Johnny on him yet. She had meant to do that right after she examined his wounds, but she obviously got sidetracked by the whole "my patient is a vampire" thing.

"Wait!" she whispered. "Let me get you some scrubs." She ran back down the hall and found a bathroom and locker room that the morgue employees used. As she eased the door open, she heard the shower going and someone humming softly. She slipped into the dressing room area and found some scrubs sitting on a bench. They would be a little small on her patient, but they would have to do. She sent a mental apology to the person in the shower who wouldn't have anything to wear once they got out.

She ran back down the hall. Her patient now had beads of sweat on his brow, and his breathing was labored. She thought about putting the scrubs on him, about seeing all of his body. Despite the harrowing situation she found herself in, the thought of seeing her patient naked sent a shiver in her gut. She shook her head, reminding herself that she was a professional and she had seen thousands of male naked bodies. She had even had a relationship or two way back when. Okay, way, way back when. Like over a hundred years, but who was counting? *But you've never a body as big as that*, a small voice whispered in her head.

Her patient would not be able to bend over to put the scrubs on his feet because of the bandages around his torso, not to mention his wounds. She bent down and helped put the scrubs over his feet, then drew them up to his knees and over his thighs to the sheet. She stopped. She looked at his face and was surprised to see a slight grin that made his brown eyes spark, despite the obvious pain he was in.

"I'll take it from here," he whispered.

She turned around, hearing the sheet rustle as he pulled the scrubs to his waist. She heard a

violent curse, and turned to see him standing up. She braced herself under his armpit, and he put a bit of weight on her, using her as a crutch. She lightly put her arm around his waist without applying too much pressure so she wouldn't hurt him further. She pushed open the door to the outside.

The sun hadn't made its appearance yet, but the night sky was no longer dark. Holly felt her back ache, her internal warning that she needed to get indoors and out of the sun's harmful rays.

"Stay here and let me get my car," she said, pointing at the silver Honda about one hundred and fifty feet away. Her patient cursed again, and she felt his body begin to tremble. He leaned up against the brick building, and she sprinted for her car. If he passed out in the parking lot, she didn't know what she would do.

She jammed the keys into the ignition, her hands shaking. She drove the car over to her patient, and then ran around the car to help him in. She watched as he slowly folded himself into the seat, wincing and breathing heavily. When he was finally in, she shut the door and ran around the car to the driver's side. She stomped on the gas, her back on fire, her eyes beginning to water from the UV rays making their way into the day.

She sped down the street, thankful that the traffic was light. Ten minutes later they pulled into her garage.

Her patient had kept his eyes closed the whole trip. She knew he was conscious only because he kept swearing under his breath.

"We just need to get you inside and down those stairs I told you about," she said getting out of the car.

She opened the door for him, and he slowly stood up.

"Dizzy," he growled. "Going to be sick."

"Don't you dare pass out on me or throw up," she demanded through gritted teeth. "Not yet anyway. You can do whatever you want once we get down those stairs."

He looked down at her, surprise showing on his face despite the fact that he looked two shades away from death. She put herself under his arm again, hoped he listened to her, and began walking toward the door that led to the house.

Chapter 3

Aiden came to consciousness with a headache that could have crippled an elephant and a stabbing pain in his ribs. His head hurt so badly he didn't want to open his eyes, and he wondered just how much whiskey he had consumed the previous night for him to be feeling this bad. And the way his ribs felt, yeah, there had probably been a fight. Probably a fight he didn't win.

He felt the bed beneath him, and a jolt of recognition that he wasn't in his own hit him. If not in his bed, then where was he?

He forced his brain to kick into gear and backtrack, and the memories began to trickle in. He had been in downtown Reno on his way to a strip club, and not for the fun of it either. That's right, there were kids disappearing. Kids who had been half human and half vampire, but their human DNA had been stronger than their vampire DNA. That's right. That Victor Marano guy had taken those kids and given them shots to activate their vampire DNA.

He remembered being with his brother Thaddeus and finding the warehouse with all the bunk beds. They had guessed that Victor Marano, who had quickly become an arch nemesis, as well as a grade A asshole, had housed the boys in the warehouse because it didn't have any windows, and frankly it was a perfect place to house a bunch of vampire boys. They had found a matchbook with the strip club name on it, *Fantasies*, if he recalled correctly. He had told Thaddeus to go home, and he would look into the strip club, but he had never made it there.

After feeding from a prostitute, he had felt really lethargic and he had put together some sort of puzzle having to do with Natalie, his dead mate's, death. He had been so engrossed and tired he hadn't heard his attackers coming.

He had been hit with a tire iron and left on the sidewalk. He remembered looking up at the stars, feeling blood trickle down his head into his ear and thinking that he would finally get to see his beloved Natalie, who had died ten years prior, because he had been certain that death was upon him.

No whiskey had been involved.

He remembered a voice. A soft voice hissing at him to wake up, and he had, despite not wanting to because he was certain he was on his way to see Natalie. Natalie never talked to him like that, and he knew if he was hearing other voices besides hers, chances were that he wasn't heading to wherever Natalie had gone. Yet, he had been compelled to see what that soft, demanding voice wanted from him.

When he awoke, he looked into the face of a woman who appeared to be in her late twenties, a woman with spiky black hair, navy blue eyes and smooth, almost translucent white skin. What had she said to him? Hospital. He was in the hospital, and she knew what he was and she needed to get both of

them out of there. He remembered looking up at the building at the name of the hospital as he stood outside with dawn fast approaching—Saint Mary's Hospital. The irony wasn't lost on him. He remembered thinking how odd it was that his mate had lost her life at Saint Mary's Hospital, Hospital de Santo Mary in Mexico, and he was getting his life saved at a hospital of the same name, just a different country.

There had been a car ride to her house. Those stairs had just about killed him, and he had thrown up in her bathroom while she held his hair back and rubbed his shoulders, making soothing shushing sounds.

He cracked his eyes and looked around the small bedroom. A small lamp bathed the room in a soft glow. He was nestled under a stark white comforter. The walls had been painted a soothing moss green. In the corner was the nurse with the navy blue eyes who had saved his hide. She was curled up in an overstuffed white chair, her small frame fitting perfectly in it. Her head rested on her knees, her arms wrapped around her shins, and judging by the steady rise and fall of her back, she was sleeping. Her hair shot out from her head in all directions and she almost looked like a child. Did he know her name? Holly. Yes. That red-haired nurse who wanted to double-check his eyes had called her Holly.

He had to piss, and he also needed to get the scrubs off. They were too small, pinching his balls and trying to make a trip north up his ass. He tried to sit up. A groan escaped his lips, but he made it vertical. He just needed to get his feet on the ground and take the five steps to the bathroom. As he eyed the doorway, it looked so far away it might as well be on another planet.

“Let me help you,” the soft voice said, and his nurse was by his side in seconds. She helped him to the doorway of the bathroom.

He steadied himself with both hands on the doorjamb and growled, “I can take it from here.”

She stepped away and he shut the door to take care of his business.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He was in bad shape. The bruising from the head wound had made its way down to his face, giving his skin darker blotches. He imagined the bruising under the bandage holding his ribs together wasn't much better.

He stumbled out of the bathroom and to the bed, waving the nurse off as she tried to help him.

He got to the bed and looked over at her. “Turn around,” he said roughly.

“Excuse me?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

“I can't stay upright too much longer, so turn around.”

She didn't turn around, just looked at him with wariness and confusion.

He sighed. “Suit yourself.” He dropped the scrubs. He knew she caught an eyeful, but he didn't care. He felt the swell of nausea beginning again.

He got himself into bed, rested his head on the pillows and closed his eyes while throwing his arm over his face. He took a couple of deep breaths—as deep as he could—to try to stave off the nausea.

“I guess I owe you a thank you,” he said when it had passed a few minutes later. “My name's Aiden, by the way.” He usually wasn't much for the polite chit-chat, but she had saved his ass, and he figured she would want to know the name of the naked male in her bed.

She didn't say anything, but sat down on the edge of the bed.

“I'm Holly, Aiden.” She was silent for a moment. “The way you can thank me is not to turn me into The Council,” she said softly.

He moved his arm and looked up at her.

“You're one of the Dark Forces, aren't you?” she asked.

He nodded slightly.

“I don't want to be turned in for breeding purposes,” she said strongly. “So here's the deal.”

As he had slept, she had put together her plan. Once he was able to get by on his own and she was certain that the wounds were healing correctly, she would pack up her stuff and head out of town. She knew a human that bought and sold identities, and she would contact him and start her life over. She loved her job, but she knew she couldn't go back now. She was certain that the security cameras had caught her great escape with the patient. If she went back now, she would be fired. It was also a possibility that she would have the police after her if Aiden's little mind trick didn't work on Shari and she didn't erase his medical records. She wondered what crime name would be tagged to taking a patient from a hospital. Kidnapping? But he had been willing to go, so it wasn't kidnapping. In his condition, she supposed it could be considered attempted murder. She shook her head, not wanting to think about the crimes she had committed.

She had some money stashed away, so she was set financially for a while until she could find another nursing job. The lease on her place was month-to-month, so she could bail at any time. She had picked up and moved many times before, and she could do it again. Being a member of the Vampire Nation, she looked like a woman in her late twenties, even though she was over two hundred years old, two hundred and two, to be exact. She could only stay in one place for about five or ten years, and then she needed to move on before people questioned why she didn't age. She had been on the run for just shy of a hundred years, so she had done a lot of moving. She had the process down to a science.

She would simply disappear from the area. She wasn't going to hang around and wait for him to get better so he could do his job.

He listened as she explained her plan. Her navy eyes flashed with determination, and the only thing he could think was that she was a female vampire. He was staring into the eyes of a female vampire. It had been what...seventy-five years, give or take a decade since he had laid eyes on a female vampire?

He watched her mouth as she talked, looking for the little tips of her fangs. She pushed her hand through her hair a lot, a nervous habit he guessed, and that was why it was always sticking out. For some reason, on her, it looked cute.

That was how he would describe her: cute. Her little nose upturned at the tip, her hand flew around while she talked. Her eyes were kind, but tough. She may have been small, but she didn't put up with any bullshit.

Despite how horrid he felt, he found a smile on his lips as she finished.

"You don't need to go anywhere," he said. "I'm not telling anyone anything."

She looked at him, wariness in her eyes. He could tell she didn't know if she should believe him or not.

For some reason that he couldn't fathom, he wanted her to believe him. He wanted her to trust him. He hadn't given a shit what anyone thought in so long, since Natalie, and the feeling surprised him.

And she didn't know who she was dealing with. Of all of his brothers, he was the one who didn't give a shit about The Council, their Behavior Doctrine, or their wishes or rules. He had been the one brother that had broken everything The Council had laid out to protect the Vampire Nation. He had fallen in love with a human. He had told that human what he was, that he was different from her. She had accepted him, and they had given birth to a beautiful boy, a half-breed vampire conceived out of love instead of the violence in which he and his brothers were conceived.

Although he wanted her trust, he didn't have it in him to keep talking to try to convince her he was one of the good guys. Well, maybe that was an overstatement. He wasn't going to tell anyone about her. He was a very strong believer in live and let live. He didn't care who you were, what you did, who you slept with, who you didn't. He figured as long as you weren't hurting anyone, then all was good. That belief certainly didn't qualify him as a good guy. He had done too much killing in his life to earn that title.

He closed his eyes again and put his arm over his forehead. He needed to get his head on somewhat straight so that he could call Thaddeus and tell him where he was, and that overall, he was basically okay. He needed to talk to his son, Robert. That fucking jackhammer kept going off in his head, making it difficult to think straight. He felt like maybe a full lobotomy wouldn't be such a bad

idea.

He felt her stand up, her light weight lifting from the bed. Her footsteps were muffled by the carpet as she headed back to her chair. They sat in silence for a moment.

"How long have I been out?" he asked.

"About a day and a half."

He nodded, and then there was more silence.

"So that's it?" she asked. "That's the end of the conversation?"

He sighed. "Not much of a talker," he said. "But you have my word, Holly, your secret is safe with me."

She watched him drift back to sleep. As a nurse for almost ten decades, she had seen more than her fair share of male bodies. She thought she had seen it all—black, white, tall, short, fat and thin—just about any combination that a person could think of. However, staring at her patient, she was in awe of him. He was sheer, raw power. She thought that she should be frightened of him, just because of his size. Those dead, angry eyes should have been the icing on the fear cake. And she had to admit she was scared, although she was trying like hell to fight that fear. She just had to keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't do anything that would compromise her situation.

She thought about the promise he had just made. Could she trust that he was telling her the truth?

She felt she should trust him, but quickly shut that down. She shouldn't believe a word that came out of his mouth. She hadn't trusted anyone in a very long time—vampire or human—and she shouldn't start now. She was a female vampire, after all, a rarity in her race. The leaders of her race, The Council, had wanted to haul in all the female vampires for a breeding program. She couldn't trust a vampire for fear that she would be turned in. She had willingly given up all contact with her four female vampire friends she had hung out with in New York a hundred years ago. They had all separated just in case one of them was caught, and wouldn't tell where the others were.

She didn't trust humans, even though she lived with one. She had learned the history of her race, how humans had almost decimated the Vampire Nation, leaving her kind to the sun, burning them alive, putting stakes through their hearts.

Not that those full-bred vampires didn't deserve it. They had been evil, terrible creatures coming close to matching the folklore the humans had of vampires, but she wasn't going to risk the human belief in the folklore either. She had read up on that as well. Vampires killed humans, vampires could turn humans into vampires—and her favorite—a vampire was the undead, and their heart didn't beat.

Really?

Because right now it felt like hers was about to come out of her chest.

Chapter 4

Aiden woke again and took a quick inventory of his body. The jackhammer in his skull had subsided to a dull throbbing, but he still didn't want to open his eyes. He didn't feel like he was going to lose his lunch any longer, and it didn't hurt to breathe. Well, it didn't hurt as bad as it did a few hours ago. Progress could be a beautiful thing.

As a first generation half-breed vampire, his healing skills far surpassed humans and other vampires. What he did feel in his body was the undeniable clench in his stomach that signaled he needed to feed.

He needed blood.

He opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was Holly standing over him, looking at him with a scrutinizing "I'm a medical professional" look. He stared back.

"You need to feed," she announced. She didn't wait for an answer, but turned away and brought up a needle.

"What the fuck is that?" he asked, his voice raspy.

"The way I feed," she said mildly, as if she were showing him a grocery list.

She swabbed his arm to insert the needle, but he jerked away.

He didn't even know what to say, he just stared at her, questions in his eyes. Vampires fed from live sources—humans. Vampires who were committed to each other for a long-term relationship fed from each other as a way to seal their bond. He had never, ever heard of a vampire going the IV route.

She rolled her eyes. "Are you afraid of needles?"

He shook his head. "What are you doing?"

"This is the way I feed. I need to stay under the radar. I can't hunt live prey because it makes my scent so much stronger, so I manipulated some medical records to get access to blood. I get the blood; vampires can't smell me. It's quick and painless and I get the nourishment I need."

She grabbed his arm and held it in place. He watched in disbelief as the needle pierced his skin and she turned the valve to allow the blood to flow into him.

He tracked the red liquid sliding down the clear tube, awed by the lengths this female had gone to protect herself. Of course she would need to feed via the IV. If she were to feed out of a live source, her scent would be easily detected by all vampires, especially male vampires. All female vampires either smelled of lavender or eucalyptus. He took a deep breath to see if he could smell either scent, but he only detect a faint lavender. To anyone who didn't know she was a female vampire, it would have smelled like a lotion or maybe a shampoo. She had lied and manipulated to keep herself safe from her own race. He decided there wasn't any logic in that fucked up scenario.

He felt the blood race through his veins. The nourishment it delivered seeped into his muscles, his fibers, his cells. It wasn't nearly strong enough though. This transfusion bullshit she had going would nourish him for a day or so. He wondered how she had lived like that. She looked healthy and strong. He wondered what her abilities would be if she fed like she was meant to, out of a live, breathing being. He imagined she would be a force to be reckoned with. Well, hell. Who was he kidding? She was already a force to be reckoned with. With live, fresh blood cells coursing through her, she would be unstoppable. He certainly wouldn't want to be in any path she swathed.

He watched her as she watched the blood drain from the bag she had hooked up to the top of the bedside lamp. Her face was clinical as she began to change the bandage on his head.

She had showered while he slept. Her face glowed with that just washed clean, her short hair lay almost flat against her scalp. Almost. His eyes traveled further down and noticed her white t-shirt—the glow from the lamp outlined the fact that she did not wear a bra, and her breasts were small, full and round and utterly perfect.

He tried to remember the last time he had laid eyes on a female vampire, about seventy-five years ago. It was just a vague recollection. He had been sent to kill the female vampire's mate because he had been killing humans. Once he had done his job, she had been overjoyed. Apparently her mate had beat her, so there wasn't any love lost. He had left when she offered him sex in return for the "favor" he had done her. Yeah, his last interaction with a female of his race hadn't left him with much confidence in his race's future. Holly was different—he knew that immediately. She was kind and good and everything that one of the Vampire Nation should hope to be.

As he stared at the outline through her shirt, he felt his cock come alive for the first time in ten years, and lust tore through him, lighting fire through his body. He felt like a lynch, but he couldn't take his eyes off the outline of her breasts. Visions of her straddling his hips, those beautiful breasts swaying as she rode him, danced through his head.

Really, where the hell did that come from? He hadn't even had the smallest interest in anyone since Natalie died.

"I think that's enough," she said as she turned the dial to stop the blood flow. He wasn't sure if she meant the blood or him staring at her chest with fantasies running through his head.

He closed his eyes again and tried not to think about his throbbing cock. He felt her slip the needle from his arm and put a bandage over the entrance. She began to clean up the makeshift IV stand.

"Thank you," he said, his voice stronger now that he had blood.

"You're welcome," she said softly.

He opened one eye and watched her walk into the bathroom. She had on a pair of pink sweat pants that said *Juicy* across the butt. Her sweet little ass swayed back and forth as she walked, making him think that *Juicy* was a perfect description for it. His cock got even harder, if that was possible. He closed his eyes again as she looked over her shoulder at him, as if she felt his eyes on her. He didn't want to get busted staring at her again. The blood was making him tired and lethargic, but he couldn't get his mind off of Holly. Images swam through his head of his hands running up and down that ass, his lips on her breasts.

Guilt consumed him, making his body twist in pain. Well, more pain. He felt that just thinking about Holly was desecrating his memory of Natalie, but there was a small voice in his head that told him it was time to move on, to start living again. That scared him a bit. In the ten years since her death, he hadn't allowed himself to get close to a woman, let alone be alone in the same room with one. Yet, here he was in bad shape, naked in a woman—no, a female vampire's—bedroom. He wasn't ready to move on. Not yet. Maybe never. He reminded himself of the oath he had taken—he would never get close to another female. Period. End of story.

Jesus, he was tired.

As he drifted off, his mind took him back in time, to the past of his people, to his childhood. After most of the pure-bred vampires had been eradicated from the planet by the humans, there were five pure-breeds left, which formed The Council. The Council, made up of four males and one female, his mother Rusalka, had decided that to help the Vampire Nation meld into the human population, they needed to merge the two species. The four male vampires repeatedly raped human women to bring the hybrid species into existence. Rusalka was in charge of bearing the warriors of the race. The warriors would do The Council's bidding. They would be the strongest among the Vampire Nation, and Rusalka took her job very seriously. She scoured the Earth for human men that fit her qualifications of what made a good mate: strength and brains.

He realized at an early age that his mother was evil. The way she mated with humans was to cloak herself to whatever appealed to her potential mate. Pure-bred vampires could do this—make themselves look human, which they weren't even close to. They were thin with long bony heads, pasty white skin, and large black pits for eyes. Their fangs hung over their lips, their claws protruded from their long talon-like hands. They were nasty creatures.

Once she was cloaked as a potential mate for the male she had chosen, she would take them to her bed. When she was certain she had conceived, she would de-cloak and reveal her true nature. Then she would kill the sire of her child. She did this over and over, until there were nine brothers. She had killed one of her sons for falling in love with a human female, so now they were down to eight.

Aiden's father had been a tribal leader in Africa. He had been a strong male, one with a sixth sense of knowing when danger was coming. Aiden never understood why his father hadn't sensed his mother coming his way—she was the poster child for danger—but he didn't. His father had paid the price, and Aiden had gotten the bonus prize of this wonderful trip here on the Earth.

His first recollection of his childhood was when he was about six or so. Being the first-born son of Rusalka of The Council was a hard role to be thrown into. He remembered when it became crystal clear at age six that his mother did not, and would not, ever love him, and that he had two purposes in life. First, he would take care of his siblings. Second was that he would be a straight-up killer. From that point on, he had never shed a tear again, never begged his mother for affection. He did as he was told and did so to the best of his abilities.

It was at that time that he also shut himself down emotionally, especially toward Rusalka. He became cold inside, and he believed that emotional detachment from just about everyone helped him in his training and kept him from the pain of wanting that emotional attachment. Better just to shut down.

His mother began training him the day he began walking. Walking quickly turned to running. By age four, he was learning martial arts. At age five, he began to handle guns. At age eight, he was an expert marksman. His blade training didn't come until age ten, but he excelled at that as well. At eleven, as his mother looked for the sire of her next child, he found himself caring for his younger brother Thaddeus in jungles of Africa. He had been responsible for making sure the kid got back to the cave where they were living for the time being, as well as feeding him. Aiden found he excelled at hunting and killing. He had the patience even at an early age to wait for his prey, and he killed with brutal efficiency. One night, he and Thaddeus had dined on monkey. It certainly didn't taste like chicken. He wouldn't recommend it, but when you were hungry you ate what you had to.

By age thirteen he was not only in charge of Thaddeus, but Cyril, another brother, as well. His mother had been so impressed with the human male that sired Cy that she decided to stick around and see if she could find another intelligent German to give her the next child.

Since they were all approximately five years apart, that put Thaddeus at around eight and Cy at three. Thaddeus could pretty much take care of himself, but still relied on Aiden to help him hunt, to help him get his training down so that he wouldn't be beaten by their mother when she returned. Thaddeus had a hard time with authority and often ended up being smacked around by good old mom. If that didn't work, then she often put him in a room for a few days with no other contact. Solitary confinement.

"You make sure Thaddeus has those knife moves down, Aiden," his mother had hissed at him before she left.

Aiden nodded. He said as little as possible to his mother. When she turned around, he gave her the one finger salute. He used to try to get her to love him. When that didn't happen, he hated her with a passion so deep it frightened him sometimes. He just wished she would cease to exist.

Aiden hated watching his brother being beaten, so he worked hard with Thaddeus.

"Thaddeus, you don't spin the knife like that. You spin it like this. And if you keep doing it the way you're doing it, you're going to stab yourself. Then we'll both be in trouble. Please. Just do it the way I'm showing you."

Thaddeus rolled his eyes and sighed. "I'm tired of doing this, Aiden. Can we work on guns for a while? I like the guns. Who cares what she does."

"No, Thaddeus," Aiden said forcefully, knowing full well that Thaddeus would be caring a lot when their mother began to beat him. "Mommy Dearest is going to want to see this when she gets back. Come on. Try it one more time."

And Thaddeus did, and he finally got it.

"Now do it again, Thaddeus. Make it so you can do it in your sleep." Just then, Cyril started crying, and Thaddeus moved to go see what Cyril wanted.

"No, Thaddeus. I'll get him. You keep practicing." As he walked away, Aiden beamed with pride at his brother, but also at himself. He was pretty certain he had just saved his brother from a beating.

He realized that being so hard on Thaddeus was twofold. First, he didn't want to watch or hear Thaddeus get beaten. That was self-preservation. Second, he knew Thaddeus had a hard time with authority, and often got a little mouthy with their mother. A couple of times, Aiden had fully expected her to just kill him instead of put up with him. He felt he was saving Thaddeus' life.

Perhaps it had been because Thaddeus was the second born. Maybe it was because he had invested so much time and energy into Thaddeus just so he didn't have to watch or hear his brother get beaten. Or maybe it was because Aiden had been in charge of him since Thaddeus was born, but whatever the reason, he did have a soft spot in his heart for the male. Thaddeus was the brother he was closest to.

It became apparent to Aiden that he had absolutely nothing in common with their little brother Cyril, or Cy for short. Cy preferred his books, while Aiden relished in the physical hunt.

That didn't mean he didn't worry about him.

Aiden had feared Cy would be knocked around next if he didn't get his shit together and start learning the physical aspects of training, but it rarely happened with him. Their mother encouraged the boy to learn all he could through his books. Sure, he was still responsible for learning the guns, knives,

and hand-to-hand combat, but she didn't expect as much from Cy as she did from Thaddeus.

By the time the next brother, Rohan, came along, Aiden was a killing machine. Their mother didn't expect much out of Rohan. She called him her greatest failure. Unlike Aiden, Thaddeus, and Cy, Rohan looked more vampire than he did human, but acted fully human. He could even go without blood and spend short amounts of time in the sun. No one was sure what to do with Rohan, but Aiden, Thaddeus, and Cy trained him to the best of his abilities to keep mom off his back. Aiden may have detached himself from everyone except Thaddeus, but one thing was certain—he was bonded to his brothers by blood, but also because all of them worked together, they were able to survive. They were bonded by a hate of their mother, and a will to survive.

As the resident killer, Aiden loved going out into the wilderness of whatever country they were in and bringing home meals. Deer, bison, rabbits...it didn't matter. One time he had gone hand-to-claw with a bear, and won. The more challenging the hunt, the more he relished in the kill. Nothing much had changed in four hundred years.

As sleep finally overtook him, he hoped it would be peaceful. His mind was always churning and agonizing, and it coughed up some pretty messy dreams. Some scared the hell out of him, and some just destroyed him over and over again.