



LOVER ETERNAL

A NOVEL OF THE BLACK DAGGER BROTHERHOOD

"Deliciously edgy, erotic, and thrilling!" —Nicole Jordan



J. R.
WARD



**Praise for *USA Today* bestselling author
J. R. Ward's dazzling debut
Dark Lover
The first novel in the Black Dagger
Brotherhood series**

“A fabulous treat for romance readers!”

—Nicole Jordan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Wicked Fantasy*

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—The Best Reviews

LOVER ETERNAL

*A Novel of the Black
Dagger Brotherhood*

J. R. Ward



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SIGNET ECLIPSE

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Dedicated to: *You*.

In the beginning, we didn't hit it off, did we?
But then I realized the truth about you and I fell in love.

Thank you for letting me see through your eyes and
walk awhile in your boots.

You are just so...beautiful.

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Glossary of Terms and Proper Nouns

Black Dagger Brotherhood (pr. n.) Highly trained vampire warriors who protect their species against the Lessening Society. As a result of selective breeding within the race, brothers possess immense physical and mental strength as well as rapid healing capabilities. They are not siblings for the most part, and are inducted into the brotherhood upon nomination by the brothers. Aggressive, self-reliant, and secretive by nature, they exist apart from civilians, having little contact with members of the other classes except when they need to feed. They are the subjects of legend and the objects of reverence within the vampire world. They may be killed only by the most serious of wounds, e.g., a gunshot or stab to the heart, etc.

blood slave (n.) Male or female vampire who has been subjugated to serve the blood needs of another. The practice of keeping blood slaves has largely been discontinued, though it has not been outlawed.

the Chosen (n.) Female vampires who have been bred to serve the Scribe Virgin. They are considered members of the aristocracy, though they are spiritually rather than temporally focused. They have little or no interaction with males, but can be mated to brothers at the Scribe Virgin's direction to propagate their class. They have the ability to prognosticate. In the past, they were used to meet the blood needs of unmated members of the brotherhood, but that practice has been abandoned by the brothers.

doggen (n.) Member of the servant class within the vampire world. *Doggen* have old, conservative traditions about service to their superiors, following a formal code of dress and behavior. They are able to go out during the day, but they age relatively quickly. Life expectancy is approximately five hundred years.

the Fade (pr. n.) Nontemporal realm where the dead reunite with their loved ones and pass eternity.

First Family (pr. n.) The king and queen of the vampires, and any children they may have.

hellren (n.) Male vampire who has been mated to a female. Males may take more than one female as mate.

leelan (adj.) A term of endearment loosely translated as “dearest one.”

Lessening Society (pr. n.) Order of slayers convened by the Omega for the purpose of eradicating the vampire species.

lesser (n.) De-souled human who as a member of the Lessening Society targets vampires for extermination. *Lessers* must be stabbed through the chest in order to be killed; otherwise they are ageless. They do not eat or drink and are impotent. Over time, their hair, skin, and irises lose pigmentation until they are blond, blushless, and pale-eyed. They smell like baby powder. Inducted into the society by the Omega, they retain a ceramic jar thereafter into which their heart was placed after it was removed.

needing period (n.) Female vampire’s time of fertility, generally lasting for two days and accompanied by intense sexual cravings. Occurs approximately five years after a female’s transition and then once a decade thereafter. All males respond to some degree if they are around a female in

her need. It can be a dangerous time, with conflicts and fights breaking out between competing males, particularly if the female is not mated.

the Omega (pr. n.) Malevolent, mystical figure who has targeted the vampires for extinction out of resentment directed toward the Scribe Virgin. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers, though not the power of creation.

princeps (n.) Highest level of the vampire aristocracy, second only to members of the First Family or the Scribe Virgin's Chosen. Must be born to the title; it may not be conferred.

pyrocant (n.) Refers to a critical weakness in an individual. The weakness can be internal, such as an addiction, or external, such as a lover.

rythe (n.) Ritual manner of assuaging honor granted by one who has offended another. If accepted, the offended chooses a weapon and strikes the offender, who presents him-or herself without defenses.

the Scribe Virgin (pr. n.) Mystical force who is counselor to the king as well as the keeper of vampire archives and the dispenser of privileges. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers. Capable of a single act of creation, which she expended to bring the vampires into existence.

shellan (n.) Female vampire who has been mated to a male. Females generally do not take more than one mate due to the highly territorial nature of bonded males.

the Tomb (pr. n.) Sacred vault of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Used as a ceremonial site as well as a storage facility for the jars of *lessers*. Ceremonies performed there include inductions, funerals, and disciplinary

actions against brothers. No one may enter except for members of the brotherhood, the Scribe Virgin, or candidates for induction.

transition (n.) Critical moment in a vampire's life when he or she transforms into an adult. Thereafter, they must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive and are unable to withstand sunlight. Occurs generally in the mid-twenties. Some vampires do not survive their transitions, males in particular. Prior to their transitions, vampires are physically weak, sexually unaware and unresponsive, and unable to dematerialize.

vampire (n.) Member of a species separate from that of Homo sapiens. Vampires must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive. Human blood will keep them alive, though the strength does not last long. Following their transitions, which occur in their mid-twenties, they are unable to go out into sunlight and must feed from the vein regularly. Vampires cannot "convert" humans through a bite or transfer of blood, though they are in rare cases able to breed with the other species. Vampires can dematerialize at will, though they must be able to calm themselves and concentrate to do so and may not carry anything heavy with them. They are able to strip the memories of humans, provided such memories are short-term. Some vampires are able to read minds. Life expectancy is upward of a thousand years, or in some cases even longer.

wahlker (n.) An individual who has died and returned to the living from the Fade. They are accorded great respect and are revered for their travails.

Chapter One

“Ah, hell, V, you’re *killing* me.” Butch O’Neal mined through his sock drawer, looking for black silk, finding white cotton.

No, wait. He pulled out one dress sock. Not exactly a triumph.

“If I were killing you, cop, footwear’d be the last thing on your mind.”

Butch glanced over at his roommate. His fellow Red Sox fan. His... well, one of his two best friends.

Both of whom, as it turned out, happened to be vampires.

Fresh from the shower, Vishous had a towel wrapped around his waist, his chest muscles and thick arms out on display. He was pulling on a black leather driving glove, covering up his tattooed left hand.

“Do you have to go for my dress blacks?”

V grinned, fangs flashing in the midst of his goatee. “They feel good.”

“Why don’t you ask Fritz to get you some?”

“He’s too busy feeding your jones for clothes, man.”

Okay, so maybe Butch had recently gotten in touch with his inner Versace, and who’ve thought he’d had it in him, but how hard could it be to get an extra dozen silkies in the house?

“I’ll ask him for you.”

“Aren’t you a gentleman.” V pushed back his dark hair. The tattoos at his left temple made an appearance and then were covered up again. “You need the Escalade tonight?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Butch stuffed his feet into Gucci loafers, bareback.

“So you’re going to see Marissa?”

Butch nodded. "I need to know. One way or the other."

And he had a feeling it was going to be *the other*.

"She's a good female."

She sure the hell was, which was probably why she wasn't returning his calls. Ex-cops who liked Scotch weren't exactly good relationship material for women, human or vampire. And the fact that he wasn't one of her kind didn't help the situation.

"Well, cop, Rhage and I'll be throwing back a few at One Eye. You come and find us when you're done—"

Banging, like someone was hitting the front door with a battering ram, brought their heads around.

V hiked up the towel. "Goddamn it, flyboy is going to have to learn how to use a doorbell."

"You try talking to him. He doesn't listen to me."

"Rhage doesn't listen to anyone." V jogged down the hall.

As the thundering dried up, Butch went over to his ever-expanding tie collection. He chose a pale blue Brioni, popped the collar of his white button-down, and slipped the silk around his neck. As he strolled out to the living room, he could hear Rhage and V talking over 2Pac's "RU still down?".

Butch had to laugh. Man, his life had taken him to a lot of places, most of them ugly, but he'd never thought he'd end up living with six warrior vampires. Or being on the fringes of their fight to protect their dwindling, hidden species. Somehow, though, he belonged with the Black Dagger Brotherhood. And he and Vishous and Rhage were an awesome threesome.

Rhage lived in the mansion across the courtyard with the rest of the Brotherhood, but the troika hung out in the gatehouse, where V and Butch crashed. The Pit, as the place was now known, was sweet digs compared to the hovels Butch had lived in. He and V had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a galley kitchen, and a living room that was decorated in a win-some, postmodern, Frat-House-Basement style: a pair of leather couches, plasma-screen high-def TV, foosball table, gym bags everywhere.

As Butch stepped into the main room, he got a load of Rhage's ensemble for the night: Black leather trench coat fell from his shoulders to his ankles. Black wife-beater was tucked into leathers. Shitkickers topped him out at six-eight or so. In the getup, the vampire was flat-out, drop-dead gorgeous. Even to a certified hetero like Butch.

The son of a bitch actually bent the laws of physics, he was so attractive. Blond hair was cut short in the back and left longer in the front. Teal-blue eyes were the color of Bahamas seawater. And that face made Brad Pitt look like a candidate for *The Swan*.

But he was no mama's boy, in spite of being a charmer. Something dark and lethal seethed behind the flashy exterior, and you knew it the minute you saw him. He gave off the vibe of a guy who'd smile while he set the record straight with his fists, even if he was spitting his own teeth out while he took care of business.

"What's doing, Hollywood?" Butch asked.

Rhage smiled, revealing a splendid set of pearlies with those long canines. "Time to go out, cop."

"Damn, vampire, didn't you get enough last night? That redhead looked like serious stuff. And so did her sister."

"You know me. Always hungry."

Yeah, well, fortunately for Rhage, there was an endless stream of women more than happy to oblige his needs. And sweet Jesus, the guy had them. Didn't drink. Didn't smoke. But he ran through the ladies like nothing Butch had ever seen.

And it wasn't like Butch knew a lot of choirboys.

Rhage looked over at V. "Go get dressed, man. Unless you were thinking of hitting One Eye in a towel?"

"Quit clocking me, my brother."

"Then gitcha ass moving."

Vishous stood up from behind a table weighed down with enough computer equipment to give Bill Gates a hard-on. From this command center, V ran the security and monitoring systems for the Brotherhood's compound, including the main house, the underground training facility, the Tomb and their Pit, as well as the system of underground tunnels that connected the buildings. He controlled everything: the retractable steel shutters that were installed over every window; the locks on the steel doors; the temperatures in the rooms; the lights; the security cameras; the gates.

V had set up the whole kit and caboodle by himself before the Brotherhood had moved in three weeks ago. The buildings and tunnels had already been up since the early 1900s, but they'd been unused for the most part. After events in July, however, the decision was made to consolidate the Brotherhood's operations, and they'd all come here.

As V went to his bedroom, Rhage took a Tootsie Roll Pop out of his pocket, ripped off the red paper, and put the thing in his mouth. Butch could feel the guy staring. And he wasn't surprised when the brother started in on him.

"So I can't believe you're getting all dolled up for a trip to One Eye, cop. I mean, this is heavy-duty, even for you. The tie, the cuff links—those are all new, right?"

Butch smoothed the Brioni down his chest and reached for the Tom Ford jacket that matched his black slacks. He didn't want to go into the Marissa thing. Just skirting around the subject with V had been enough. Besides, what could he say?

She blew my doors off when I met her, but she's been avoiding me for the past three weeks. So instead of taking the hint, I'm heading over to beg like a desperate loser.

Yeah, he really wanted to trot that out in front of Mr. Perfect, even if the guy was a good buddy.

Rhage rolled the lollipop around in his mouth. "Tell me something. Why do you bother with the clothes, man? You don't do anything with your mojo. I mean, I see you turn down females at the bar all the time. You saving yourself for marriage?"

"Yup. That's right. Got myself tied in a knot until I walk down that aisle."

"Come on, I really am curious. Are you holding it for someone?" When there was only silence, the vampire laughed softly. "Do I know her?"

Butch narrowed his eyes, weighing whether the conversation would be over faster if he kept his mouth shut. Probably not. Once Rhage got started, he didn't quit until he decided he was finished. He talked the same way he killed.

Rhage shook his head ruefully. "Doesn't she want you?"

"We're going to find out tonight."

Butch checked his cash level. Sixteen years as a homicide detective hadn't lined his pockets with much to speak of. Now that he was hanging with the Brotherhood? He had so much of the green, he couldn't possibly spend it fast enough.

"You're lucky, cop."

Butch glanced over. "How you figure?"

“I’ve always wondered what it would be like to settle down with a female of worth.”

Butch laughed. The guy was a sex god, an erotic legend in his race. V had said that stories about Rhage were passed from father to son when the time was right. The idea that he’d downshift into being someone’s husband was absurd.

“Okay, Hollywood, what’s the punch line? Come on, hit me with it.”

Rhage winced and looked away.

Holy hell, the guy had been serious. “Whoa. Listen, I didn’t mean to—”

“Nah, it’s cool.” The smile reappeared, but the eyes were flat. He sauntered over to the wastebasket and dropped the lollipop stick in the trash. “Now, can we get out of here? I’m tired of waiting for you boys.”

Mary Luce pulled into her garage, shut off her Civic, and stared at the snow shovels hanging on pegs in front of her.

She was tired, although her day hadn’t been strenuous. Answering phones and filing papers at a law office just wasn’t taxing, physically or mentally. So she really shouldn’t be exhausted.

But maybe that was the point. She wasn’t being challenged, so she was wilting.

Could it be time to go back to the kids? After all, it was what she was trained for. What she loved. What nourished her. Working with her autistic patients and helping them find ways of communicating had brought her all kinds of rewards, personally and professionally. And the two-year hiatus had not been her choice.

Maybe she should call the center, see if they had an opening. Even if they didn’t, she could volunteer until something became available.

Yes, tomorrow she would do that. There was no reason to wait.

Mary grabbed her purse and got out of the car. As the garage door trundled shut, she went around to the front of her house and picked up the mail. Flipping through bills, she paused to test the chilly October night with her nose. Her sinuses hummed. Autumn had swept out the dregs of summer a good month ago, the change of seasons ushered in on the back of a cold rush of air from Canada.

She loved the fall. And upstate New York did it proud, in her opinion.

Caldwell, New York, the town she was born and would most likely die in, was more than an hour north of Manhattan, so it was technically

considered “upstate.” Split in half by the Hudson River, the Caldie, as it was known by natives, was every midsize city in America. Wealthy parts, poor parts, nasty parts, normal parts. Wal-Marts and Targets and McDonald’ses. Museums and libraries. Suburban malls strangling a faded downtown. Three hospitals, two community colleges, and a bronze statue of George Washington in the park.

She tilted her head back and looked at the stars, thinking that it would never occur to her to leave. Whether that spoke of loyalty or lack of imagination, she wasn’t sure.

Maybe it was her house, she thought as she headed for her front door. The converted barn was situated on the edge of an old farmhouse property, and she’d put in an offer fifteen minutes after she’d gone through it with a real estate agent. Inside, the spaces were cozy and small. It was...lovely.

Which was why she’d bought it four years ago, right after the death of her mother. She’d needed lovely then, as well as a complete change of scenery. Her barn was everything her childhood home had not been. Here, the pine floorboards were the color of honey, varnished clear, not stained. Her furniture was from Crate and Barrel, all fresh, nothing worn or old. The throw rugs were sisal, short-napped and trimmed with suede. And everything from the slipcovers to the drapes to the walls to the ceilings was creamy white.

Her aversion to darkness had been her interior decorator. And hey, if it’s all a variation on beige, the stuff matches, right?

She put her keys and her purse down in the kitchen and grabbed the phone. She was told that *You have...two...new messages.*

“Hey, Mary, it’s Bill. Listen, I’m going to take you up on your offer. If you could cover me at the hotline tonight for an hour or so that would be great. Unless I hear from you, I’ll assume you’re still free. Thanks again.”

She deleted it with a *beep*.

“Mary, this is Dr. Della Croce’s office. We’d like you to come in as a follow-up to your quarterly physical. Would you please call to schedule an appointment when you get this message? We’ll accommodate you. Thanks, Mary.”

Mary put the phone down.

The shaking started in her knees and worked its way up into the muscles in her thighs. When it hit her stomach, she considered running for the bathroom.

Follow-up. We'll accommodate you.
It's back, she thought. The leukemia was back.

Chapter Two

“**W**hat the hell are we going to tell him? He’s coming here in twenty minutes!”

Mr. O regarded his colleague’s theatrics with a bored stare, thinking that if the *lesser* did any more hopping up and down, the idiot would qualify as a pogo stick.

Goddamn, but E was a fuckup. Why his sponsor had brought him into the Lessening Society in the first place was a mystery. The man had little drive. No focus. And no stomach for their new direction in the war against the vampire race.

“What are we going—”

“We aren’t going to tell him anything,” O said as he looked around the basement. Knives, razors, and hammers were scattered out of order on the cheap sideboard in the corner. There were pools of blood here and there, but not under the table, where they belonged. And mixed in with the red was a glossy black, thanks to E’s flesh wounds.

“But the vampire escaped before we got any information out of him!”

“Thanks for the recap.”

The two of them had just started working the male over when O went out on an assist. By the time he got back, E had lost control of the vampire, been sliced in a couple of places, and was all by his little lonesome bleeding in a corner.

That prick boss of theirs was going to be shit-wild, and even though O despised the man, he and Mr. X had one thing in common: Sloppiness was

for crap.

O watched E dance around a little more, finding in the jerky movements the solution to both an immediate problem and a longer-term one. As O smiled, E, the fool, seemed relieved.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” O murmured. “I’ll tell him we took the body out and left it for the sun in the woods. No big deal.”

“You’ll talk to him?”

“Sure, man. You’d better take off, though. He’s going to be pissed.”

E nodded and bolted for the door. “Later.”

Yeah, say good-night, motherfucker, O thought as he started to clean up the basement.

The shitty little house they were working in was unremarkable from the street, sandwiched between a burned-out shell that had once been a barbecue restaurant and a condemned rooming house. This part of town, a mix of squalid residential and lowbrow commercial, was perfect for them. Around here, folks didn’t go out after dark, gun pops were as common as car alarms, and nobody said nothing if someone let out a scream or two.

Also, coming and going from the site was easy. Thanks to the neighborhood hardies, all of the streetlights had been shot out and the ambient glow from other buildings was negligible. As an added benefit, the house had an exterior bulkhead entry into its basement. Carrying a fully loaded body bag in and out was no problem.

Although even if someone saw something, it would be the work of a moment to eliminate the exposure. No big surprise to the community, either. White trash had a way of finding their graves. Along with wife beating and beer sucking, dying was probably their only other core competency.

O picked up a knife and wiped E’s black blood off the blade.

The basement was not big and the ceiling was low, but there was enough room for the old table they used as a workstation and the battered sideboard they kept their instruments on. Still, O didn’t think it was the right facility. It was impossible to safely and securely store a vampire here, and this meant they lost an important tool of persuasion. Time wore down mental and physical faculties. If leveraged correctly, the passage of days was as powerful as anything you could break a bone with.

What O wanted was something out in the woods, something big enough so he could keep his captives over a period of time. As vampires went up in smoke with the dawn, they had to be kept protected from the sun. But if you

just locked them in a room, you ran the risk of their dematerializing right out of your hands. He needed something steel to cage them....

Up above, the back door shut and footsteps came down the stairs.

Mr. X walked under a naked bulb.

The *Fore-lesser* was about six-four and built like a linebacker. As with all slayers who'd been in the Society for a long time, he'd paled out. His hair and skin were the color of flour, and his irises were as clear and colorless as window glass. Like O, he was dressed in standard-issue *lesser* gear: black cargo pants and a black turtleneck with weapons hidden under a leather jacket.

"So tell me, Mr. O, how goes your work?"

As if the chaos in the basement wasn't explanation enough.

"Am I in charge of this house?" O demanded.

Mr. X walked casually over to the sideboard and picked up a chisel. "In a manner of speaking, yes."

"So am I permitted to ensure that this"—he moved his hand around the disorder—"doesn't happen again?"

"What did happen?"

"The details are boring. A civilian escaped."

"Will it survive?"

"I don't know."

"Were you here when it happened?"

"No."

"Tell me everything." Mr. X smiled as silence stretched out. "You know, Mr. O, your loyalty could get you in trouble. Don't you want me to punish the right person?"

"I want to take care of it myself."

"I'm sure you do. Except if you don't tell me, I might have to take the cost of failure out of your hide anyway. Is that worth it?"

"If I'm allowed to do what I will with the responsible party, yeah."

Mr. X laughed. "I can only imagine what that might be."

O waited, watching the chisel's sharp head catch light as Mr. X walked around the room.

"I paired you with the wrong man, didn't I?" Mr. X murmured as he picked a set of handcuffs off the floor. He dropped them on the sideboard.

"I thought Mr. E might rise to your level. He didn't. And I'm glad you came

to me first before you disciplined him. We both know how much you like to work independently. And how much it pisses me off.”

Mr. X looked over his shoulder, dead eyes fixed on O. “In light of all this, particularly because you approached me first, you can have Mr. E.”

“I want to do it with an audience.”

“Your squadron?”

“And others.”

“Trying to prove yourself again?”

“Setting a higher standard.”

Mr. X smiled coldly. “You are an arrogant little bastard, aren’t you?”

“I’m as tall as you are.”

Suddenly, O found himself unable to move his arms or legs. Mr. X had pulled this paralyzing shit before, so it wasn’t entirely unexpected. But the guy still had the chisel in his hand and he was coming closer.

O fought the hold, sweat breaking out as he struggled and got nowhere.

Mr. X leaned in so their chests were touching. O felt something brush against his ass.

“Have fun, son,” the man whispered into O’s ear. “But do yourself a favor. Remember that however long your pants are, you’re not me. I’ll see you later.”

The man strode out of the basement. The door upstairs opened and shut.

As soon as O could move, he reached into his back pocket.

Mr. X had given him the chisel.

Rhage stepped from the Escalade and scanned the darkness around One Eye, hoping a couple of *lessers* would jump out at them. He didn’t expect to get lucky. He and Vishous had trolled for hours tonight, and they’d gotten a whole lot of nothing. Not even a sighting. It was damn eerie.

And to someone like Rhage, who depended on fighting for personal reasons, it was also frustrating as hell.

Like all things, though, the war between the Lessening Society and the vampires went in cycles, and they were currently in a downturn. Which made sense. Back in July, the Black Dagger Brotherhood had taken out the Society’s local recruitment center along with about ten of their best men. Clearly, the *lessers* were reconnoitering.

Thank God, there were other ways to burn off his edge.

He looked at the sprawling nest of depravity that was the Brotherhood's current R & R hangout. One Eye was on the edge of town, so the folks inside were bikers and guys who worked construction, tough types who tended toward the redneck rather than the slick persuasion. The bar was your standard-issue watering hole. Single-story building surrounded by a collar of asphalt. Trucks, American sedans, and Harleys parked in the spots. From tiny windows, beer signs glowed red, blue, and yellow, the logos Coors and Bud Light and Michelob.

No Coronas or Heinekens for these boys.

As he shut the car door, his body was humming, his skin prickling, his thick muscles twitching. He stretched out his arms, trying to buy himself a little relief. He wasn't surprised when it made no difference. His curse was throwing its weight around, taking him into dangerous territory. If he didn't get some kind of release soon, he was going to have a serious problem. Hell, he was going to *be* a serious problem.

Thank you very much, Scribe Virgin.

Bad enough that he'd been born a live wire with too much physical power, a fuckup with a gift of strength he hadn't appreciated or harnessed. But then he'd pissed off the mystical female who lorded over their race. Man, she'd been only too happy to put down another layer of crap on the compost heap he'd been born with. Now, if he didn't blow off steam on a regular basis, he turned deadly.

Fighting and sex were the only two releases that brought him down, and he used them like a diabetic with insulin. A steady stream of both helped keep him level, but they didn't always do the trick. And when he lost it, things got nasty for everyone, himself included.

God, he was tired of being stuck inside his body, managing its demands, trying not to fall into a brutal oblivion. Sure, his stunner of a face and the strength were all fine and good. But he would have traded both to a scrawny, ugly mo'fo, if it would have gotten him some peace. Hell, he couldn't even remember what serenity was like. He couldn't even remember who he was.

The disintegration of himself had started up pretty quick. After only a couple of years into the curse, he'd stopped hoping for any true relief and simply tried to get by without hurting anyone. That was when he'd started to die on the inside, and now, over a hundred years later, he was mostly numb, nothing more than glossy window dressing and empty charm.

On every level that counted, he'd given up trying to pretend he was anything but a menace. Because the truth was, no one was safe when he was around. And that was what really killed him, even more than the physical stuff he had to go through when the curse came out of him. He lived in fear of hurting one of his brothers. And, as of about a month ago, Butch.

Rhage walked around the SUV and looked through the windshield at the human male. God, who'd have thought he'd ever be tight with a Homo sapiens?

"We going to see you later, cop?"

Butch shrugged. "Don't know."

"Good luck, man."

"It'll be what it is."

Rhage swore softly as the Escalade took off and he and Vishous walked across the parking lot.

"Who is she, V? One of us?"

"Marissa."

"*Marissa?* As in Wrath's former *shellan*?" Rhage shook his head. "Oh, man, I need details. V, you gotta hook me."

"I don't ride him about it. And neither should you."

"Aren't you curious?"

V didn't reply as they came up to the bar's front entrance.

"Oh, right. You already know, don't you?" Rhage said. "You know what's going to happen."

V merely lifted his shoulders and reached for the door.

Rhage planted his hand on the wood, stopping him. "Hey, V, you ever dream of me? You ever see my future?"

Vishous swiveled his head around. In the neon glow of a Coors sign, his left eye, the one with the tattoos around it, went all black. The pupil just expanded until it ate up the iris and the white part, until there was nothing but a hole.

It was like staring into infinity. Or maybe into the Fade as you died.

"Do you really want to know?" the brother said.

Rhage let his hand drop to his side. "Only one thing I care about. Am I going to live long enough to get away from my curse? You know, find a slice of calm?"

The door flew open and a drunken man lurched out like a truck with a broken axle. The guy headed for the bushes, threw up, and then lay facedown on the asphalt.

Death was one sure way to find peace, Rhage thought. And everyone died. Even vampires. Eventually.

He didn't meet his brother's eyes again. "Scratch it, V. I don't want to know."

He'd been cursed once already and still had another ninety-one years before he was free. Ninety-one years, eight months, four days until his punishment was over and the beast would no longer be a part of him. Why should he volunteer for a cosmic whammy like knowing he wouldn't live long enough to be free of the damn thing?

"Rhage."

"What?"

"I'll tell you this. Your destiny's coming for you. And she's coming soon."

Rhage laughed. "Oh, yeah? What's the female like? I prefer them—"

"She's a virgin."

A chill shot down Rhage's spine and nailed him in the ass. "You're kidding, right?"

"Look in my eye. Do you think I'm jerking you off?"

V paused for a moment and then opened the door, releasing the smell of beer and human bodies along with the pulse of an old Guns N' Roses song.

As they went inside, Rhage muttered, "You're some freaky shit, my brother. You really are."

Chapter Three

Pavlov had a point, Mary thought while she drove downtown. Her panic reaction to the message from Dr. Della Croce's office was a trained one, not something logical. "Further tests" could be a lot of things. Just because she associated any kind of news from a physician with catastrophe didn't mean she could see into the future. She had no idea what, if anything, was wrong. After all, she'd been in remission for close to two years and she felt well enough. Sure, she got tired, but who didn't? Her job and volunteer work kept her busy.

First thing in the morning she'd call for the appointment. For now she was just going to work the beginning of Bill's shift at the suicide hotline.

As the anxiety backed off a little, she took a deep breath. The next twenty-four hours were going to be an endurance test, with her nerves turning her body into a trampoline and her mind into a whirlpool. The trick was waiting through the panic phases and then shoring up her strength when the fear lightened up.

She parked the Civic in an open lot on Tenth Street and walked quickly toward a worn-out six-story building. This was the dingy part of town, the residue of an effort back in the seventies to professionalize a nine-square-block area of what was then a "bad neighborhood." The optimism hadn't worked, and now boarded-up office space mixed with low-rent housing.

She paused at the entrance and waved to the two cops passing by in a patrol car.

The headquarters of the Suicide Prevention Hotline were on the second floor in the front, and she glanced up at the glowing windows. Her first contact with the nonprofit had been as a caller. Three years later, she manned a phone every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. She also covered holidays and relieved people when they needed it.

No one knew she'd ever dialed in. No one knew she'd had leukemia. And if she had to go back to war with her blood, she was going to keep that to herself as well.

Having watched her mother die, she didn't want anyone standing over her bed weeping. She already knew the impotent rage that came when saving grace didn't heel on command. She had no interest in a replay of the theatrics while she was fighting for breath and swimming in a sea of failing organs.

Okay. Nerves were back.

Mary heard a shuffle over to the left and caught a flash of movement, as if someone had ducked out of sight behind the building. Snapping to attention, she punched a code into a lock, went inside, and climbed the stairs. When she got to the second floor, she buzzed the intercom for entrance into the hotline's offices.

As she walked past the reception desk, she waved to the executive director, Rhonda Knute, who was on the phone. Then she nodded to Nan, Stuart, and Lola, who were on deck tonight, and settled into a vacant cubicle. After making sure she had plenty of intake forms, a couple of pens, and the hotline's intervention reference book, she took a bottle of water out of her purse.

Almost immediately one of her phone lines rang, and she checked the screen for caller ID. She knew the number. And the police had told her it was a pay phone. Downtown.

It was her caller.

The phone rang a second time and she picked up, following the hotline's script. "Suicide Prevention Hotline, this is Mary. How may I help you?"

Silence. Not even breathing.

Dimly, she heard the hum of a car engine flare and then fade in the background. According to the police's audit of incoming calls, the person always phoned from the street and varied his location so he couldn't be traced.

“This is Mary. How may I help you?” She dropped her voice and broke protocol. “I know it’s you, and I’m glad you’re reaching out tonight again. But please, can’t you tell me your name or what’s wrong?”

She waited. The phone went dead.

“Another one of yours?” Rhonda asked, taking a sip from a mug of herbal tea.

Mary hung up. “How did you know?”

The woman nodded across her shoulder. “I heard a lot of rings out there, but no one got farther than the greeting. Then all of a sudden you were hunched over your phone.”

“Yeah, well—”

“Listen, the cops got back to me today. There’s nothing they can do short of assigning details to every pay phone in town, and they’re not willing to go that far at this point.”

“I told you. I don’t feel like I’m in danger.”

“You don’t know that you’re not.”

“Come on, Rhonda, this has been going on for nine months now, right? If they were going to jump me, they would have already. And I really want to help—”

“That’s another thing I’m concerned about. You clearly feel like protecting whoever the caller is. You’re getting too personal.”

“No, I’m not. They’re calling here for a reason, and I know I can take care of them.”

“Mary, stop. Listen to yourself.” Rhonda pulled a chair over and lowered her voice as she sat down. “This is...hard for me to say. But I think you need a break.”

Mary recoiled. “From what?”

“You’re here too much.”

“I work the same number of days as everyone else.”

“But you stay here for hours after your shift is through, and you cover for people all the time. You’re too involved. I know you’re substituting for Bill right now, but when he comes I want you to leave. And I don’t want you back here for a couple of weeks. You need some perspective. This is hard, draining work, and you have to have a proper distance from it.”

“Not now, Rhonda. Please, not now. I need to be here now more than ever.”

Rhonda gently squeezed Mary's tense hand. "This isn't an appropriate place for you to work out your own issues, and you know that. You're one of the best volunteers I've got, and I want you to come back. But only after you've had some time to clear your head."

"I may not have that kind of time," Mary whispered under her breath.

"What?"

Mary shook herself and forced a smile. "Nothing. Of course, you're right. I'll leave as soon as Bill comes in."

Bill arrived about an hour later, and Mary was out of the building in two minutes. When she got home, she shut her door and leaned back against the wood panels, listening to all the silence. The horrible, crushing silence.

God, she wanted to go back to the hotline's offices. She needed to hear the soft voices of the other volunteers. And the phones ringing. And the drone of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling...

Because with no distractions, her mind flushed up terrible images: Hospital beds. Needles. Bags of drugs hanging next to her. In an awful mental snapshot, she saw her head bald and her skin gray and her eyes sunken until she didn't look like herself, until she *wasn't* herself.

And she remembered what it felt like to cease being a person. After the doctors started treating her with chemo, she'd quickly sunk into the fragile underclass of the sick, the dying, becoming nothing more than a pitiful, scary reminder of other people's mortality, a poster child for the terminal nature of life.

Mary darted across the living room, shot through the kitchen, and threw open the slider. As she burst out into the night, fear had her gasping for breath, but the shock of frosty air slowed her lungs down.

You don't know that anything's wrong. You don't know what it is....

She repeated the mantra, trying to pitch a net on the thrashing panic as she headed for the pool.

The Lucite in-ground was no more than a big hot tub, and its water, thickened and slowed by the cold, looked like black oil in the moonlight. She sat down, took off her shoes and socks, and dangled her feet in the icy depths. She kept them submerged even when they numbed, wishing she had the gumption to jump in and swim down to the grate at the bottom. If she held on to the thing for long enough, she might be able to anesthetize herself completely.

She thought of her mother. And how Cissy Luce had died in her own bed in the house the two of them had always called home.

Everything about that bedroom was still so clear: The way the light had come through the lace curtains and landed on things in a snowflake pattern. Those pale yellow walls and the off-white wall-to-wall rug. That comforter her mother had loved, the one with the little pink roses on a cream background. The smell of nutmeg and ginger from a dish of potpourri. The crucifix above the curving headboard and the big Madonna icon on the floor in the corner.

The memories burned, so Mary forced herself to see the room as it had been after everything was over, the illness, the dying, the cleaning up, the selling of the house. She saw it right before she'd moved out. Neat. Tidy. Her mother's Catholic crutches packed away, the faint shadow left by the cross on the wall covered by a framed Andrew Wyeth print.

The tears wouldn't stay put. They came slowly, relentlessly, falling into the water. She watched them hit the surface and disappear.

When she looked up, she was not alone.

Mary leaped to her feet and stumbled back, but stopped herself, wiping her eyes. It was just a boy. A teenage boy. Dark-haired, pale-skinned. So thin he was emaciated, so beautiful he didn't look human.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, not particularly afraid. It was hard to be scared of anything that angelic. "Who are you?"

He just shook his head.

"Are you lost?" He sure looked it. And it was too cold for him to be out just in the jeans and T-shirt he was wearing. "What's your name?"

He lifted a hand to his throat and moved it back and forth while shaking his head. As if he were a foreigner and frustrated by the language barrier.

"Do you speak English?"

He nodded and then his hands started flying around. American Sign Language. He was using ASL.

Mary reached back to her old life, when she'd trained her autistic patients to use their hands to communicate.

Do you read lips or can you hear? she signed back at him.

He froze, as if her understanding him had been the last thing he'd expected.

I can hear very well. I just can't talk.

Mary stared at him for a long moment. "You are the caller."

He hesitated. Then nodded his head. *I never meant to scare you. And I don't call to annoy you. I just...like to know you're there. But there's nothing weird to it, honest. I swear.*

His eyes met hers steadily.

"I believe you." Except what did she do now? The hotline prohibited contact with callers.

Yeah, well, she wasn't about to kick the poor kid off her property.

"You want something to eat?"

He shook his head. *Maybe I could just sit with you awhile? I'll stay on the other side of the pool.*

As if he were used to people telling him to get away from them.

"No," she said. He nodded once and turned away. "I mean, sit down here. Next to me."

He came at her slowly, as if expecting her to change her mind. When all she did was sit down and put her feet back in the pool, he took off a pair of ratty sneakers, rolled up his baggy pants, and picked a spot about three feet from her.

God, he was so small.

He slipped his feet in the water and smiled.

It's cold, he signed.

"You want a sweater?"

He shook his head and moved his feet in circles.

"What's your name?"

John Matthew.

Mary smiled, thinking they had something in common. "Two New Testament prophets."

The nuns gave it to me.

"Nuns?"

There was a long pause, as if he were debating what to tell her.

"You were in an orphanage?" she prompted gently. She recalled that there was still one in town, run by Our Lady of Mercy.

I was born in a bathroom stall in a bus station. The janitor who found me took me to Our Lady. The nuns thought up the name.

She kept her wince to herself. "Ah, where do you live now? Were you adopted?"

He shook his head.

“Foster parents?” Please, God, let there be foster parents. Nice foster parents. Who kept him warm and fed. Good people who told him he mattered even if his parents had deserted him.

When he didn’t reply, she eyed his old clothes, and the older expression on his face. He didn’t look as if he’d known a lot of nice.

Finally, his hands moved. *My place is on Tenth Street.*

Which meant he was either a poacher living in a condemned building or a tenant in a rat-infested hovel. How he managed to be so clean was a miracle.

“You live around the hotline’s offices, don’t you? Which was how you knew I was on this evening even though it wasn’t my shift.”

He nodded. *My apartment is across the street. I watch you come and go, but not in a sneaky way. I guess I think of you as a friend. When I called the first time...you know, it was on a whim or something. You answered...and I liked the way your voice sounded.*

He had beautiful hands, she thought. Like a girl’s. Graceful. Delicate.

“And you followed me home tonight?”

Pretty much every night. I have a bike, and you’re a slow driver. I figure if I watch over you, you’ll be safer. You stay so late, and that’s not a good part of town for a woman to be alone in. Even if she’s in a car.

Mary shook her head, thinking he was an odd one. He looked like a child, but his words were those of a man. And all things considered, she probably should be creeped out. This kid latching on to her, thinking he was some kind of protector even though it looked as if he were the one who needed to be rescued.

Tell me why you were crying just now, he signed.

His eyes were very direct, and it was eerie to have an adult male stare anchored by a child’s face.

“Because I might be out of time,” she blurted.

“Mary? Are you up for a visit?”

Mary looked over her right shoulder. Bella, her only neighbor, had walked across the two acre meadow that ran between their properties and was standing on the edge of the lawn.

“Hey, Bella. Ah, come meet John.”

Bella glided up to the pool. The woman had moved into the big old farmhouse a year ago and they’d taken to talking at night. At six feet tall, and with a mane of dark waves that fell to the small of her back, Bella was

a total knockout. Her face was so beautiful it had taken Mary months to stop staring, and the woman's body was right off the cover of *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit edition.

So naturally John was looking awestruck.

Mary wondered idly what it would be like to get that reception from a man, even a prepubescent one. She'd never been beautiful, falling instead into that vast category of women who were neither bad-looking nor good-looking. And that had been before chemo had done a number on her hair and skin.

Bella leaned down with a slight smile and offered her hand to the boy. "Hi."

John reached up and touched her briefly, as if he weren't sure she was real. Funny, Mary had often felt the same way about the woman. There was something too...much about her. She just seemed larger than life, more vivid than the other people Mary ran into. Certainly more gorgeous.

Although Bella sure didn't act the part of the femme fatale. She was quiet and unassuming and she lived alone, apparently working as a writer. Mary never saw her in the daytime, and no one ever seemed to come or go out of the old farmhouse.

John looked at Mary, his hands moving. *Do you want me to leave?*

Then, as if anticipating her answer, he pulled his feet from the water.

She put her hand on his shoulder, trying to ignore the sharp thrust of bone just under his shirt.

"No. Stay."

Bella took off her running shoes and socks and flicked her toes over the surface of the water. "Yeah, come on, John. Stay with us."

Chapter Four

Rhage saw the first one he wanted tonight. She was a blond human female, all sexed-up and ready to go. Like the rest of her kind in the bar, she'd been throwing him signals: Flashing her ass. Fluffing her teased hair.

"Find something you like?" V said dryly.

Rhage nodded and crooked his finger at the female. She came when called. He liked that in a human.

He was tracking the shift of her hips when his view was blocked by another tight female body. He looked up and forced his eyes not to roll.

Caith was one of his kind, and beautiful enough with her black hair and those dark eyes. But she was a Brother chaser, always sniffing around, offering herself. He had the sense she saw them as prizes, something to brag about. And how irritating was that.

As far as he was concerned, she put the *itch* in *bitch*.

"Hey, Vishous," she said in a low, sexy voice.

"Evenin', Caith." V took a sip of his Grey Goose. "What up?"

"Wondering what you're doing."

Rhage looked around Caith's hips. Thank God the blonde wasn't put off by a little competition. She was still coming toward the table.

"You going to say hello, Rhage?" Caith prompted.

"Only if you get out of the way. You're blocking my view."

The female laughed. "Another of your cast of thousands. How lucky she is."

"You wish, Caith."

“Yes, I do.” Her eyes, predatory and hot, glided over him. “Maybe you’d like to hang with Vishous and me?”

As she reached out to stroke his hair, he caught her wrist. “Don’t even try it.”

“How is it you’ll do so many humans and deny me?”

“Just not interested.”

She leaned down, talking into his ear. “You should try me sometime.”

He jerked her away from him, tightening his hand on her bones.

“That’s right, Rhage, squeeze harder. I like it when it hurts.” He let go immediately, and she smiled while rubbing her wrist. “So are you busy, V?”

“I’m settling in right now. But maybe a little later.”

“You know where to find me.”

When she left, Rhage glanced over at his brother. “I don’t know how you can stand her.”

V tossed back his vodka, watching the female with hooded eyes. “She has her attributes.”

The blonde arrived, stopping in front of Rhage and striking a little pose. He put both hands on her hips and pulled her forward so she straddled his thighs.

“Hi,” she said, moving against his hold. She was busy looking him over, sizing up his clothes, eyeing the heavy gold Rolex peeking out from under his trench coat’s sleeve. The calculation in her eyes was as cold as the center of his chest.

God, if he could have left he would have; he was so sick of this shit. But his body needed the release, demanded it. He could feel his drive rising, and as always, that god-awful burn left his dead heart in the dust.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Tiffany.”

“Nice to meet you, Tiffany,” he said, lying.

Less than ten miles away, at Mary’s pool in her backyard, she, John, and Bella were having a surprisingly jolly time.

Mary laughed out loud and looked at John. “You’re not serious.”

It’s true. I shuttled back and forth between the theaters.

“What did he say?” Bella asked, grinning.

“He saw *The Matrix* four times the day it opened.”

The woman laughed. “John, I’m sorry to break this to you, but that’s pathetic.”

He beamed at her, blushing a little.

“Did you get into the whole *Lord of the Rings* thing, too?” she asked.

He shook his head, signed, and looked expectantly at Mary.

“He says he likes martial arts,” she translated. “Not elves.”

“Can’t blame him there. That whole hairy feet thing? Can’t do it.”

A gust of wind came up, teasing fallen leaves into the pool. As they floated by, John reached out and grabbed one.

“What’s that on your wrist?” Mary asked.

John held his arm out so she could inspect the leather bracelet. There were orderly markings on it, some kind of cross between hieroglyphics and Chinese characters.

“That’s gorgeous.”

I made it.

“May I see?” Bella asked, leaning over. Her smile disintegrated and her eyes narrowed on John’s face. “Where did you get this?”

“He says he made it.”

“Where did you say you’re from?”

John retracted his arm, clearly a little unnerved by Bella’s sudden focus.

“He lives here,” Mary said. “He was born here.”

“Where are his parents?”

Mary faced her friend, wondering why Bella was so intense. “He doesn’t have any.”

“None?”

“He told me he grew up in the foster-care system, right, John?”

John nodded and cradled his arm against his stomach, protecting the bracelet.

“Those markings,” Bella prompted. “Do you know what they mean?”

The boy shook his head and then winced and rubbed his temples. After a moment, his hands signed slowly.

“He says they don’t mean anything,” Mary murmured. “He just dreams of them and he likes the way they look. Bella, ease off, okay?”

The woman seemed to catch herself. “Sorry. I...ah, I’m really sorry.”

Mary glanced at John and tried to take the pressure off him. “So what other movies do you like?”

Bella got to her feet and shoved on her running shoes. Without the socks. “Will you guys excuse me for a moment? I’ll be right back.”

Before Mary could say anything, the woman jogged across the meadow. When she was out of earshot, John looked up at Mary. He was still wincing.

I should go now.

“Does your head hurt?”

John pushed his knuckles into the space between his eyebrows. *I feel like I just ate ice cream really fast.*

“When did you have dinner?”

He shrugged. *I don’t know.*

Poor kid was probably hypoglycemic. “Listen, why don’t you come inside and eat with me? Last thing I had was takeout for lunch, and that was about eight hours ago.”

His pride was obvious in the firm shake of his head. *I’m not hungry.*

“Then will you sit with me while I have a late dinner?” Maybe she could entice him to eat that way.

John stood up and held out his hand as if to help her to her feet. She took his small palm and leaned on him just enough so he’d feel some of her weight. Together they headed for her back door, shoes in hand, bare feet leaving wet prints on the chilly flagstone around the pool.

Bella burst into her kitchen and stalled out. She’d had no particular plan when she’d taken off. She just knew she had to do something.

John was a problem. A serious problem.

She couldn’t believe she hadn’t recognized him for what he was right off the bat. Then again, he hadn’t gone through the change yet. And why would a vampire be hanging out in Mary’s backyard?

Bella nearly laughed. She hung out in Mary’s backyard. So why couldn’t others like her do the same?

Putting her hands on her hips, she stared at the floor. What the hell was she going to do? When she’d searched John’s conscious mind, she’d found nothing about his race, his people, his traditions. The boy didn’t know a thing, had no idea who he really was or what he was going to turn into. And he honestly didn’t know what those symbols meant.

She did. They spelled out TEHRROR in the Old Language. A warrior’s name.

How was it possible he'd been lost to the human world? And how long did he have before his transition hit? He looked as if he was in his early twenties, which meant he had a year or two. But if she was wrong, if he was closer to twenty-five, he could be in immediate danger. If he didn't have a female vampire to help him through the change, he was going to die.

Her first thought was to call her brother. Rehvenge always knew what to do about everything. The problem was, once that male got involved in a situation, he took over completely. And he tended to scare the hell of everyone.

Havers—she could ask Havers for help. As a physician, he could tell how long the boy had before the transition. And maybe John could stay at the clinic until his future was clearer.

Yeah, except he wasn't sick. He was a pretransition male, so he was physically weak, but she'd sensed no illness in him. And Havers ran a medical facility, not some kind of rooming house.

Besides, what about that name? It was a warrior's—

Bingo.

She went out of the kitchen and into the sitting room, heading for the address book she kept on her desk. In the back, on the last page, she'd written a number that had been circulating for the last ten years or so. Rumor had it, that if you called, you could reach the Black Dagger Brotherhood. The race's warriors.

They would want to know there was a boy with one of their names left to fend for himself. Maybe they would take John in.

Her palms were sweaty as she picked up the phone, and she half expected either for the number not to go through or to have it answered by someone telling her to go to hell. Instead, all she got was an electronic voice repeating what she had dialed and then a beep.

"I...ah, my name is Bella. I'm looking for the Brotherhood. I need... help." She left her number and hung up, thinking less was more. If she was misinformed, she didn't want to leave a detailed message on some human's voice mail.

She looked out a window, seeing the meadow and the glow of Mary's house in the distance. She had no idea how long it would take for someone to get back to her, if at all. She should probably go back and find out where the kid lived. And how he knew Mary.

God, Mary. That awful disease was back. Bella had sensed its return and had been debating how to handle what she knew when Mary had mentioned she was going in for her quarterly physical. That had been a couple of days ago, and tonight Bella had planned to ask how things had gone. Maybe she could help the female in some small way.

Moving quickly, she went back to the French doors that faced the meadow. She'd find out more about John and—

The phone rang.

So soon? Couldn't be.

She reached across the counter and picked up the kitchen's extension.
"Hello?"

"Bella?" The male voice was low. Commanding.

"Yes."

"You called us."

Holy Moses, it worked.

She cleared her throat. Like any civilian, she knew all about the Brotherhood: their names, their reputations, their triumphs and legends. But she'd never actually met one. And it was a little hard to believe she was talking to a warrior in her kitchen.

So get to the point, she told herself.

"I, ah, I have an issue." She explained to the male what she knew about John.

There was silence for a moment. "Tomorrow night you will bring him to us."

Oh, man. Just how would she pull that off?

"Ah, he doesn't speak. He can hear, but he needs a translator to be understood."

"Then bring one with him."

She wondered how Mary would feel about getting tangled up in their world. "The female he's using tonight is a human."

"We'll take care of her memory."

"How do I get to you?"

"We will send a car for you. At nine o'clock."

"My address is—"

"We know where you live."

As the phone went dead, she shivered a little.

Okay. Now she just had to get John and Mary to agree to see the Brotherhood.

When she got back to Mary's barn, John was sitting at the kitchen table while the female ate some soup. They both looked up as she approached, and she tried to be casual as she sat down. She waited a little bit before throwing the ball out.

"So, John, I know some folks who are into the martial arts." Which wasn't exactly a lie. She'd heard the brothers were good at all kinds of fighting. "And I was wondering, would you have any interest in meeting them?"

John cocked his head and moved his hands around while looking at Mary.

"He wants to know why. For training?"

"Maybe."

John signed some more.

Mary wiped her mouth. "He says that he can't afford the cost of training. And that he's too small."

"If it were free would he go?" God, what was she doing, promising things she couldn't deliver? Heaven knew what the Brotherhood would do with him. "Listen, Mary, I can take him to a place where he can meet...tell him it's a place where master fighters hang out. He could talk to them. Get to know them. He might like to—"

John tugged on Mary's sleeve, signed some, and then stared at Bella.

"He wants to remind you that he can hear perfectly well."

Bella looked at John. "I'm sorry."

He nodded, accepting the apology.

"Just come meet them tomorrow," she said. "What do you have to lose?"

John shrugged and made a graceful movement with his hand.

Mary smiled. "He says okay."

"And you'll have to come, too. To translate."

Mary seemed taken aback, but then stared at the boy. "What time?"

"Nine o'clock," Bella replied.

"I'm sorry, I'll be working then."

"At night. Nine o'clock at night."

Chapter Five

Butch walked into One Eye feeling like someone had pulled the stoppers out of a number of his internal organs. Marissa had refused to see him, and though he wasn't surprised, it still hurt like a bitch.

So it was time for some Scotch therapy.

After sidestepping a drunken bouncer, a knot of floozies, and a pair of arm wrestlers, Butch found the troika's regular table. Rhage was in the far corner behind it, up against the wall with a brunette. V was nowhere in sight, but a glass filled with Grey Goose and a knotted drink stirrer were in front of a chair.

Butch was two shots in and not feeling much better when Vishous came out from the back. His shirt was untucked and wrinkled at the bottom, and right on his heels was a black-haired woman. V waved her off when he saw Butch.

"Hey, cop," the brother said as he sat down.

Butch tipped his shot glass. "What's doing?"

"How—"

"No go."

"Aw, hell, man. I'm sorry."

"Me, too."

V's phone went off and he cocked it open. The vampire said two words, put the thing back in his pocket, and reached for his coat.

"That was Wrath. We've got to be back at the house in a half hour."

Butch thought about sitting and drinking alone. That plan had *bad idea* written all over it. “You want to poof it or ride back with me?”

“We got time to drive.”

Butch tossed the Escalade’s keys across the table. “Bring the car around. I’ll grab Hollywood.”

He got up and headed for the dark corner. Rhage’s trench coat was flared out around the brunette’s body. God only knew how far things had gone underneath.

“Rhage, buddy. We gotta bounce.”

The vampire lifted his head, all tight lips and narrowed eyes.

Butch held his hands up. “I’m not cock-blocking for kicks and giggles. The mother ship called.”

With a curse, Rhage stepped back. The brunette’s clothes were disarranged and she was panting, but they hadn’t gotten to showtime yet. Hollywood’s leathers were all where they should be.

As Rhage retreated, the woman grabbed at him as if realizing the orgasm of her life was about to walk out the door. With a smooth movement, he passed his hand in front of her face and she froze. Then she looked down at herself as if trying to figure out how she’d come to be so aroused.

Rhage turned away with a glower, but by the time he and Butch were outside, he was shaking his head ruefully.

“Cop, listen, I’m sorry if I gave you the evil eye back there. I get a little...focused.”

Butch clapped him on the shoulder. “No problem.”

“Hey, how did your female—”

“Not a chance.”

“Damn, Butch. That rots.”

They piled into the Escalade and headed north, following Route 22 deeper into the countryside. They were going at quite a clip, Trick Daddy’s *Thug Matrimony* thumping like a jackhammer, when V hit the brakes. In a clearing, back about a hundred yards from the road, there was something hanging from a tree.

No, someone was in the process of hanging something from a tree. With an audience of pale-haired, black-clothed tough guys watching.

“*Lessers*,” V muttered, easing off onto the shoulder.

Before they came to a full stop, Rhage exploded out of the car, running flat-out toward the group.

Vishous looked across the front seat. “Cop, you might want to stay—”

“Fuck you, V.”

“You armed with one of mine?”

“No, I’m going out there naked.” Butch grabbed a Glock out from under the seat, flipping off the semi’s safety as he and Vishous jumped to the ground.

Butch had seen only two *lessers* before, and they freaked him out. They looked like men, they moved and talked like men, but they weren’t alive. One look in their eyes and you knew the slayers were empty vessels, the soul gone somewhere else. And they stank to high heaven.

But then again, he never could stand the smell of baby powder.

Out in the clearing, the *lessers* assumed attack positions and reached into their jackets as Rhage covered the yards of meadow grass like a freight train. He fell upon the group in some kind of suicidal surge, no weapon drawn.

Jesus, the guy was nuts. At least one of those slayers had taken out a handgun.

Butch leveled the Glock and tracked the action, but couldn’t get a clean shot. And then he realized he didn’t need to play back-up.

Rhage handled the *lessers* by himself, all animal strength and reflexes. He was ripping some kind of martial-arts hybrid, his trench coat flaring out behind him as he kicked heads and punched torsos. He was deadly beautiful in the moonlight, his face twisted into a snarl, his big body pummeling the tar out of those *lessers*.

A holler lit off to the right and Butch wheeled around. V had taken down a *lesser* who’d tried to run, and the brother was all over the damn thing like white on rice.

Leaving the *Fight Club* stuff to the vampires, Butch headed over to the tree. Strung up from a thick branch was the body of another *lesser*. The thing had been worked over but good.

Butch loosened the rope and lowered the body, checking over his shoulder because the smacks and grunts of fighting were suddenly louder. Three more *lessers* had joined the fray, but he wasn’t worried about his boys.

He knelt down to the slayer in front of him and started going through its pockets. He was pulling out a wallet when a gun went off with an awful popping sound. Rhage hit the ground. Flat on his back.

Butch didn't think twice. He shifted into firing position and aimed at the *lesser* who was about to plow another slug into Rhage. The Glock's trigger never got pulled. From out of nowhere, there was a brilliant flash of white, like a nuke had gone off. Night turned to day as everything in the clearing was illuminated: the autumnal trees, the fighting, the flat space.

As the brilliance receded, someone came running at Butch. When he recognized V, he lowered the gun.

"Cop! Get in the fucking car!" The vampire was hauling ass, legs pumping like he was about to get served.

"What about Rhage—"

Butch didn't get the rest of the sentence out. V hit him like a piledriver, doing a grab and drag that ended only when they were both in the Escalade and the doors were shut.

Butch turned on the brother. "We're not leaving Rhage out there!"

A mighty roar split the night, and Butch slowly turned his head.

In the clearing he saw a creature. Some eight feet tall, it was built along the lines of a dragon, with teeth like a T. rex and a slashing pair of front claws. The thing flickered in the moonlight, its powerful body and tail covered with iridescent purple and lime-green scales.

"What the hell is that?" Butch whispered, fumbling to make sure the door was locked.

"Rhage in a really bad mood."

The monster let loose another howl and went after the *lessers* as though they were toys. And it...*Good Lord*. There wasn't going to be anything left of the slayers. Not even bones.

Butch felt himself beginning to hyperventilate.

Dimly, he heard the sound of a lighter being teed off, and he glanced across the seat. V's face caught and held the flare of yellow as he lit a hand-rolled with shaky hands. When the brother exhaled, the tang of Turkish tobacco filled the air.

"Since when has he..." Butch turned back to the creature feature playing in the clearing. And totally lost his train of thought.

"Rhage pissed off the Scribe Virgin, so she cursed him. Gave him two hundred years of hell. Anytime he gets too worked up, presto-change-o.

Pain can set it off. Anger. Physical frustration, if you feel me.”

Butch cocked an eyebrow. And to think he’d gotten between that guy and a woman he wanted. Never pulling that kind of stupidity again.

As the carnage continued, Butch began to feel as if he were watching the Sci-Fi Channel with the sound on mute. Man, this kind of violence was out of even his league. In all his years as a homicide detective, he’d seen plenty of dead bodies, some of which had been hard-core gruesome. But he’d never witnessed a slaughter in live action before, and oddly, the shock of it removed the experience from reality.

Thank God.

Although he had to admit the beast was a smooth mover. The way it spun that *lesser* up into the air and caught the slayer with its...

“Does it happen often?” he asked.

“Often enough. That’s why he goes for the sex. Keeps him calm. I’ll tell you this, you don’t screw around with the beast. It doesn’t know who’s a friend and who’s lunch. All we can do is wait around until Rhage comes back and then take care of him.”

Something bounced on the hood of the Escalade with a bang. Oh, God, was that a head? No, a boot. Maybe the creature didn’t like the taste of rubber.

“Take care of him?” Butch murmured.

“How’d you like it if every bone in your body was broken? He goes through a change when that thing comes out, and as it leaves, he gets nailed again.”

In short order, the clearing was empty of *lessers*. With another deafening roar, the beast wheeled around as if looking for more to consume. Finding no other slayers, its eyes focused on the Escalade.

“Can it get into the car?” Butch asked.

“If it really wants to. Fortunately, it can’t be very hungry.”

“Yeah, well...what if it’s got room for Jell-o,” Butch muttered.

The beast shook its head, black mane tossing in the moonlight. Then it howled and charged at them, running on two legs. The pounding of its stride called thunder and tremors out of the earth.

Butch checked the door lock one more time. Then thought about being a pansy and maybe hitting the floor.

The creature stopped right next to the SUV and fell into a crouch. It was close enough so its breath fogged Butch’s window on the exhale, and up

close, the thing was hideous. White narrowed eyes. Snarling jowls. And the full set of fangs in its gaping mouth was right out of a fever nightmare. Black blood ran down its chest like crude oil.

The beast lifted its muscled forelegs.

Jesus, those claws were like daggers. Made Freddie Krueger's set of fun and games look like pipe cleaners.

But Rhage was in there. Somewhere.

Butch put his hand to the window, as if he could reach the brother.

The creature cocked its head, white eyes blinking. Abruptly it heaved a great breath, and then the massive body started to shake. A high, piercing cry came out of its throat, cracking through the night. There was another flash of brilliance. And then Rhage was lying naked on the ground.

Butch threw open the car door and knelt by his friend.

Rhage shook uncontrollably on the dirt and grass, his skin clammy, his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth moving slowly. There was black blood all over his face, in his hair, down his chest. His stomach was horribly distended. And there was a small hole in his shoulder where the bullet had hit him.

Butch yanked off his jacket and put it over the vampire. Leaning down, he tried to catch the words that were being mumbled. "What was that?"

"Hurt? You...V?"

"Nah, we're doing good."

Rhage seemed to relax a little. "Take me home.... Please...get me home."

"Don't you worry about a thing. We're gonna take care of you."

O moved fast across the clearing, heading away from the slaughter, running low to the ground. His truck was parked down the road, about a mile away. He figured he had another three to four minutes before he got to it, and so far nothing was chasing him.

He'd taken off the instant that flash of light had ripped through the clearing, knowing damn well that nothing good came after a sparkler like that. He'd figured it was either nerve gas or the precursor to one fuck of an explosion, but then he'd heard a roar. As he'd looked over his shoulder, he'd stopped dead. Something had been doing a number on his fellow *lessers*, picking them off like flies.

A creature. From out of nowhere.

He hadn't watched for long, and as he ran now, O glanced back once again to make sure he wasn't being followed. The path behind was still clear, and up ahead he saw the truck. When he got to it, he threw himself inside, cranked the engine over, and hit the gas.

First order of business was to separate from the scene. A massacre like that was going to attract attention, either because of what it looked and sounded like while it was happening or because of what was left when it was over. Second was to reconnoiter. Mr. X was going to be split-personality pissed at this. O's squadron of primes was gone, and the other *lessers* that he'd invited to watch E's discipline were dead, too. Six slayers in little over a half hour.

And goddamn it, he didn't know much about the monster who'd done the damage. They'd been hanging E's body in the tree when the Escalade had pulled over to the side of the road. A blond warrior had gotten out, so big, so fast, he was obviously a member of the Brotherhood. There had been another male with him, also incredibly lethal, as well as a human, although Christ only knew what that guy had been doing with the two brothers.

The fight had gone on for about eight or nine minutes. O had taken on the blond, had punched him a number of times with no measurable effect on the vampire's stamina or strength. The two of them had been deep in hand-to-hand when one of the other *lessers* had fired a gun. O had ducked and rolled, nearly getting shot himself. When he'd looked up, the vampire was clutching his shoulder and falling backward.

O had lunged for him, wanting to have the kill, but as he sprang forward, the *lesser* with the gun had tried to get at the vampire himself. The idiot had tripped on O's leg and knocked both of them to the ground. Then that light had gone off and the monster had appeared. Was it possible that the thing had come out of the blond warrior somehow? Man, what a secret weapon that would be.

O pictured the warrior, recalling every aspect of the male from his eyes to his face to the clothes he wore and the way he moved. Having a good description of the fair-haired brother was critical for use in the Society's interrogations. Specific questions posed to captives were more likely to lead to good answers.

And information on the brothers was what they were looking for. After decades of just knocking off civilians, the *lessers* were now targeting the

Brotherhood specifically. Without those warriors, the vampire race would be completely vulnerable, and the slayers could finally finish their job eradicating the species.

O pulled into the parking lot of the local laser-tag place, thinking that the only good thing about the evening had been when he'd killed E slowly. Taking out his irritation on the slayer's body had been like drinking a cool beer on a hot summer day. Satisfying. Calming.

But what had happened afterward had put him right back on edge.

O flipped open his phone and hit speed dial. There was no reason to wait until he got home to make a report. Mr. X's reaction was going to be worse if he thought the news had been delayed.

"We've had a situation," he said when the call was answered.

Five minutes later he hung up, turned the truck around, and headed back to the rural part of town.

Mr. X had demanded an audience. At his private cabin in the woods.

Chapter Six

Rhage could see only shadows, as his eyes were incapable of focusing or processing much light. He hated the loss of faculty and did his best to track the two big shapes moving around him. When hands gripped under his armpits and latched onto his ankles, he groaned.

“Easy there, Rhage, we’re just gonna lift you for a sec, true?” V said.

A fireball of pain shot through his body as he was taken up off the ground and carried around to the back of the Escalade. They laid him down. Doors shut. The engine turned over with a low purr.

He was so cold his teeth knocked together, and he tried to draw whatever was across his shoulders closer. He couldn’t make his hands work, but someone pulled what he assumed was a jacket more tightly around him.

“Just hang in there, big guy.”

Butch. It was Butch.

Rhage struggled to speak, hating the foul taste in his mouth.

“Nah, relax, Hollywood. You’re cool. V and I are going to get you home.”

The car started to move, bumping up and down as if it were getting off the shoulder and onto the road. He moaned like a sissy, but he couldn’t help it. His body felt as though it had been beaten all over with a baseball bat. A bat with a spike on the end.

And the bone and muscle aches were a minor problem compared to his stomach. He was praying he’d make it back to the house before he threw up in V’s car, but there was no guarantee he’d hold out that long. His salivary

glands were working overtime, so he had to swallow repeatedly. Which made his gag reflex fire up. Which spurred on the churning nausea. Which made him want to...

Trying to pull himself out the spiral, he breathed slowly through his nose.

“How we doing there, Hollywood?”

“Promise me. Shower. First thing.”

“You got it, buddy.”

Rhage figured he must have passed out, because he came awake as he was being hauled from the car. He heard familiar voices. V’s. Butch’s. A deep growl that could only be Wrath.

He lost consciousness again. When he came back, something cold was against his back.

“Can you stand up for me?” Butch asked.

Rhage gave it a shot and was grateful when his thighs accepted his weight. And now that he was out of the car, the nausea was a little better.

His ears caught a sweet chiming noise, and a moment later a warm rush fell over his body.

“How we doing, Rhage? Too hot?” Butch’s voice. Up close.

The cop was in the shower with him. And he smelled Turkish tobacco. V must be in the bathroom, too.

“Hollywood? This too hot for you?”

“No.” He reached around for the soap, fumbling. “Can’t see.”

“Just as well. No reason for you to know what we look like naked together. Frankly, I’m traumatized enough for the both of us.”

Rhage smiled a little as a washcloth scrubbed over his face, neck, chest.

God, that felt fantastic. He craned his head back, letting the soap and water wash away the remnants of the beast’s doing.

Too soon the shower was off. A towel was wrapped around his hips while another one dried him off.

“There anything else we can do for you before you get horizontal?” Butch asked.

“Alka-Seltzer. Cabinet.”

“V, fire up some of that shit, would you?” Butch’s arm came around Rhage’s waist. “Lean on me, buddy. Yeah, that’s right—*whoa*. Damn, we’ve got to stop feeding you.”

Rhage let himself be led across the marble floor and onto the carpet in the bedroom.

“All right, big guy, down you go.”

Oh, yeah. Bed. Bed was good.

“And look who’s here. It’s Nurse Vishous.”

Rhage felt his head get tilted up and then a glass was put to his lips. When he’d taken all he could, he collapsed against the pillows. He was about to pass out again when he heard Butch’s hushed voice.

“At least the bullet went through him clean. But, man, he doesn’t look good.”

V answered quietly. “He’ll be all right in a day or so. He recovers quickly from anything, but it’s still tough.”

“That creature was something else.”

“He worries a lot about it coming out.” There was the rasp of a lighter and then a fresh waft of that wonderful tobacco. “He tries not to show how afraid of it he is. Gotta keep up that glossy front and all. But he’s terrified of hurting someone.”

“First question he asked when he came back was whether you and I were okay.”

Rhage tried to force himself to sleep. The black void was a hell of a lot better than listening to his friends pity him.

Ninety-one years, eight months, four days. And then he would be free.

Mary was desperate to get to sleep. She closed her eyes. Did the deep breathing thing. Relaxed her toes one by one. Ran through all the telephone numbers she knew. None of it worked.

She rolled over and stared at the ceiling. When her mind kicked up an image of John, she was grateful. The boy was better than so many other subjects she could dwell on.

She couldn’t believe he was twenty-three, although the more she thought about him, it did seem possible. *Matrix* fixation aside, he was incredibly mature. Old, really.

When it had come time for him to go, she’d insisted on driving him back to his apartment. Bella had asked to come, too, so the three of them had gone downtown with his bike sticking out of the back of the Civic. Leaving the boy in front of that miserable apartment building had been hard. She’d almost begged him to come home with her.

But at least he'd agreed to be at Bella's tomorrow night. And maybe the martial-arts academy would open some doors for him. She had a feeling he didn't have many friends, and thought Bella was sweet to make the effort on his behalf.

With a little grin, Mary pictured the way John had looked at the other woman. Such shy admiration. And Bella handled the attention gracefully, though she was no doubt used to those kind of stares. Probably got them all the time.

For a moment Mary indulged herself and imagined looking out at the world through Bella's flawless eyes. And walking on Bella's flawless legs. And swinging Bella's flawless hair over a shoulder.

The fantasizing was a good diversion. She decided she'd go to New York City and strut down Fifth Avenue wearing something fabulous. No, the beach. She'd head for the beach in a black bikini. Hell, maybe a black bikini with a *thong*.

Okay, this was getting a little creepy.

Still, it would have been great, just once, to have a man stare at her with total adoration. To have him be...*enthralled*. Yes, that was the word. She would have loved for a man to be enthralled by her.

Except it was never going to happen. That time in her life, of youth and beauty and dewy sexuality, had passed. Had never been, actually. And now she was a nothing-special thirty-one-year-old who'd led a very hard life, thanks to the cancer.

Mary groaned. Oh, this was great. She wasn't panicking, but she was knee-deep in self-pity. And the shit was like sludge, clingy and disgusting.

She clicked on the light and reached for *Vanity Fair* with grim resolve. *Dominick Dunne, take me away*, she thought.

Chapter Seven

After Rhage fell asleep, Butch walked with V down the hall to Wrath's private study. Usually Butch didn't hang around for Brotherhood business, but Vishous was going to report on what they'd found on the way home, and Butch was the only one who'd gotten a look at the *lesser* in the tree.

As he came through the door, he had the same reaction he always did to the Versailles decor: It just didn't fit. All the gold curlicue things on the walls and the paintings of little fat boys with wings on the ceiling and the flimsy, fancy furniture. The place looked like a hangout for those old-fashioned, powdered-wig French guys. Not a war room for a bunch of heavy-duty fighters.

But whatever. The Brotherhood had moved into the mansion because it was convenient and secure, not because they liked the way it was tricked up.

He picked a chair with spindly legs and tried to sit down without letting all of his weight go. As he settled in, he shot a nod to Tohrment, who was on the silk-covered couch across the way. The vampire took up most of the piece of furniture, his big body sprawled across the powder-blue cushions. His military-cut black hair and his thick shoulders pronounced him a hard-ass, but that navy-blue gaze of his told another story.

Underneath all the warrior tough stuff, Tohr was a really nice guy. And surprisingly empathic, considering he kicked around the undead for a living. He was the official leader of the Brotherhood since Wrath had ascended to the throne two months ago, and the only fighter who didn't live

at the mansion. Tohr's *shellan*, Wellsie, was expecting their first child and not about to move in with a bunch of single guys. And who could blame her?

"So I guess you boys had some fun on the way home," Tohr said to Vishous.

"Yeah, Rhage really let loose," V replied as he poured himself a shot of vodka from the wet bar.

Phury came in next and nodded hello. Butch liked the brother a lot, even though they didn't have much in common. Well, except for their wardrobe fetish, although even there they differed. Butch's clotheshorse routine was a fresh coat of paint on a cheap house. Phury's style and masculine elegance were down to the bone. He was lethal, there was no doubt about it, but he had a metrosexual vibe to him.

The refined-gentleman impression wasn't just a result of his sharp duds, like the black cashmere sweater and fine twill slacks he was sporting right now. The brother had the most amazing head of hair Butch had ever seen. The long, thick waves of blond and red and brown were outrageously beautiful, even for a woman. And his odd yellow eyes, that shone bright as gold in the sunshine, added to his whole deal.

Why he was celibate was a total mystery.

As Phury went over to the bar and poured himself a glass of port, his limp was barely noticeable. Butch had heard that the guy's lower leg had been lost somewhere along the line. He had an artificial limb now, and evidently it didn't hinder him on the battlefield in the slightest.

Butch glanced over as someone else came into the room.

Unfortunately, Phury's twin had decided to show up on time, but at least Zsadist went to the far corner and stayed away from everyone. This was just fine with Butch, because that bastard made him jumpy.

Z's scarred face and glossy black eyes were just the tip of the iceberg for freakiness. The skull-trimmed hair, the tats around his neck and wrists, the piercings: He was a total package of menace and had the high-octane hatred to back up the impression he made. In law enforcement slang, he was a triple threat, that one. Stone cold. Mean as a snake. And unpredictable as hell.

Apparently Zsadist had been abducted from his family as an infant and sold into some kind of slavery. The hundred or so years he'd spent in captivity had sucked out anything even remotely human—er, vampire—in

him. He was nothing but dark emotions trapped in a ruined skin now. And if you knew what was good for you, you stayed the hell out of his way.

From out in the hall there was the sound of heavy footfalls. The brothers got quiet, and a moment later Wrath filled the doorway.

Wrath was a huge, dark-haired, cruel-lipped nightmare of a guy. He wore black wraparound shades all the time, lots of leather, and was about the last person on the planet anyone would want to screw with.

The hard-ass also happened to be the first on Butch's list of men to have at his back. He and Wrath had forged a bond on the night Wrath had been shot getting his wife back from the *lessers*. Butch had helped out, and that was that. They were tight.

Wrath entered the room like he owned the whole world. The brother was total emperor material, which made sense, because that was what he was. The Blind King. The last pure-bred vampire left on the planet. The ruler of his race.

Wrath glanced in Butch's direction. "You took good care of Rhage tonight. I appreciate it."

"He'd have done the same for me."

"Yeah, he would've." Wrath went behind the desk and sat down, crossing his arms over his chest. "Here's what we got. Havers had a trauma case come in tonight. Civilian male. Beat to shit, barely conscious. Before he died, he told Havers that he'd been worked over by the *lessers*. They wanted to know about the Brotherhood, where we lived, what he knew about us."

"Another one," Tohr murmured.

"Yeah. I think we're seeing a shift in the Lessening Society's strategy. The male described a place specifically set up for rough interrogation. Unfortunately, he died before he could give a location." Wrath pegged Vishous with a stare. "V, I want you to go to the civilian's family and tell them that the death will be avenged. Phury, get over to Havers's and talk to the nurse who caught most of what the male said. See if you can get a bead on where they had him and how he escaped. I'm not going to have those bastards using my civilians as scratching posts."

"They're working over their own kind, too," V interjected. "We found a *lesser* being strung up in a tree on the way home. Surrounded by his friends."

"What did they do to the guy?"

Butch spoke up. “Plenty. He wasn’t breathing anymore and then some. Do they take out their own a lot?”

“No. They don’t.”

“Then it’s a hell of a coincidence, don’t you think? Civilian gets free of a torture camp tonight. *Lesser* shows up looking like a pincushion.”

“I’m with you there, cop.” Wrath turned to V. “You get any info off those *lessers*? Or did Rhage clean house?”

V shook his head. “Everything was gone.”

“Not exactly.” Butch reached into his pocket and took out the wallet he’d removed from the treed *lesser*. “I got this off the one they turned on.” He rifled through and found the driver’s license. “Gary Essen. Hey, he lived in my old building. Just goes to show, you never know about your neighbors.”

“I’ll search the apartment,” Tohr said.

As Butch tossed the wallet over, the brothers got up, ready to leave.

Tohr spoke before anyone took off. “There’s one other thing. Got a phone call tonight. Civilian female found a young male out on his own. He had the name Tehrror on him. I told her to bring him to the training center tomorrow night.”

“Interesting,” Wrath said.

“He doesn’t speak, and his translator’s coming with him. It’s a human, by the way.” Tohr smiled and put the *lesser*’s wallet in the back pocket of his leathers. “But don’t worry about it. We’ll scrub her memories.”

As Mr. X opened up his cabin’s front door, his mood was not improved by Mr. O’s affect. The *lesser* on the other side was looking steady, unflappable. Humility would have gotten him further, but any form of weakness or submission was not in the man’s nature. Yet.

Mr. X motioned his subordinate in. “You know something, this confession-of-failure thing we’ve got going on is not working for me. And I should have known not to trust you. You mind explaining why you killed your squadron?”

Mr. O pivoted around. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t try to hide behind lies, it’s annoying.” Mr. X shut the door.

“I didn’t kill them.”

“But a creature did? Please, Mr. O. You could at least be more original. Better yet, blame it on the Brotherhood. That would be more plausible.”

Mr. X walked across the cabin's main room, keeping quiet for a while so his subordinate could get good and worked up. He idly checked his laptop and then glanced around his private quarters. The place was rustic, the furniture sparse, the seventy-five surrounding acres a good buffer. The toilet didn't work, but as *lessers* didn't eat, that kind of facility was unnecessary. The shower ran just fine, however.

And until they settled on another recruitment center, this humble outpost was the society's headquarters.

"I told you exactly what I saw," Mr. O said, breaking the silence tightly. "Why would I lie?"

"The *why* is irrelevant to me." Mr. X casually opened the door to the bedroom. The hinges creaked. "You should know that I sent a squadron to the scene while you were driving out here. They reported that there was nothing left of the bodies, so I assume you stabbed them into the great unknown. And they confirmed that there had been one hell of a fight, a lot of blood. I can imagine how your squadron fought against you. You must have been spectacular to win."

"If I'd killed them like that, why are my clothes mostly clean?"

"You changed before coming here. You're not stupid." Mr. X positioned himself in the bedroom's doorway. "So here's where we are, Mr. O. You are a pain in the ass, and the question I need to ask myself is whether you're worth all this aggravation. Those were Primes you killed out there. Seasoned *lessers*. Do you know how long—"

"I didn't kill them—"

Mr. X took two easy steps forward and coldcocked Mr. O in the jaw. The other man went down to the floor.

Mr. X put his boot on the side Mr. O's face, pinning him. "Let's quit it with that, okay? What I was saying was, do you have any idea how long it takes to make a Prime? Decades, centuries. You managed to wipe out three of them in one night. Which brings you to a total of four, counting Mr. M, who you sliced without my permission. And then there were the Betas you slayed tonight, as well."

Mr. O was spitting mad, his eyes glaring up from around the Timberland's sole. Mr. X leaned into his foot until those lids were wide, no longer narrow.

"So, again, I have to ask myself, are you worth it? You're only three years into the society. You're strong, you're effective, but you're proving

impossible to control. I put you with Primes because I assumed you'd fall in line with their level of excellence and temper yourself. Instead, you killed them."

Mr. X felt his blood rise and reminded himself that anger was not appropriate for a leader. Calm, levelheaded domination worked best. He took a deep breath before speaking again.

"You took out some of our best assets tonight. And it is going to stop, Mr. O. Right now."

Mr. X lifted his boot. The other *lesser* immediately sprang up from the floor.

Just as Mr. O was about to speak, an odd, discordant hum weaved through the night. He looked toward the sound.

Mr. X smiled. "Now if you don't mind, get the hell into that bedroom."

Mr. O crouched into an attack pose. "What's that?"

"It's time for a little behavior modification. A little punishment, too. So get into the bedroom."

By now the sound was so loud it was more a vibration of the air than something ears could register.

Mr. O shouted, "I told you the truth."

"Into the bedroom. The time for talking's passed." Mr. X glanced over his shoulder, in the direction of the hum. "Oh, for chrissakes."

He froze the large muscles in the other *lesser's* body and manhandled Mr. O into the other room, shoving him down on the bed.

The front door burst wide open.

Mr. O's eyes bulged as he took in the Omega. "Oh...God...no..."

Mr. X tidied up the man's clothes, straightening the jacket and the shirt. For good measure, he smoothed all that dark brown hair down and kissed Mr. O's forehead, as if he were a child.

"If you'll excuse me," Mr. X murmured, "I'm going to leave the two of you alone."

Mr. X took the back door out of the cabin. He was just getting into his car when the screams started.

Chapter Eight

“Ah, Bella, I think our ride is here.” Mary let the curtain fall back into place. “Either that or a third-world dictator is lost in Caldwell.”

John headed for the window. *Wow, he signed. Check out that Mercedes. Those blackened windows look bulletproof.*

The three of them left Bella’s house and walked over to the sedan. A little old man, dressed in black livery, got out of the driver’s side and came around to greet them. Incongruously, he was a cheery sort, all smiles. With the loose skin on his face, his long earlobes, and all those jowls, he looked like he was melting, though his radiant happiness suggested disintegration was a fine state to be in.

“I am Fritz,” he said, bowing low. “Please allow me to drive you.”

He opened the rear door and Bella slid inside first. John was next, and when Mary was settled back against the seat, Fritz closed the door. A second later they were on the road.

As the Mercedes glided along, Mary tried to see where they were going, except the windows were too dark. She assumed they were headed north, but who knew?

“Where is this place, Bella?” she asked.

“It’s not far.” But the woman didn’t sound all that confident. In fact, she’d been on edge since Mary and John had shown up.

“Do you know where we’re being taken?”

“Oh, sure.” The woman smiled and looked at John. “We’re going to meet some of the most amazing males you’ve ever seen.”

Mary's instincts knocked around in her chest, sending all kinds of tread-carefully signals. God, she wished she'd taken her own car.

Twenty minutes later, the Mercedes slowed to a stop. Inched forward. Stopped again. This happened at regular intervals a number of times. Then Fritz put down his window and spoke into some kind of intercom. They cruised along a little farther, then came to a stop. The engine was turned off.

Mary reached for the door. It was locked.

America's Most Wanted, *here we come*, she thought. She could just imagine their pictures on the TV, victims of violent crime.

But the driver let them out immediately, still with that smile on his face. "Won't you follow me?"

As Mary got out, she looked around. They were in some kind of underground parking lot, except there were no other cars. Just two small buses, like the kind you took around an airport.

They stuck close to Fritz and went through a pair of thick metal doors that opened into a maze of fluorescent-lit corridors. Thank God the guy seemed to know where he was going. There were branches splitting off in all directions with no rational plan, as if the place had been designed to get people lost and keep them that way.

Except someone would always know where you were, she thought. Every ten yards there was a pod set into the ceiling. She'd seen them before in malls, and the hospital had them, too. Surveillance cameras.

Finally they were shown into a small room with a two-sided mirror, a metal table, and five metal chairs. A small camera was mounted in the corner opposite the door. It was exactly like a police interrogation room, or what one must be like according to the sets on *NYPD Blue*.

"You will not have to wait long," Fritz said with a little bow. As he ducked out, the door eased shut of its own volition.

Mary went over and tried the handle, surprised to find it released easily. Then again, whoever was in charge here clearly didn't have to worry about losing track of their visitors.

She looked over at Bella. "You mind telling me what this place is?"

"It's a facility."

"A facility."

"You know, for training."

Yeah, but for what kind of training? "Are these folks of yours with the government or something?"

“Oh, no. No.”

John signed, *This doesn't look like a martial-arts academy.*

Yeah, no kidding.

“What did he say?” Bella asked.

“He's as curious as I am.”

Mary turned back to the door, opened it, and stuck her head out into the hall. When she heard a rhythmic sound, she stepped from the room, but didn't wander.

Footsteps. No, a shuffling. *What the—*

A tall blond man dressed in a black muscle shirt and leather pants lurched around a corner. He was unsteady on his bare feet, with one hand on the wall and his eyes focused downward. He seemed to be watching the floor carefully, as if he were relying on his depth perception to balance himself.

He looked drunk or maybe sick, but...good lord, he was beautiful. In fact, his face was so dazzling she had to blink a couple of times. Perfectly square jaw. Full lips. High cheekbones. Broad forehead. Hair was thick and wavy, lighter in the front, darker in the back where it was cut short.

And his body was just as spectacular as his head. Big-boned. Thickly muscled. No fat. His skin was golden even under the fluorescent lights.

Suddenly he looked at her. His eyes were an electric teal blue, so bright, so vivid, they were almost neon. And they stared right through her.

Mary sank back just the same and thought the lack of response wasn't a surprise. Men like him didn't notice women like her. It was a fact of nature.

She should just go back into the room. There was no sense in watching him not acknowledge her as he passed. Trouble was, the closer he got, the more mesmerized she became.

God, he really was...beautiful.

Rhage felt like holy hell as he weaved down the corridor. Every time the beast came out of him and his vision headed off for a little vacation, his eyes took their own sweet time in getting back to work. The body didn't want to play, either, his legs and arms hanging like heavy weights off his torso, not exactly useless, but damn close.

And his stomach was still off. The very idea of food made him nauseous.

But he'd had it with being stuck in his room. Twelve hours flat on his back was enough wasted time. He was determined to get to the training center's gym, hop on a recumbent bike, and loosen himself up a little—

He stopped, tensing. He couldn't see much, but he knew for sure he was not alone in the hall. Whoever it was stood close beside him, to his left. And it was a stranger.

He spun around and yanked the figure out of a doorway, grabbing it by the throat, forcing the body into the opposite wall. Too late he realized it was a female, and the high-pitched gasp shamed him. He quickly eased up on his grip, but he did not let go.

The slender neck under his palm was warm, soft. Her pulse was frantic, blood racing through the veins that came up from her heart. He leaned down and drew a breath through his nose. Only to jerk back.

Jesus Christ, she was a human. And she was sick, maybe dying.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "How did you get in here?"

There was no answer, just quick breathing. She was utterly terrified of him, the smell of her fear like wood smoke in his nose.

He softened his voice. "I'm not going to hurt you. But you don't belong here, and I want to know who you are."

Her throat undulated under his hand, as if she were swallowing "My name...my name is Mary. I'm here with a friend."

Rhage stopped breathing. His heart skipped a beat and then slowed.

"Say that again," he whispered.

"Ah, my name is Mary Luce. I'm a friend of Bella's.... We came here with a boy, with John Matthew. We were invited."

Rhage shivered, a balmy rush blooming out all over his skin. The musical lilt of her voice, the rhythm of her speech, the sound of her words, it all spread through him, calming him, comforting him. Chaining him sweetly.

He closed his eyes. "Say something else."

"What?" she asked, baffled.

"Talk. Talk to me. I want to hear your voice again."

She was silent, and he was about to demand that she speak when she said, "You don't look well. Do you need a doctor?"

He found himself swaying. The words didn't matter. It was her sound: low, soft, a quiet brushing in his ears. He felt as if he were being stroked on the inside of his skin.

“More,” he said, twisting his palm around to the front of her neck so he could feel the vibrations in her throat better.

“Could you...could you please let go of me?”

“No.” He brought his other arm up. She was wearing some kind of fleece, and he moved the collar aside, putting his hand on her shoulder so she couldn’t get away from him. “Talk.”

She started to struggle. “You’re crowding me.”

“I know. *Talk.*”

“Oh, for God’s sake, what do you want me to say?”

Even exasperated, her voice was beautiful. “Anything.”

“Fine. Get your hand off my throat and let me go or I’m going to knee you where it counts.”

He laughed. Then sank his lower body into her, trapping her with his thighs and hips. She stiffened against him, but he got an ample feel of her. She was built lean, though there was no doubt she was a female. Her breasts hit his chest, her hips cushioned his, her stomach was soft.

“Keep talking,” he said in her ear. God, she smelled good. Clean. Fresh. Like lemon.

When she pushed against him, he leaned his full weight into her. Her breath came out in a rush.

“Please,” he murmured.

Her chest moved against his as if she were inhaling. “I...er, I have nothing to say. Except get off of me.”

He smiled, careful to keep his mouth closed. There was no sense showing off his fangs, especially if she didn’t know what he was.

“So say that.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Say nothing. Over and over and over again. Do it.”

She bristled, the scent of fear replaced by a sharp spice, like fresh, pungent mint from a garden. She was annoyed now.

“*Say it,*” he commanded, needing to feel more of what she did to him.

“*Fine.* Nothing. Nothing.” Abruptly she laughed, and the sound shot right through to his spine, burning him. “Nothing, nothing. *No-thing. No-thing.* Noooooothing. There, is that good enough for you? Will you let me go now?”

“No.”

She fought against him again, creating a delicious friction between their bodies. And he knew the moment when her anxiety and irritation turned to something hot. He smelled her arousal, a lovely sweetening in the air, and his body answered her call.

He got hard as a diamond.

“Talk to me, Mary.” He moved his hips in a slow circle against her, rubbing his erection on her belly, increasing his ache and her heat.

After a moment the tension eased out of her, softening her against the thrust of his muscles and his arousal. Her hands flattened on his waist. And then slowly slid around to the small of his back, as if she were unsure why she was responding to him the way she was.

He arched against her, to show his approval and encourage her to touch more of him. When her palms moved up his spine, he growled low in his throat and dropped his head down so his ear was closer to her mouth. He wanted to give her another word to say, something like *luscious* or *whisper* or *strawberry*.

Hell, *antidisestablishmentarianism* would do it.

The effect she had on him was druglike, a tantalizing combination of sexual need and profound ease. Like he was having an orgasm and falling into a peaceful sleep at the same time. It was like nothing he’d ever felt before.

A chill shot through him, sucking the warmth out of his body.

He snapped his head back as he thought about what Vishous had said to him.

“Are you a virgin?” Rhage demanded.

The stiffness in her body returned, like cement setting solid. She shoved hard against him, moving him not one inch.

“I *beg* your pardon. What kind of question is that?”

Anxiety tightened his hand on her shoulder. “Have you ever been taken by a male? *Answer the question.*”

Her lovely voice turned high, frightened. “Yes. Yes, I’ve had...a lover.”

Disappointment loosened his grip. But relief was right on its heels.

All things considered, he wasn’t sure he needed to meet his destiny this ten minutes.

Besides, even if she wasn’t his fate, this human female was extraordinary...something special.

Something he had to have.

Mary took a deep breath as the hold on her throat relaxed.

Be careful what you ask for, she thought, remembering how she'd wanted a man to be enthralled by her.

God, this was so not what she'd expected the experience to be like. She was utterly overwhelmed. By the male body pressing into her. By the promise of sex seething out of him. By the lethal power he could wield if he decided to squeeze her neck again.

"Tell me where you live," the man said.

When she didn't answer, he undulated his hips, that massive erection moving, circling, pressing into her stomach.

Mary shut her eyes. And tried not to wonder what it would feel like if he were inside of her while he was doing that.

His head came down and his lips brushed the side of her neck. Nuzzled her. "Where do you live?"

She felt a soft, moist stroke. God, his tongue. Running up her throat.

"You're going to tell me eventually," he murmured. "But take your time. I'm not in a big hurry right now."

His hips left her briefly, returning as his thigh pushed between her legs and brushed against her core. The hand at the base of her neck swept down to her sternum, coming to rest between her breasts.

"Your heart is beating fast, Mary."

"Th-that's because I'm frightened."

"Fear isn't the only thing you're feeling. Why don't you check out what your hands are up to?"

Shoot. They were high on his biceps. And they were gripping him, pulling him closer. Her nails were digging into his skin.

When she let go of him, he frowned. "I like the way that feels. Don't stop."

The door opened behind them.

"Mary? Are you oka—Oh...my God." Bella's words trailed off.

Mary braced herself as the man twisted his torso and looked at Bella. His eyes squinted, flicked up and down, and then came back to Mary.

"Your friend's worried about you," he said softly. "You can tell her she shouldn't be."

Mary tried to get loose and wasn't surprised when he mastered the jerky movements easily.

“I have an idea,” she muttered. “Why don’t you let me go, and then I won’t have to reassure her?”

A dry male voice cut through the hall. “Rhage, that female wasn’t brought here for your pleasure, and this isn’t One Eye, my brother. No sex in the hall.”

Mary tried to turn her head, but the hand between her breasts slid up her throat and took her chin, stopping her. Teal blue eyes bored into hers.

“I’m going to ignore them both. If you do the same, we can make them disappear.”

“Rhage, let her go.” A sharp torrent of words followed, spoken in a language she didn’t understand.

While the tirade went on, the blond’s brilliant gaze stayed on her, his thumb running gently back and forth along her jaw. He was lazy, affectionate, but when he replied to the other man, his voice was hard and aggressive, as powerful as his body. Another series of words came back, this time less combative. Like the other guy was trying to reason with him.

Abruptly the blond let her go and stepped back. The absence of his warm, heavy body was a curious shock.

“See you later, Mary.” He brushed her cheek with his forefinger and then turned from her.

Feeling weak in the knees, she sagged against the wall as he staggered away, steadying himself by throwing his arm out to the side.

God, when he’d had her at his mercy, she’d forgotten he was ill.

“Where’s the boy?” the other male voice demanded.

Mary looked to her left. The guy was big and dressed in black leather, with a military haircut and a shrewd pair of navy-blue eyes.

A soldier, she thought, somehow put at ease by him.

“The boy?” he prompted.

“John’s in there,” Bella replied.

“Then let’s get to it.”

The man opened the door and leaned against it so she and Bella had to squeeze past him. He paid no attention to them as they went by, but stared at John instead. John looked right back at him, eyes narrowed as if he were trying to place the soldier.

When they were all sitting at the table, the man nodded to Bella. “You were the one who called.”

“Yes. And this is Mary Luce. And John. John Matthew.”

“I’m Tohrment.” He refocused on John. “How you doing, son?”

John signed, and Mary had to clear her throat before translating. “He says, ‘Fine, sir. How are you?’”

“I’m all right.” The man smiled a little and then glanced at Bella. “I want you to wait in the hall. I’ll talk to you after I speak with him.”

Bella hesitated.

“That isn’t a request,” he said in a level voice.

After Bella left, the guy turned his chair toward John, leaned back in it, and kicked his long legs out. “So tell me, son, where did you grow up?”

John moved his hands, and Mary said, “Here in town. First in an orphanage, then with a couple sets of foster parents.”

“You know anything about your mom or dad?”

John shook his head.

“Bella told me you had a bracelet with some designs on it. Would you show it to me?”

John pulled up his sleeve and extended his arm. The man’s hand engulfed the boy’s wrist.

“That’s real nice, son. You make it?”

John nodded.

“And where’d you get the idea for the design?”

John extracted himself from the soldier’s grip and started to sign. When he stopped, Mary said, “He dreams of the pattern.”

“Yeah? Mind if I ask what your dreams are like?” The man returned to his casual pose in the chair, but his eyes were narrow.

Screw martial-arts training, Mary thought. This wasn’t about some karate lessons. This was an interrogation.

As John hesitated, she wanted to grab the kid and march out, but she had a feeling the boy would fight her. He was utterly absorbed by the man, intense and intent.

“It’s all right, son. Whatever it is, it’s okay.”

John lifted his hands, and Mary spoke as he signed.

“Er...he’s in a dark place. Kneeling in front of an altar. Behind it, he sees writing on the wall, hundreds of lines of writing in black stone—John, wait, slow down. I can’t translate when you go so fast.” Mary concentrated on the boy’s hands. “He says in the dream he keeps going over and touching a strip of writing that looks like this.”

The man frowned.

When John looked down, as if embarrassed, the soldier said, “Don’t you worry, son, we’re cool. Is there anything else you can think of about yourself that strikes you as odd? Things that maybe make you different from other folks?”

Mary shifted in her chair, really uncomfortable with the way things were going. John was clearly going to answer any question put to him, but for God’s sake, they didn’t know who this man was. And Bella, though she’d made the introduction, had been obviously uncomfortable.

Mary lifted her hands, about to sign a warning to John, when the kid unbuttoned his shirt. He opened one side, flashing a circular scar above his left pectoral.

The man leaned forward, studied the marking, and then moved back. “Where did you get that?”

The boy’s hands flew around in front of him.

“He says he was born with it.”

“Is there anything else?” the man asked.

John glanced over at Mary. He took a deep breath and signed, *I dream of blood. Of fangs. Of...biting.*

Mary felt her eyes widen before she could stop herself.

John looked at her anxiously. *Don’t worry, Mary. I’m not a sicko or anything. I was terrified when the dreams first came to me, and it’s not like I can control what my brain does, you know.*

“Yeah, I know,” she said, reaching out and squeezing his hand.

“What did he say?” the man asked.

“That last part was meant for me.”

She inhaled deeply. And went back to translating.

Chapter Nine

Bella leaned back against the wall in the corridor and started braiding pieces of her hair, something she did when she was nervous.

She'd heard members of the Brotherhood were almost a separate species, but she'd never thought that was true. Until now. Those two males were not just colossal on a physical scale; they radiated dominance and aggression. Hell, they made her brother look like an amateur in the hard-ass department, and Rehvenge was the toughest thing she'd ever come across.

Dear God, what had she done in bringing Mary and John here? She was a little less concerned for the boy, but what about Mary? The way that blond warrior had acted around her was flat-out trouble. You could have boiled an ocean with the kind of lust he'd thrown off, and members of the Black Dagger Brotherhood were not used to being denied. From what she'd heard, when they wanted a female, they took her.

Thankfully, they weren't known to rape, although going by what she'd seen just now, they wouldn't have to. Those warrior's bodies were made for sex. Mating with one of them, being possessed by all that strength, would be an extraordinary experience.

Although Mary, as a human, might very well not feel that way.

Bella looked up and down the hall, restless, tense. There was no one around, and if she had to stand still any longer she was going to have a headful of cornrows. She shook out her hair, picked a random direction, and meandered. When she caught the sound of a rhythmic pounding in the

distance, she followed the thumping to a pair of metal doors. She opened one side and walked through.

The gymnasium was the size of a pro-basketball court, its wooden floor varnished to a high gloss. Bright blue mats were laid out here and there and caged fluorescent lights dangled from the high ceiling. A balcony with stadium seating jutted out on the left, and beneath the overhang, a series of punching bags was strung up.

A magnificent male was beating the crap out of one of them, his back to her. Dancing on the balls of his feet, light as a breeze, he threw punch after punch, ducking, hitting, driving the heavy bag forward with his force so the thing hung at an angle.

She couldn't see his face, but he had to be attractive. His skull-trimmed hair was light brown, and he wore a skintight black turtleneck and a pair of loose black nylon workout pants. A holster crisscrossed over his broad back.

The door clicked shut behind her.

With a swipe of his arm, the male whipped a black-bladed dagger out and buried it into the bag. He ripped the thing open, sand and padding pouring down in a rush onto the mat. And then he spun around.

Bella clapped a hand over her mouth. His face was scarred, as if someone had tried to cut it in half with a knife. The thick line started at his forehead, went down the bridge of his nose, and curved over his cheek. It ended at the side of his mouth, distorting his upper lip.

Narrowed eyes, black and cold as night, took her in and then widened ever so slightly. He seemed nonplussed, his big body unmoving save for the deep breaths he took.

The male wanted her, she thought. And was unsure what to do about it.

Except just like that, the speculation and odd confusion were buried. What took their place was an icy anger that scared the hell out of her. Keeping her eyes on him, she backed into the door and pumped the release bar. When she got nowhere, she had a feeling he was trapping her inside.

The male watched her struggle for a moment and then came after her. As he stalked across the mats, he flipped his dagger into the air and caught it by the handle. Flipped it up, snatched it back. Up and down.

“Don't know what you're doing here,” he said in a low voice. “Other than fucking up my workout.”

As those eyes went over her face and body, his hostility was palpable, but he was also throwing off raw heat, a kind of sexual menace she really shouldn't have been captivated by.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know..."

"Didn't know what, female?"

God, he was so close now. And he was so much bigger than her.

She flattened herself against the door. "I'm sorry—"

The male punched his hands into the metal on either side of her head. She eyed the knife he was holding, but then forgot all about the weapon as he leaned into her. He stopped just before their bodies touched.

Bella took a deep breath, smelling him. His scent was more like a fire in her nose than anything she could name. And she responded to it, warming, wanting.

"You're sorry," he said, titling his head to the side and focusing on her neck. When he smiled, his fangs were long and very white. "Yeah, I bet you are."

"I am very sorry."

"So prove it."

"How?" she croaked.

"Get on your hands and knees. I'll take your apology from there."

A door on the other side of the gymnasium burst open.

"Oh, Christ...Let her go!" Another male, this one with a long head of hair, jogged across the vast floor. "Hands off, Z. Right now."

The scarred male leaned down to her, putting that misshapen mouth close to her ear. Something pressed into her sternum, over her heart. His fingertip.

"You just got saved, female."

He stepped around her and went out the door, just as the other male came up to her.

"Are you okay?"

Bella eyed the decimated punching bag. She couldn't seem to breathe, although whether that was from fear or something altogether sexual, she wasn't sure. Probably a combination of both.

"Yes, I think so. Who was that?"

The male opened the door and led her back to the interrogation room without answering her question. "Do yourself a favor and stay here, okay?"

Good advice, she thought, as she was left by herself.

Chapter Ten

Rhage came awake with a jolt. As he looked at the clock on his bedside table, he was psyched when he could focus his eyes and read the thing. Then pissed off when he saw what time it was.

Where the hell was Tohr? He'd promised to call as soon as he was done with the human female, but that had been more than six hours ago.

Rhage reached for the phone and dialed Tohr's cell. When he got voice mail, he cursed and hung up.

As he got out of bed, he stretched carefully. He was sore and sick to his stomach, but able to move a lot better. A quick shower and a fresh set of leathers had him feeling even more himself, and he headed for Wrath's study. Dawn was coming soon, and if Tohr wasn't answering his phone, he was probably doing a download to the king before he went home.

The room's double doors were open, and lo and behold, Tohrment was wearing a track in the Aubusson carpet, pacing while talking to Wrath.

"Just who I was looking for," Rhage drawled.

Tohr glanced over. "I was coming to your room next."

"Sure you were. What's doing, Wrath?"

The Blind King smiled. "Glad to see you're getting back to fighting form, Hollywood."

"Oh, I'm ready, all right." Rhage stared at Tohr. "You got something to tell me?"

"Not really."

"You're saying you don't know where the human lives?"

“I don’t know if you need to go see her, how about that?”

Wrath leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on the desk. His enormous shitkickers made the delicate thing look like a footstool.

He smiled. “One of you steakheads want to bring me up to speed?”

“Private biz,” Rhage murmured. “Nothing special.”

“The hell it is.” Tohr turned to Wrath. “Our boy over here seems to want to get to know the kid’s human translator better.”

Wrath shook his head. “Oh, no, you don’t, Hollywood. Lie down with some other female. God knows, there’s enough of them out there for you.” He nodded at Tohr. “As I was saying, I’ve got no objection to the boy joining the first class of trainees, provided you verify his background. And that human needs to be checked out, too. If the kid disappears all of a sudden, I don’t want her causing trouble.”

“I’ll take care of her,” Rhage said. When they both gave him a look, he shrugged. “Either you let me or I’ll follow whoever does. One way or the other, I will find that female.”

Tohr’s brows turned his forehead into a plow field. “Will you back off, my brother? Assuming the boy comes here, there’s too close a connection with that human. Just drop it.”

“Sorry. I want her.”

“Christ. You can be a real pain in the ass, you know that? No impulse control, but totally single-minded. Helluva combination.”

“Look, one way or the other, I’m going to have her. Now do you want me to check her out while I do it or not?”

When Tohr rubbed his eyes, and Wrath cursed, Rhage knew he’d won.

“Fine,” Tohr muttered. “Find out her background and her connection to the kid and then do what you will with her. But at the end of it, you strip her memories and you don’t see her again. Do you hear me? You wipe yourself out of her when you’re finished and you *do not* see her again.”

“Deal.”

Tohr flipped open his cell and punched a few buttons. “I’m text-messaging the human’s number to you.”

“And her friend’s.”

“You’re going to do her, too?”

“Just give it to me, Tohr.”

Bella was getting into bed for the day when the phone rang. She picked it up, hoping it wasn't her brother. She hated when he checked to make sure she was at home when night receded. Like she might be out screwing males or something.

"Hello?" she said.

"You will call Mary and you will tell her to meet me tonight for dinner."

Bella bolted upright. *The blond warrior.*

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes...but what do you want with her?" As if she didn't already know.

"Call her now. Tell her that I am a friend of yours and she'll enjoy herself. It will be better that way."

"Better than what?"

"My breaking into her house to get to her. Which is what I'll do, if I have to."

Bella closed her eyes and saw Mary against that wall, the male looming over her as he held her in place. He was coming after her for one and only one reason: to release all that sex in his body. Release it into her.

"Oh, God...please don't hurt her. She's not one of us. And she's ill."

"I know. I'm not going to harm her."

Bella put her head in her hand, wondering just how a hard male like him would know what hurt and what didn't.

"Warrior...she doesn't know about our race. She's—I beg you, don't—"

"She won't remember me after it's done."

Like that was supposed to make her feel less awful? As it was, she felt like she was serving Mary up on a platter.

"You can't stop me, female. But you can make it easier on your friend. Think about it. She'll feel safer if she meets me in a public place. She won't know what I am. It will be as normal as it can be for her."

Bella hated being pushed around, hated the sense that she was betraying Mary's friendship.

"I wish I'd never brought her along," she muttered.

"I don't." There was a pause. "She has an...unusual way about her."

"What if she denies you?"

"She won't."

"But if she does?"

"That's her choice. She won't be forced. I swear to you."

Bella let her hand drop to her throat, tangling a finger in the Diamonds by the Yard chain she always wore.

“Where?” she said with dejection. “Where should she meet you?”

“Where do humans meet for normal dates?”

How the hell would she know? Except then she remembered Mary saying something about a colleague of hers meeting a man.... What was the name of the place?

“TGI Friday’s,” she said. “There’s one in Lucas Square.”

“Fine. Tell her eight o’clock tonight.”

“What name do I give her?”

“Tell her it’s...Hal. Hal E. Wood.”

“Warrior?”

“Yeah?”

“Please...”

His voice actually softened. “Don’t worry, Bella. I’ll treat her well.”
The phone went dead.

In Mr. X’s cabin deep in the woods, O slowly sat up on the bed, easing himself to the vertical. He brushed his hands across his wet cheeks.

The Omega had left only an hour ago, and O’s body was still leaking out of several places, wounds and otherwise. He wasn’t sure he was up to moving, but he had to get the hell away from this bedroom.

When he tried to stand his vision spun wildly, so he sat down. Through the little window across the room, he saw dawn breaking, the warm glow splintered by the boughs of pine trees. He hadn’t expected the punishment to last a whole day. And had been sure at many points that he wouldn’t make it through.

The Omega had taken him to places inside of himself that he’d been shocked to find he had. Places of fear and self-loathing. Of utter humiliation and degradation. And now, in the aftermath, he felt as if he had no skin, as if he were totally open and exposed, a raw laceration that just happened to be breathing.

The door opened. Mr. X’s shoulders filled the frame. “How are we doing?”

O covered himself with a blanket and then opened his mouth. Nothing came out. He coughed a few times. “I...made it.”

“I was hoping you would.”

For O, it was difficult to see the man dressed in regular clothes, holding a clipboard, looking as if he were ready to start another productive workday. Compared to where O had spent the last twenty-four hours, the normalcy seemed fake and vaguely threatening.

Mr. X smiled a little. “So, you and I are going to strike a deal. You get in line and stay there, and that won’t happen again.”

O was too exhausted to argue. The fight in him would come back—he knew it would—but right now all he wanted was soap and hot water. And some time alone.

“What do you say to me?” Mr. X demanded.

“Yes, sensei.” O didn’t care what he had to do, what he had to say. He just had to get away from the bed...the room...the cabin.

“There are some clothes in the closet. You good enough to drive?”

“Yeah. Yeah...I’m fine.”

O pictured the shower at his house, all creamy tile and white grout. Clean. So very clean. And he would be, too, when he got out of it.

“I want you to do yourself a favor, Mr. O. When you go about your work, remember what all that felt like. Call it up, keep it fresh in your mind, and take it out on your subjects. I may be irritated by your initiative, but I would despise you if you went soft on me. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sensei.”

Mr. X turned away, but then glanced over his shoulder. “I think I know why the Omega let you survive. As he left, he was quite complimentary. I know he’d like to see you again. Shall I tell him you’d welcome his visits?”

O made a strangled sound. He couldn’t help it.

Mr. X laughed softly. “Perhaps not.”

Chapter Eleven

Mary parked in the TGI Friday's lot. Looking around at the cars and minivans, she wondered how the hell she'd agreed to meet some man for dinner. Close as she could recall, Bella had phoned and talked her into it this morning, but damned if she could remember any of the particulars.

Then again, she wasn't retaining much. Tomorrow morning she was going to the doctor's for the follow-up, and with that hanging over her, she was in a daze. Take last night, for instance. She could have sworn she went somewhere with John and Bella, except the evening was a total black hole. Work was the same. She'd gone through the motions at the law office today, making simple mistakes and staring into space.

As she got out of the Civic, she tightened herself up mentally as best she could. She owed the poor man she was meeting an effort to be alert, but other than that, she didn't feel any pressure. She'd made it clear to Bella this was friends only. Split the check. Nice to meet you; see you later.

Which would have been her attitude even if she hadn't been distracted by the whole Russian-roulette medical lottery hanging over her head. Aside from the fact that she might be sick again, she was way out of practice with the whole dating thing and not looking to get back in shape. Who needed the drama? Most single guys in their early thirties were still looking for fun or they would have been married already, and she was the antifun, buzz-kill type. Serious by nature, with some hard-core experience.

And she didn't look like a party, either. The unremarkable hair growing out of her head was pulled back tight and cinched in a scrunchie. The

creamy Irish knit sweater she had on was baggy and warm. Her khakis were comfortable, and her flats were brown and scuffed at the toes. She probably looked like the mother she would never be.

When she walked into the restaurant, she found the hostess and was led to a booth in the back corner. As she put her purse down, she smelled green peppers and onions and looked up. A waitress whipped by with a sizzling iron plate.

The restaurant was busy, a great cacophony rising up from all the life in the place. While waiters danced around with trays of steaming food or piles of used dishes, families and couples and groups of friends laughed, talked, argued. The mad chaos struck her as more awesome than ordinary, and sitting by herself she felt utterly separate, a poser among the real people.

They all had happy futures. She had...more doctor's appointments to go to.

With a curse, she clipped her emotions into place, trimming off the panic and catastrophizing, leaving behind nothing but a resolve not to dwell on Dr. Della Croce tonight.

Mary thought of topiaries and smiled a little, just as a harried waitress came up to the table. The woman put down a plastic glass of water, spilling some.

"You waiting for someone?"

"Yes, I am."

"You want a drink?"

"This is fine. Thanks."

As the waitress took off, Mary sipped the water, tasted metal, and pushed the glass away. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a flurry of movement at the front door.

Holy...Wow.

A man had walked into the restaurant. A really, really...very fine man.

He was blond. Movie-star beautiful. And monumental in a black leather trench coat. His shoulders were broad as the door he'd come through, his legs so long he was taller than anyone in the place. And as he strode through the knot of people at the entrance, the other men looked down or away or at their watches, as if they knew they couldn't measure up to what he had going on.

Mary frowned, feeling like she'd seen him somewhere before.

Yeah, it's called the big screen, she told herself. Maybe there was a movie being shot here in town.

The man stepped up to the hostess and ran his eyes over the woman as if trying her on for size. The redhead blinked up at him in stunned disbelief, but then clearly her estrogen receptors came to the rescue. She pulled her hair forward, as if she wanted to make sure he noticed the stuff, and then kicked out her hip as if she'd popped the thing out of joint.

Don't worry, Mary thought. *He sees you, honey.*

As the two of them started coming through the restaurant, the man surveyed every table, and Mary wondered who he was eating with.

Aha. Two booths away there was a blonde seated alone. Her fuzzy blue sweater was skintight, the angora shrink-wrap showing off a dazzling display of assets. And the woman was radiating anticipation as she watched him come through the restaurant.

Bingo. Ken and Barbie.

Well, not really Ken. As the guy walked along, there was something about him that wasn't WASPy handsome in spite of his amazing looks. Something...animalistic. He just didn't carry himself as other people did.

Actually, he moved like a predator, thick shoulders rolling with his gait, head turning, scanning. She had the discomfiting sense that if he wanted to, he could wipe out everyone in the place with his bare hands.

Calling on her willpower, Mary forced herself to stare into her water glass. She didn't want to be like all the other gawking fools.

Oh, hell, she had to look up again.

He'd bypassed the blonde and was standing in front of a brunette directly across the aisle. The woman was smiling broadly. Which seemed only reasonable.

"Hey," he said.

Well, what do you know. Voice was spectacular, too. A deep, resonant drawl.

"Hi, yourself."

The man's tone sharpened. "You are not Mary."

Mary tensed. *Oh, no.*

"I'll be anyone you want."

"I'm looking for Mary Luce."

Oh...shit.

Mary cleared her throat, wishing she were anywhere else, anyone else. “I’m...ah, I’m Mary.”

The man turned around. As vivid, teal blue eyes bored into her, his big body stiffened.

Mary looked down quickly, jabbing the straw into her water.

Not what you were expecting, am I? she thought.

As silence stretched out, clearly he was searching for a socially acceptable excuse to cut and run.

God, how could Bella have humiliated her like this?

Rhage stopped breathing and just took the human in. Oh, she was lovely. Nothing he’d expected, but lovely nonetheless.

Her skin was pale and smooth, like fine ivory stationery. The bones of her face were equally delicate, her jaw a graceful arch running from her ears to her chin, her cheeks high and tinted with a natural blush. Her neck was long and slender, like her hands and probably her legs. Her deep brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

She wore no makeup, he couldn’t detect any perfume, and the only jewelry she had on was a pair of tiny pearl earrings. Her off-white sweater was bulky and loose, and he was willing to bet her pants were also baggy.

There was absolutely nothing about her that courted notice. She wasn’t anything like the females he went for. And she held his attention like a marching band.

“Hello, Mary,” he said softly.

He was hoping she would look back up at him, because he hadn’t been able to catch enough of her eyes. And he couldn’t wait to hear her voice again. The two words she’d spoken had been so quiet and not nearly enough.

He stuck his hand out, itching to touch her. “I’m Hal.”

She let his palm hang between them as she reached for her purse and started to scootch her way out of the booth.

He planted himself in her path. “Where are you going?”

“Look, it’s okay. I won’t tell Bella. We’ll just pretend we had dinner.”

Rhage closed his eyes and tuned out the background noise so he could absorb the sound of her voice. His body stirred and calmed, weaved a little. And then he realized what she’d said.

“Why would we lie? We are going to have dinner together.”

Her lips tightened, but at least she stopped trying to escape.

When he was sure she wasn't going to bolt, he sat down and tried to get his legs to fit under the table. As she looked at him, he stopped shifting his knees around.

Dear God. Her eyes didn't match the gentle lilt of her voice at all. They belonged to a warrior.

Gunmetal gray, surrounded by lashes the color of her hair, they were grave, serious, reminding him of males who had fought and survived battle. They were staggeringly beautiful in their strength.

His voice vibrated. "I am so going to...have dinner with you."

Those eyes flared and then narrowed. "Have you always done charity work?"

"Excuse me?"

A waitress came over and slowly put down a glass of water in front of him. He could smell the female's lusty response to his face and his body and it annoyed him.

"Hi, I'm Amber," she said. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Water is fine. Mary, do you want anything else?"

"No, thanks."

The waitress stepped a little closer to him. "Can I tell you about our specials?"

"All right."

As the list went on and on, Rhage didn't look away from Mary. She was hiding her eyes from him, damn it.

The waitress cleared her throat. A couple of times. "You sure I can't get you a beer? Or maybe something with a little more kick? How about a shot —"

"We're fine, and you can come back later for the order. Thanks."

Amber took the hint.

When they were alone, Mary said, "Really, let's just end—"

"Have I given you any indication that I don't want to eat with you?"

She put a hand on top of the menu in front of her, tracing the picture of a plate of ribs. Abruptly she pushed the thing away. "You keep staring at me."

"Males do that." *When they find a female they want*, he added to himself.

“Yeah, well, not to me they don’t. I can imagine how seriously underwhelmed you are, but I don’t need you focusing on the particulars, know what I mean? And I’m really not interested in enduring an hour of you taking one for the team.”

God, that voice. She was doing it to him again, his skin flaring with shivers and then settling down, loosening. He took a deep breath, trying to catch some of her natural, lemony scent.

As silence cropped up between them, he nudged her menu back at her. “Decide what you’re going to order, unless you just want to sit there while I eat.”

“I can leave anytime I want.”

“True. But you won’t.”

“Oh, and why’s that?” Her eyes flashed, and his body lit up like a football stadium.

“You’re not going to bail because you like Bella too much to embarrass her by walking out on me. And unlike you, I will tell her you ditched me.”

Mary frowned. “Blackmail?”

“Persuasion.”

She slowly opened the menu and glanced at it. “You’re still staring at me.”

“I know.”

“Would you mind looking somewhere else? The menu, that brunette across the aisle. There’s a blonde two booths back, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“You don’t ever wear perfume, do you?”

Her eyes flipped up to his. “No, I don’t.”

“May I?” He nodded to one of her hands.

“Excuse me?”

He couldn’t very well tell her he wanted to smell her skin up close. “Considering we’re having dinner and all, seems only civil to shake hands, doesn’t it? And even though you shut me down the first time I tried to be polite, I’m willing to give it another shot.”

When she didn’t answer, he reached across the table and took her hand into his. Before she could react, he pulled her arm forward, bent down, and pressed his lips to her knuckles. He breathed in deeply.

His body’s response to her scent was immediate. His erection punched at the fly of his leathers, straining, pushing. He shifted around to make

some more room in his pants.

God, he couldn't wait to get her home alone.

Chapter Twelve

Mary stopped breathing as Hal released her hand.

Maybe she was dreaming. Yeah, that had to be it. Because he was too gorgeous. Too sexy. And way too focused on her to be real.

The waitress came back, getting as close to Hal as she could without actually being in his lap. And wouldn't you know it, the woman had freshened her lip gloss. That mouth of hers looked like it had had an oil change with something called Fresh Pink. Or Curious Coral. Or something equally ridiculous.

Mary shook her head, surprised she was being so bitchy.

"What can I get you?" the waitress asked Hal.

He glanced across the table and lifted an eyebrow. Mary shook her head and started flipping through the menu.

"Okay, whadda we got here," he said, opening his own. "Let's have the Chicken Alfredo. The NY strip, rare. And a cheeseburger, also rare. Double on the fries. And some nachos. Yeah, I want the nachos with everything on them. Double that, too, will you?"

Mary could only stare as he closed the menu and waited.

The waitress looked a little awkward. "Is all that for both you and your sister?"

As if family obligation was the only reason a man like him would be out with a woman like her. *Oh, man...*

"No, that's for me. And she's my date, not my sister. Mary?"

“I...ah, I’ll just have a Caesar salad, whenever his”—*feeding trough?*
—“dinner comes.”

The waitress took the menus and left.

“So, Mary, tell me a little about yourself.”

“Why don’t we just make it about you?”

“Because then I won’t hear you talk.”

Mary stiffened, something bubbling below the surface of her consciousness.

Talk. I want to hear your voice.

Say nothing. Over and over and over again. Do it.

She could have sworn this man had said those things to her, but she’d never met him before. God knew, she would have remembered that.

“What do you do for a living?” he prompted.

“Er...I’m an executive assistant.”

“Where?”

“A law firm here in town.”

“But you did something else, didn’t you?”

She wondered how much Bella had told him. God, she hoped the woman hadn’t brought up the illness. Maybe that was why he was staying.

“Mary?”

“I used to work with kids.”

“Teacher?”

“Therapist.”

“Head or body?”

“Both. I was a rehab specialist for autistic children.”

“What got you started in it?”

“Do we have to do this?”

“Do what?”

“All the let’s-pretend-to-get-to-know-you stuff.”

He frowned, leaning back as the waitress put a huge plate of nachos on the table.

The woman bent down to his ear. “Shhh, don’t tell anyone. I stole these from another order. They can wait, and you look very hungry.”

Hal nodded, smiled, but seemed uninterested.

She had to give him credit for being polite, Mary thought. Now that he was sitting across the table from her, he didn’t seem to notice any other women at all.

He offered the plate to her. When she shook her head, he popped a nacho in his mouth.

“I’m not surprised small talk annoys you,” he said.

“Why’s that?”

“You’ve been through too much.”

She frowned. “What exactly did Bella tell you about me?”

“Nothing much.”

“So how do you know I’ve been through anything?”

“It’s in your eyes.”

Oh, hell. He was smart, too. Talk about the total package.

“But I hate to break it to you,” he said, making fast but neat work of the nachos, “I don’t care if you’re annoyed. I want to know what got you interested in that line of work, and you’re going to tell me.”

“You are arrogant.”

“Surprise, surprise.” He smiled tightly. “And you’re avoiding my question. What got you started in it?”

The answer was her mother’s struggle with muscular dystrophy. After seeing what her mom went through, helping other people find ways around their limitations had been a calling. Maybe even a way to work off some guilt at being healthy when her mother had been so compromised.

And then Mary had gotten hit with some serious compromises herself.

Funny, the first thing she’d thought of when she’d been diagnosed was that it wasn’t fair. She’d watched her mother do the disease thing, had suffered right alongside. So why was the universe requiring her to know firsthand the kind of pain she’d witnessed? It was right then and there that she’d realized there was no quota on misery for people, no quantifiable threshold that once reached, got you miraculously taken out of the distress pool.

“I never wanted to do anything else,” she hedged.

“Then why did you stop?”

“My life changed.”

Thankfully, he didn’t follow up on that one. “Did you like working with handicapped kids?”

“They’re not...they weren’t handicapped.”

“Sorry,” he said, clearly meaning it.

The sincerity in his voice popped the lid off her reserve in a way compliments or smiles never would have.

“They’re just different. They experience the world in a different way. Normal is just what’s average, it’s not necessarily the only way of being, or living—” She stopped, noticing he’d closed his eyes. “Am I boring you?”

His lids lifted slowly. “I love to hear you talk.”

Mary swallowed a gasp. His eyes were neon, glowing, iridescent.

Those had to be contacts, she thought. People’s eyes just didn’t come in that teal color.

“Different doesn’t bother you, does it?” he murmured.

“No.”

“That’s good.”

For some reason, she found herself smiling at him.

“I was right,” he whispered.

“About what?”

“You’re lovely when you smile.”

Mary looked away.

“What’s the matter?”

“Please don’t put on the charm. I’d rather deal with small talk.”

“I’m honest, not charming. Just ask my brothers. I’m constantly putting my foot in my mouth.”

There were more of him? Boy, that’d be a hell of a family Christmas card. “How many brothers do you have?”

“Five. Now. We lost one.” He took a long drink of water, as if he didn’t want her to see his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“Thanks. It’s still fresh. And I miss him like hell.”

The waitress arrived with a heavy tray. When the plates were lined up in front of him and Mary’s salad was down on the table, the woman lingered until Hal thanked her pointedly.

He went for the Alfredo first. He sank his fork into the tangle of fettuccine, twisted until a knot of pasta was on the tines, and carried the noodles to his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully and added some salt. He tested the strip steak next. Shook on a little pepper. Then he picked up the cheeseburger. It was halfway to his mouth when he frowned and put it back down. He used his fork and knife to take a bite.

He ate like a total gentleman. With an almost dainty air.

Abruptly, he looked at her. “What?”

“Sorry, I, ah...” She picked at her salad. And promptly went back to watching him eat.

“You keep staring at me and I’m going to blush,” he drawled.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I like your eyes on me.”

Mary’s body shimmered to life. And she responded with total grace by launching a crouton into her lap.

“So what are you looking at?” he asked.

She used her napkin to dab at the dressing skid on her pants. “Your table manners. They’re very good.”

“Food is to be savored.”

She wondered what else he enjoyed like that. Slowly. Thoroughly. God, she could just imagine the kind of love life he had. He’d be amazing in bed. That big body, that golden skin, those long, tapered fingers...

Mary’s throat went dry and she made a grab for her glass. “But do you always...eat so much?”

“Actually, the stomach’s off. I’m taking it easy.” He shook a little more salt on the fettuccine. “So you used to work with autistic children, but now you’re at a law firm. What else do you do with your time? Hobbies? Interests?”

“I like to cook.”

“Really? I like to eat.”

She frowned, trying not to imagine him sitting at her table.

“You’re irritated again.”

She waved her hand around. “I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are. Don’t like the idea of cooking something for me, do you?”

His unfettered honesty made her think she could tell him anything and he’d respond with exactly what he thought and felt. Good or bad.

“Hal, do you have any kind of filter between your brain and your mouth?”

“Not really.” He finished the Alfredo and moved the plate aside. The steak was up next. “So what about your parents?”

She took a deep breath. “My mother died about four years ago. My father was killed when I was two in a wrong-place-wrong-time kind of thing.”

He paused. “That’s hard. Losing both of them.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Both of mine are gone, too. But at least they made it to old age. Do you have sisters? Brothers?”

“No. It was just me and my mother. And now only me.”

There was a long silence. “So how do you know John?”

“John...oh, John Matthew? Did Bella tell you about him?”

“After a fashion.”

“I don’t know him all that well. He just kind of came into my life recently. I think he’s a special kid, a kind one, even though I get the sense things haven’t been easy for him.”

“You know his parents?”

“He told me he doesn’t have any.”

“You know where he lives?”

“I know the area of town. It’s not a very good one.”

“Do you want to save him, Mary?”

What an odd question, she thought.

“I don’t think he needs to be saved, but I’d like to be his friend. Truthfully, I barely know him. He just showed up at my house one night.”

Hal nodded, as if she’d given him an answer he’d wanted.

“How do you know Bella?” she asked.

“Don’t you like your salad?”

She looked down her plate. “I’m not hungry.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes.”

As soon as he’d finished his burger and fries, he reached over for the small menu by the salt and pepper shakers.

“Is dessert more to your liking?” he asked.

“Not tonight.”

“You should eat more.”

“I had a big lunch.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Mary crossed her arms over her chest. “How would you know?”

“I can sense your hunger.”

She stopped breathing. God, those eyes of his were gleaming again. So blue, so bright, the color endless, like the sea. An ocean to swim in. To drown in. To die in.

“How do you know I’m...hungry?” she said, feeling as if the world were slipping away.

His voice dropped until it was almost a purr. “I’m right, aren’t I? So why does it matter how?”

Fortunately, the waitress arrived to pick up the dishes and broke the moment. By the time Hal had ordered an apple crisp, some kind of brownie thing, and a cup of coffee, Mary felt like she was back on the planet.

“So what do you do for a living?” she asked.

“This and that.”

“Acting? Modeling?”

He laughed. “No. I may be decorative, but I prefer to be useful.”

“And how are you useful?”

“I guess you could say I’m a soldier.”

“You’re in the military?”

“Kind of.”

Well, that would explain the deadly air. The physical confidence. The sharpness in his eyes.

“What branch?” Marines, she thought. Or maybe a SEAL. He was that hard.

Hal’s face tightened up. “Just another soldier.”

From out of nowhere, a cloud of perfume invaded Mary’s nose. It was the redheaded hostess sweeping up to the table.

“Was everything okay?” As Hal looked over, you could practically hear the woman sizzle.

“Fine, thanks,” he said.

“Good.” She slipped something onto the table. A napkin. With a number and a name on it.

As the woman flashed her eyes and sauntered off, Mary looked down at her hands. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her purse.

Time to go, she thought. For some reason she didn’t want to watch Hal put that napkin in his pocket. Even though he had every right to do so.

“Well, this has been...interesting,” she said. She picked up her bag and shuffled out of the booth.

“Why are you leaving?” His frown made him look like true military material, taking him very far away from the sexy male pinup stuff.

Unease flickered in her chest. “I’m tired. But, thanks, Hal. This has been...Well, thanks.”

As she tried to get by him, he took her hand, stroking her inner wrist with his thumb. “Stay while I eat my dessert.”

She looked away from his perfect face and his broad shoulders. The brunette across the aisle was getting to her feet and eyeing him, a business card in her hand.

Mary leaned down. “I’m sure you’ll find plenty of others to keep you company. In fact, one’s headed your way right now. I’d say good luck with her, but she looks like a sure thing.”

Mary made a beeline for the exit. The chilly air and the relative silence were a relief after the crush of people, except as she approached her car, she had the eerie sense she wasn’t alone. She glanced over her shoulder.

Hal was right behind her, even though she’d left him in the restaurant. She wheeled around, heart pounding like it wanted out of her ribs.

“Jesus! What are you doing?”

“Walking you to your car.”

“I...ah. Don’t bother.”

“Too late. This Civic is yours, right?”

“How did you—”

“The lights flashed as you unlocked it.”

She moved away from him, but as she backed up, Hal came forward. When she bumped against her car, she put her hands out.

“Stop.”

“Don’t be scared of me.”

“Then don’t crowd me.”

She turned away from him and went for the door handle. His hand shot out, clamping on the seam between the window and the roof.

Yeah, she was going to get behind the wheel. When he let her.

“Mary?” His deep voice was right next to her head, and she jumped.

She felt the raw seduction of him and imagined his body as a cage locked around her. With a treasonous shift, her fear changed into something wanton and needy.

“Let me go,” she whispered.

“Not yet.”

She heard him take a deep breath, as if he were smelling her, and then her ears were flooded by a rhythmic pumping sound, as though he were purring. Her body loosened, heated, opened between her legs as if it was prepared to accept him inside.

Good God, she had to get away from him.

She grabbed onto his forearm and pushed. Which got her nowhere.

“Mary?”

“*What?*” she snapped, resentful because she was turned on when she should have been petrified. For God’s sake, he was a stranger, a big, pushy stranger, and she was a woman alone with no one to miss her if she didn’t make it home.

“Thank you for not bailing on me.”

“You’re welcome. Now how about letting me leave?”

“As soon as you let me kiss you good-night.”

Mary had to open her mouth to get enough air into her lungs.

“Why?” she asked hoarsely. “Why would you want to do that?”

His hands fell onto her shoulders and turned her around. He towered over her, blocking out the glow from the restaurant, the lights in the parking lot, the stars far above.

“Just let me kiss you, Mary.” His hands slid up her throat and on to the sides of her face. “Only once. Okay?”

“No, it’s not okay,” she whispered as he tilted her head back.

His lips descended and her mouth trembled. It had been so long since she’d been kissed. And never by a man like him.

The contact was soft, gentle. Unexpected, given the size of him.

And just as a blast of heat licked over her breasts and landed between her legs, she heard a hiss.

Hal stumbled back and looked at her strangely. With a jerky movement, his heavy arms crossed over his chest, as if he were holding on to himself.

“Hal?”

He said nothing, just stood there, staring. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was shaken.

“Hal, are you all right?”

He shook his head once.

Then he walked away, disappearing into the darkness beyond the parking lot.

Chapter Thirteen

Rhage materialized in the courtyard between the Pit and the mansion.

He couldn't put an exact bead on the sensation inside his skin, but it was some kind of low-level buzz in his muscles and bones, like the vibration of a tuning fork. What he did know for sure was that he'd never felt the hum before. And that it had kicked off the moment his mouth had touched Mary's.

Since anything new and different with his body was bad, he'd immediately gotten the hell away from her, and not being around the female seemed to help. Trouble was, now that the feeling was fading, his body's need for release was causing him to twitch. Which wasn't fair. After the beast came out, he usually got at least a few days off.

He checked his watch.

Damn it, he wanted to go out hunting for *lessers* to take himself down a notch or two, but since Tohr had taken over command of the Brotherhood, new rules had been laid out. After changing, Rhage was supposed to cool his jets for a couple days until he was back on all burners. With Darius's death this past summer, the number of brothers had been reduced to six, and then Wrath had ascended to the throne, so they were just five now. The race couldn't afford to lose another warrior.

The forced R & R made sense, but he hated being told what to do. And he couldn't stand not being out in the field, especially when he needed to drain off some juice.

Taking a set of keys from his coat, he went over to his souped-up GTO. The car came awake with a roar, and a minute and a half later he was out on the open road. He didn't know which direction he was headed in. Didn't care.

Mary. That kiss.

God, her mouth had been unbelievably sweet as it trembled under his, so sweet he'd wanted to part her lips with his tongue and slide inside of her. Slide and retreat and come back again for another taste. And then do the same with his body between her legs.

Except he'd had to stop. Whatever that hum was, it got him wired, so it was dangerous. The damn reaction didn't make sense, though. Mary calmed him, brought him some ease. Sure, he wanted her, and that was going to wire him out, but it shouldn't be enough to get him dangerous.

Ah, hell. Maybe he'd misinterpreted the response. Maybe that current had been sexual attraction of a more profound sort than he was used to.... Which was typically nothing but the urge to come just so his body was less likely to flip out on him.

He thought about the females he'd had. There had been countless numbers of them, all nameless, faceless bodies he'd released into, not one of them a source of real pleasure for him. He'd touched them and kissed them only because unless they got off too, he felt like a total user.

Shit, he felt like a user anyway. He *was* a user.

So even if he hadn't been thrown by the buzz from kissing Mary, he still would have left her in that parking lot. With her lovely voice and her warrior eyes and her trembling mouth, Mary could not be just another screw. Taking her, even if she was willing, seemed like a violation of something pure. Something better than he was.

His cell phone rang and he took it out of his pocket. As he checked caller ID, he cursed, but answered the thing anyway. "Hey, Tohr. I was going to call you."

"I just saw your car peel out of here. Are you meeting the human female now?"

"I already did."

"That was quick. She must have treated you right."

Rhage ground his teeth. For once he had no quick comeback. "I talked to her about the kid. We've got no problem there. She likes him, she feels

badly for him, but if he disappeared, she wouldn't cause a problem. She only met him recently."

"Good job, Hollywood. So where you headed now?"

"Just driving."

Tohr's voice softened. "You hate not being able to fight, don't you?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"Of course, but don't worry, tomorrow night will come soon enough, and you'll be back in action. In the meantime, you could work off a little more of that sauce of yours at One Eye." Tohr chuckled. "By the way, I heard about the sisters you did two nights ago, one right after another. Man, you're amazing, you know that?"

"Yeah, Tohr, can I ask you a favor?"

"Anything, my brother."

"Could you not...ride me about the females?" Rhage took a deep breath. "Because the truth is, I hate it, I really do."

He meant to stop there, but suddenly the words were coming out and he couldn't shut up.

"I hate the anonymity of it. I hate the way my chest aches afterward. I hate the smells on my body and in my hair when I get home. But most of all, I hate the fact that I'm going to have to do it again because if I don't, I could end up hurting one of you guys or some innocent bystander." He exhaled through his mouth. "And those two sisters you're so impressed with? See, here's the thing. I only pick the ones who don't give a shit who they're with, because otherwise it's not fair. Those two bar chippies checked out my watch and my roll and figured I was a pimp trophy. The fucking was about as intimate as a car accident. And tonight? You're going home to Wellsie. I'm going home alone. Just like I did yesterday. Just like I'm going to do the day after. The whoring isn't fun for me, and it's been killing me for years, so please give it a rest, dig?"

There was a long silence. "Jesus...I'm sorry. I didn't know. I had no idea—"

"Yeah, ah..." He really needed to stop this conversation. "Look, I gotta go. I gotta...go. Later."

"No, wait, Rhage—"

Rhage turned his phone off and pulled over to the side of the road. As he looked around, he realized he was out in the middle of nowhere, with