

BORN
TO
DARKNESS
SERIES

EVANGELINE ANDERSON

CRIMSON

Debt

Born to Darkness
Book 1: Crimson Debt
by
Evangeline Anderson
SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Author's note: I know a lot of you are eagerly awaiting Shadowed, book 8 in my Kindred series and believe me, it is coming. I simply hit a wall while writing it and had to take a step back and write something completely different. This new series is the result. I had great fun writing it and hope you'll enjoy reading it as well. Shadowed will be out later this year and I have provided the first chapter at the end of this book for your reading enjoyment. In the mean time, I hope you love reading Crimson Debt as much as I loved writing it. Thanks for your patience and for not pirating my work--I make my living on these books and try to keep the prices low so everyone can enjoy them.

Hugs and Happy Reading to you all!

Evangeline

Chapter One

“So you’re working here of your own free will? No one has coerced you either mentally or physically into employment at *Under the Fang*?”

The college age barmaid gave me a bored look and snapped her gum. “Yeah, I mean no, nobody forced me or anything. I’m here ‘cause the tips are great, Master Corbin won’t let anybody fuck with us, and I get as much glam-sex as I want for free. What’s not to like?”

What indeed. I studied her eyes, looking for the telltale red pinprick in her pupils that denoted thrall but there was nothing. There never was at *Under the Fang*, Tampa’s premiere glam-sex club which always pissed me off. I would have loved to nail the owner’s hide to the wall. Self-satisfied bastard.

Sitting on a raised dais in the center of the club was the bastard in question—Alec Corbin, a four star master vamp who looked like a wet-dream come true. He was six four and probably around twenty or two twenty-five, all of it muscle and he wasn’t shy about showing it off either. Right now he was wearing a tight black t-shirt that hugged his broad shoulders and muscular chest and made his dark blond hair glow positively gold in the dim lights of the club. He’d died needing a shave but the dark blond stubble on his square jaw only added to his sex appeal and I was willing to bet that he knew it.

However it wasn’t his size or his looks that drew the admiration of every fang freak in the sunshine state—it was Corbin’s eyes. Fringed thickly with dark lashes, they were a deceptively light silver blue that reminded me of the reflection on the surface of a lake. A mysterious body of water that had unexplored depths with monsters swimming somewhere down deep, just waiting to grab you and drag you under. Pretty on the surface and fucking scary underneath.

Yeah, that was Corbin, all right.

As though feeling my gaze on him, he looked up and smiled at me, showing just enough fang to be insulting. I met his monster’s eyes without fear and gave him a blank look back. I can do that because I’m an Auditor, but I don’t recommend it to your average garden variety human. Being one of the one in ten thousand who is immune to a vamp’s glamour and mind tricks comes in handy for me in my line of work, but if someone without my gifts was to try what I do, they’d be screwed six ways on Sunday.

“Seriously, I mean this gig rocks. Where else do you get multiple orgasms as a bonus?”

The chirpy voice of the barmaid drew me away from my staring contest with Corbin and I turned to look at her again. She had curly hair that was done up in a lot of tendrils around her round face and there was a fresh set of fang marks on her neck. Looking around the club, which was decorated in red, black, and silver, I saw more than one patron with a matching set. The sex for blood trade must be hustling tonight.

“So you do the glam-sex thing a lot, do you?” I asked, wondering about the state of her grandmother. There haven’t been any studies to prove that glam-sex—that is mind-sex with a vampire—has long term side effects, but how often could you let another being alter your brain before it turned to mush?

“Yeah, it’s great. Especially with Master Corbin. I mean, I only got it from him once, back when I first started, but wow.” She waved shyly at Corbin who didn’t bother to acknowledge her. His lack of attention didn’t seem to bother his employee, however. “It’s like *amazing*,” she gushed, grinning

me. "I mean, have you ever tried it?"

"Can't." I pointed to the small black star tattooed at the outer corner of my right eye—the mark of an Auditor. I use makeup to cover it up when I'm out but the law mandates I keep it visible while I'm at work. It's the same law that forces vamps to have their own tattoos—one star for every century they've been alive. Or undead, if you want to get technical. They use a special kind of ink—I've heard it's blood based—in order to make a permanent mark on a vamp and even so it fades over time and they have to get it redone. Alec Corbin had four little blood red stars under his left eye. As far as I knew, he was the only four-star vamp in all of Florida, which was fine with me. The longer a vamp survives, the stronger he gets. Four stars are rare and scary enough, any more and you're getting into truly frightening territory.

"Oh, right." The barmaid shook her head. "Vamps can't glam you, huh? Bummer."

"I manage just fine," I said dryly. "How does your boyfriend feel about you having glam-sex with the fangers every night?"

"Oh, I haven't dated anyone since just after I started here two years ago. I was going with this other guy—we were even thinking of getting married. But he got mad when I quit school to work at the *Fang* full time. He was all 'Glam-sex is still cheating' and I was like, 'As if, asshole. They don't even touch me.' But he totally wouldn't see it my way and he was being a jerk about the whole thing. So we broke up."

"So you quit school and you haven't had a meaningful relationship outside the confines of your own head in two years? All just so you could work at a bar and get mind-fucked every night?" I asked bluntly. "Think about it—you could be married with kids and a career by now and instead you're slinging beers for minimum wage. Is it really worth it?"

The barmaid's cheeks flushed an angry red. "You sound like my mom. Come to think of it, you kind of *look* like her too."

Okay, that hurt. Thirty was coming up pretty fast but I didn't think I really looked my age. Nothing, my bright red hair, big brown eyes, and freckles made me look younger than I was—a trait I hated but used to my advantage when I needed to. Probably what the girl was referring to was my choice of clothing. I was wearing a gray tailored pantsuit with black heels to add a little height to my five foot four inch frame. The cut of the suit was pretty severe and it didn't show a bit of skin besides my hands and throat—a far cry from the barmaid's daisy dukes and cut-up-to-here midriff t-shirt.

"Forget I said anything," I told her, snapping my citation pad shut. "What you do with your life is your business."

I was trying to make peace but she couldn't let it drop. "Like you've done so much with yours she sneered. "You're just some kind of bureaucrat who goes around and tries to ruin other people's fun. Is this what you do all day? Ask people stupid boring questions?"

"Actually, I also kill vampires sometimes," I said pleasantly. "So my job isn't *all* boring."

The girl's mouth was suddenly hanging open and I had a moment of satisfaction when I thought I finally gotten through to her. Then a deep, cool voice behind me said, "I think you've annoyed Master Godwin quite enough for now, Bambie. Maybe you should go see if table five needs a refill on the drinks."

"Yes, Master Corbin." The awe in her voice made me roll my eyes and she bowed and actually backed away, as though Corbin was some kind of royalty. Well, to fang freaks like her, he probably was.

“Sorry about that. Bambie isn’t the brightest barmaid we have here at *the Fang* but she’s competent and reliable.” Corbin stepped around to face me and turned the force of his considerable charm on me like a spot light. I could feel the envious stares of the other women, and quite a few of the men in the club as well, as they watched us.

“No problem. Just part of the job.” I met his eyes because I could. But just because he couldn’t glamour me didn’t mean it was easy to hold his unwavering silver-blue gaze.

“The job which includes killing vampires,” he said blandly.

I frowned. “That’s right.” I wore a Glock 22 loaded with hollow point bullets filled with silver nitrate and I knew how to use it. I’d only pulled the trigger twice—both times my life had been threatened—but I was also the state mandated button man—or button woman in my case. That is, when a vamp was sentenced to death, I was the one who pushed the button that opened the skylight in the sun room where our fanged friends were executed. Hey, somebody had to do it and it was part of my job. Not a part I particularly cared for but I wasn’t going to apologize for it either.

Corbin seemed to sense my defensive mood because he changed the subject. “I trust you got the information you needed and that our little establishment passed your test with flying colors?” he asked smoothly.

“You’re in compliance.” I couldn’t keep the annoyance out of my voice. Other vamp-run establishments had regular complaints but *Under the Fang* never had a single problem. Every employee was perfectly happy, every customer completely satisfied. The local PD never even got any drunk and disorderly calls which was unheard of since the club had a full bar and last call wasn’t until five AM.

“You sound disappointed.” Corbin grinned, showing more than a little fang, which really pissed me off. Not a lot of humans know it but displaying their fangs is more than just an expression of hunger for a vamp—it’s an outright sexual come-on. Corbin might as well have rubbed his hard-on against my thigh—that’s how subtle it was.

“Why don’t you close your mouth, Corbin. I don’t appreciate your little display.”

“You should be flattered,” he said mildly. “Not many breathers affect me this way.”

“You get a hard-on for danger. Is that it?” I shifted my stance so my jacket fell open, revealing the Glock strapped under my arm. Unfortunately, Corbin’s silvery-blue eyes went to my breasts instead of my gun.

“Let’s just say I like aggressive women.” He smiled at me, not retracting his fangs a bit. “It’s a great pity, though, that you have to use a weapon to back up your threat. It would be so much better if you had the physical strength to meet me as an equal.”

“Why is that? You want to arm wrestle?”

He laughed, a deep, rich sound that seemed to go right through me. “I think I’d prefer a different kind of wrestling and I don’t mean of the glam variety.”

I could feel myself blushing and it pissed me off. Corbin was talking about sex—not mind-fucking but actual *physical* sex—which was highly illegal between humans and vampires. That’s because you can’t go to bed with a being strong enough to bend an iron bar in half and not wake up looking like a road kill the next morning—if you wake up at all, that is. A vamp’s blood-lust combines with the fuck-lust when they try to have sex with a human and the result usually looks like a Jackson Pollock painting.

“I see I’ve given you some food for thought,” Corbin noted when I didn’t answer his innuendo.

“Yes. You have me thinking you’re offering more than glam-sex here, which, as you know, is against the law.”

He crossed his arms over his broad chest and grinned. “I would never offer such a thing to a human—*not unless she could handle it, Addison.*”

The use of my first name pissed me off even more, as he no doubt intended. I reached for my cuffs—the ones made of a tough silver alloy vamps can’t break. They’re also covered in velvet to keep their skin from burning on contact, which sort of ruins the effect in my opinion but whatever—the work.

“You want me to bring you in for threatening an officer?”

“Not threatening. *Offering.* You seem so tense—I just want to help you unwind.”

“Because being torn limb from limb by a lust-crazed vamp is so relaxing. Thanks but no thanks, Corbin.”

He waved my words away with a languid gesture. “That kind of outcome is strictly the result of a underage vampire who doesn’t know how to control him or herself. As we age, we gain finesse. I assure you, Addison, I could pleasure you both very thoroughly and very gently. You would come over and over.”

I shook my head, sure that my cheeks were as red as my hair by now. That’s the thing with dealing with the older vamps—they have no social mores left and they don’t care if they violate conversational taboos. Corbin was offering me sex as casually as he might offer me a free drink from his bar and the sad thing was, it was the best offer I’d had in over a year. Or rather, the only offer. But there was no way I was letting him know that.

“Stick with mind-fucking your regulars,” I told him. “I’m not interested.”

He shrugged, his broad shoulders rippling. “Suit yourself. But you ought to do something to relax. You are wound so tightly it makes me wonder when you’ll snap.”

“I do yoga three times a week,” I said, stung into revealing a personal detail. “That keeps me plenty relaxed, thank you very much.”

Corbin looked interested. “If you’re able to open yourself enough to do that kind of exercise, you should be able to let down your shields enough to let me glamour you. I could give you much pleasure without even touching you—since you fear my strength.”

“I’d be stupid if I didn’t fear it,” I said bluntly. “I’d as soon take a python to bed as a vampire—you’re both cold blooded predators but I bet the snake is a hell of a lot more cuddly.”

“I can be cuddly.” Corbin’s voice dropped and his eyes were hooded. “And tender, and gentle, and passionate. Come, Addison, I can feel your need—it throbs through me more strongly each time we meet. How long has it been since a man touched you and gave you pleasure?”

“You’re feeling your own ego, buddy,” I snapped, angry that he seemed to know about my dark spell. “And if you keep coming on to me, I’m going to bite you so fast it’ll make your undead head spin.”

“Very well.” He held up his hands in a ‘don’t shoot’ gesture and retracted his fangs. “I wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of the law. Just know that my offer is open if you should change your mind. I find myself strongly attracted to you and I would welcome the chance to know you more intimately—mentally or physically. Or both.”

“You’re wasting your time. Find somebody else to be your blood bank—it’s never going to happen.”

with me.”

“Is that so?” His hand shot out faster than my eye could track and caught me by the arm. Before I could stop him, he had pushed the sleeve of my gray suit jacket up, baring the scars on my wrist. “You claim to hate vampires and yet you are feeding one of our number, Addison. Who is the lucky recipient?”

“Let me go,” I said, but I didn’t struggle—what would be the point? I could yank my arm out of its socket more easily than I could break his light grip. “What I do on my own time is none of your fucking business,” I told him.

“Whoever it is, they are not very experienced. I could heal these for you, you know.” His thumb glided over the scarred inside of my wrist with a touch so gentle I could barely feel it. Yet it seemed to send electrical tingles through my entire body.

“I said *let me go*.” I was breathing hard—from anger, obviously.

Finally Corbin released me. “Very well.”

“That’s it.” I began to scribble on my pad as soon as I got my arm back. “You can expect my summons. I know they didn’t have sexual harassment seminars back when you were made or spawned or whatever the hell you call it...”

“Born to darkness,” he said, watching as I wrote. “Or brought over. That is what we call it when you are first made.”

“Whatever.” I tore off the slip and handed him the ticket. “The point is, I came in to inspect your club and interview your employees—not put up with your bullshit.”

Corbin looked surprised. “I wouldn’t have offered you sexual favors if it wasn’t so blindingly obvious that you need them, Addison. Or if I didn’t find you so bewitchingly beautiful.”

I threw up my hands in disgust. “Nothing gets through to you, does it? At the very least you’re going to be paying a hefty fine but you just keep on talking trash. How many ways can I say this? *I’m not interested*.”

Corbin smiled, showing fang again. “I will believe what you are saying when your body agrees with your words. In the meantime, consider my offer open—for both the sex and the scars. Good evening, Addison.”

He glided away, leaving me fuming. “The name is Officer Godwin to you,” I said under my breath, knowing he could still hear me even across the crowded room and the thumping bass beat of the music from the dance floor. Sure enough, he smiled at me and sketched a little salute. Damn him. I hoped the judge sentenced him to double the usual fine—triple. Unfortunately that wouldn’t teach him a lesson—Corbin was loaded, even with the hefty insurance premiums he was paying to run a glam-sex club. Whatever fine he wound up with would be a drop in the bucket compared to the take at *Under the Fang* for even a single night.

Still seething, I turned on my heel and headed for the glowing red exit sign at the back of the club. Unfortunately, to get to it I had to pass the glam booths, which all had glass walls, both for full disclosure as the law demanded and for the flocks of voyeurs that liked to watch someone else get glammed.

On either side of me I caught glimpses of glam-sex for blood transactions in various stages. Typically the vamp took blood first—payment up front so to speak—before doing the glam session. Of course, before any of that could take place, the human party had to sign a ridiculously long waiver releasing the vampire who was glamming him, as well as the club and its ownership from any

liability. You'd think that all the legal mumbo-jumbo you had to go through to have mind-sex with a vamp would take some of the fun out of it but apparently not. Despite the late hour, I knew people were still lined up around the block to get in and most of them had already signed the waiver while they waited.

"Look into my eyes," I heard a sultry voice murmur as a female vamp leaned across a small table and took a middle aged, balding businessman by the hands. "We are naked together, just the two of us lying in the middle of a king-sized bed."

"Yes," he breathed, his pupils dilated hugely. "Yes, with black satin sheets. And I'm tied to the bed."

"If you wish." The vamp looked bored. No doubt she heard this same scenario over and over again. "So I understand you have been a very naughty boy and you need to be punished."

"Yes!" The bald businessman was sweating now. He leaned forward, clutching her hands eagerly. "Yes, I'm bad. And you have to spank me."

"All right. I'm getting my paddle. It's black leather and it's full of holes to cut the wind resistance. You're really going to feel this on your backside, you naughty little boy."

Though I had never experienced glam-sex myself, I knew that the man was actually seeing what the vamp was describing. It was kind of like phone sex but with very vivid realistic images to go along with it. A perverted mind-movie so convincing that glam-addicts often couldn't remember what they had and hadn't actually done.

The businessman already had one hand down his pants, wanking himself shamelessly—pathetic. Also unnecessary in some cases. I'd heard that some of the older vamps could actually make you come without a single physical touch—yours, of course, not theirs. Alec Corbin could probably just look at you the right way and give you multiple orgasms. I shut that thought down quickly—he was more than a four-star vamp, he was a four-star asshole and there was no way I was attracted to him and his blatant come-ons.

"The master says I am to give you this."

The smooth, cool voice beside me made me jump. I realized I'd been standing there, watching the sweaty businessman and the bored female vampire have glam-sex as avidly as any of the other dozens or so voyeurs that were wandering up and down the aisle that housed the glam booths.

"What is it?" I stared at the card the small, curly-haired vampire was holding out to me. He had a lovely, androgynous face and for a moment I wasn't sure of his sex. Of course, that wouldn't matter since most vamps are bisexual anyway.

"His private number," the androgynous vamp said. "He says that you may call him any time day or night."

"Wouldn't he be asleep during the day?" I demanded, forgetting that I didn't want to call Corbin no matter what time it was.

The little vamp shrugged. "My master is old. He requires very little daytime rest anymore."

"I see." I took the card and started to tear it up but somehow, instead, I put it in my pocket.

"Do you have a message for Master Corbin before you go?" the little vamp asked.

"No," I said shortly. "Wait—yes. Tell him if he thinks giving me his private number will inspire me to make a booty call, he's sadly mistaken."

The androgynous vamp gave me a puzzled look. "A booty call? You will call his buttocks on the

telephone? I do not understand.”

I stifled a snicker. “You don’t have to. Basically it means I’m not interested in fucking a vampire.”

He looked grave. “I am sorry you dislike my kind so much. We were once as you are, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” I frowned. “And some of my best friends are vampires—I just don’t like Corbin. Now if you’ll excuse me…” I looked down at my watch. Three AM and time for me to get home. Since I work with vamps I have to be out at night but my shift was finally coming to an end. Thank goodness.

“I will faithfully repeat your words to Master Corbin,” the little vampire assured me. “Though I am still uncertain about the meaning of this ‘booty call’ you spoke of.”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about it—your master will get it even if you don’t.” That was one thing about Corbin, he was surprisingly good with modern slang for an older vampire. Every once in awhile I could hear a soft, Gaelic-sounding burr in his deep voice and he had a tendency not to use many contractions but other than that, he was certainly up on the current century. Which was probably the secret to his longevity.

Though they are technically immortal, not many vamps are adaptable enough to keep up with the ever changing world. A lot of them just shut down after a couple of centuries, which is a good thing or the world would be overrun with bloodsuckers and we humans would become little more than cattle.

I headed for the exit more purposefully this time, not allowing myself to be sucked into the various bizarre fetish fantasies I heard being whispered about in the clear glass booths on either side of me. Sick, this whole damn thing was sick and I wished for the umpteenth time that I was in another line of work. Still, the pay was too good to quit, and besides, I had personal reasons for doing what I did. Also, I usually didn’t have to put up with the amount of bullshit I’d endured that night. Most vamps hate and fear me and none of them but Corbin had ever dared to come on to me. I didn’t have to visit *Under the Fang* again for a whole month so maybe my night was looking up.

That was what I thought, anyway, until I got out into the parking lot and my cell phone rang.

Chapter Two

I groaned when I saw the number on my cell. It was my best friend Taylor and I was already feeling anemic. I hoped she just wanted to talk and wasn't looking for a midnight snack.

See, I wasn't kidding when I said some of my best friends were vampires. Taylor and I have been BFFs since my sophomore year of college and she's a vamp, though unfortunately not a very good one.

I answered the phone on the third ring and tried to make my voice light. "Hey roomie, what's up?"

"Not too much." Even in those few words, I could tell Taylor was holding herself back. Her voice had that tight sound you get when you're trying to talk without crying. "Could, uh, could I come over?" she asked. "Not to eat or anything. Just to talk?"

"Sure," I said, repressing a sigh. My day had started almost twenty hours ago with a day of execution and I was completely worn out. But I couldn't say no to Taylor—after all, it was my fault she was a vampire in the first place.

"Okay. I'll be at your place in twenty."

"See you there," I said, sliding into my car and starting the engine. "I'm on my way from my monthly inspection of *Under the Fang*."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Taylor sounded concerned. "Did Alec Corbin give you shit again?"

"Like you wouldn't *believe*." I sort of regretted telling my best friend about the perverse attraction Alec Corbin seemed to feel for me—mostly because I knew she couldn't keep secrets from her mistress—the vampire who had made her. But we had always been each other's confidants and it was a hard habit to break. Besides, I reasoned to myself, what did it matter if other vamps in Tampa knew Corbin seemed to have the hots for me? If anything it would just prove that he was crazy—not that anyone would dare to call him that to his face since he was the most powerful vampire in the state.

"We can talk about your shit first if you want," she offered, breaking my train of thought.

"No, I think I'd be better off just trying to forget it," I said, thinking of Corbin's offer to heal my scars. It was true they were unsightly and hard to explain, which meant I spent a lot of my time in long-sleeved shirts. In Tampa, where the heat and humidity were a punishment to begin with, that was no laughing matter. But saying so would only hurt Taylor's feelings.

"Okay, then. Whatever you want." She sounded subdued again. I wanted to ask her what was wrong but I resisted the urge to get the bitch session started over the phone. It was late and I was tired. I should hang up and concentrate on driving.

"I'll be there soon," I said, wishing I could promise her a pitcher of margaritas, extra salty, the way she used to like them. But vampires aren't able to ingest anything but blood and sometimes a little weak tea or watered down wine so a trip to Margaritaville was out of the question.

"See you." She hung up with a click and I sighed, then put the cell back in my pocket. So much for going straight to bed. From what I knew of Taylor and her current troubles, it was going to be a long time before I visited dreamland.

As I navigated my way through Tampa's darkened streets, I remembered the night six years ago that had started it all and how my best friend had become one of the living dead in the first place.

It had been a night not unlike this one—meaning it was hot and sticky, too humid to go out. I had been in favor of staying in our cozy little two-bedroom apartment, ordering pizza, and whipping up some frozen drinks in the blender. But since my break-up with Todd, the guy I'd been sure was Mr. Right for most of college and part of grad school, staying at home was all I did.

Taylor was always on me for moping around our apartment and she pointed out that we needed to go cut loose and have some fun, or as she put it, “Get off your ass and try to forget about Prince Charming turning back into a frog.”

I reluctantly agreed and when Taylor won some tickets to see Celeste, Mistress of the Night Vampire Bedazzlement on a radio show during her drive home, it seemed positively providential. We went for the Goth-chic look, wearing all black like the real fang freaks and Taylor even produced some black lipstick and nail polish to top it off. By the time we got out the door, nobody would have known the difference between us and a couple of glam-heads looking for a fix.

We were as giggly as a couple of school girls as we entered the Embassy Suites banquet hall where the show was being held. Celeste was a very strong three-star vamp with incredible powers of persuasion and her show was a popular tourist attraction, ranking right up there with Disney World and Busch Gardens. But despite living in a vamp-heavy town, neither Taylor nor I had ever seen a vampire in action. We were good little grad students, keeping our noses to the grindstone, and didn't have much time for partying. I was working on a PhD in nineteenth century English Lit and Taylor wanted to be a veterinarian. Both of our dreams were shattered that night, although for very different reasons.

We found seats right up near the front row and the lights dimmed dramatically. Then soft, hypnotic flute music began from somewhere offstage and suddenly Celeste was standing there, almost directly in front of us, looking like some kind of goddess.

She was dressed like a flapper, although I knew the roaring twenties weren't her era of origin. Two hundred years earlier would have been more like it but with her slender, waifish figure and pale, pixie-cut blonde hair, the three-star vamp looked a lot more at home in her sleeveless fringed and beaded gown than she would have in an outfit from the seventeen hundreds.

“Ladies and gentlemen—humans of all ages and persuasions, you have come here tonight to be amazed and enthralled and I promise you shall be.” With the first sound of the vamp's soft but penetrating voice a hush fell over the crowd. I looked to either side of me and saw that every eye was trained on Celeste and that the faces of my fellow audience members were filled with longing and delight. Every one of them seemed to be under some kind of spell, even Taylor—*especially* Taylor. I began to feel uneasy as I realized that I was the only one who wasn't immediately enraptured by Celeste.

“You have all signed that silly little piece of paper the human lawyers make us hand out before we can begin,” the vampire continued. “So let us get the show on the road, as they say. I'm going to need a volunteer from the audience.”

Every hand in the room went up. I mean, *every single one*. Except mine, of course—there was no way I was getting up on stage with that ancient thing dressed up like a pretty young flapper. The longer I sat there, the more uncomfortable I got and the show hadn't even really started yet. I turned to Taylor to tell her we needed to go but by then Celeste was already calling her up on stage.

“You have great depths in you, my dear. True potential,” she said, staring directly into my best friend's eyes. “You are an old soul. Come, tell me about yourself. Let me heal you.”

“Taylor, *no*,” I hissed, gripping her upper arm but she shrugged me off like a gnat and walked

quickly to the stage.

“Celeste, I am ready.” Her pupils were dilated and her voice sounded somehow robotic. It was frightening but there was no one I could ask for help. No one but me who wasn’t under the vampire spell.

I learned later that this was Celeste’s special gift as well as the key to her popularity. She could glam an entire auditorium of willing humans just with the sound of her voice and make them believe anything she wanted. The actual show was pretty cheesy, Celeste asking audience members up and telling them trivial details of their past like where they had mislaid their favorite pair of earrings or predicting their love lives. But because they were under her spell, they left thinking they had witnessed something life changing and profound. It was all a big cheat but try telling the tourists that—they adored Celeste and she loved being worshiped so it all worked out. Well, for her, anyway. For my best friend, not so much.

The vampire mistress played Taylor like a violin. She dropped a few hints about the recent frustrations of her love life and my best friend melted like ice cream on a hot summer day. She cried and begged the vampire to help make everything all right.

“You shall be healed of all your sorrows, beautiful one,” Celeste intoned, stroking Taylor’s cheek softly. Right then I knew something more than a show was going on. At five ten with a curvy, statuesque figure and long black hair, Taylor looks like a heroine on the front of a bodice-ripping romance novel. I’d always admired her flawless, freckle-free skin and her model’s physique but from a friend’s perspective. However, I could see Celeste’s dark gaze crawling greedily all over my best friend’s body and it was clear the vamp wanted more than friendship from her latest “volunteer.”

I sat helpless in the crowd while the vampire glammed Taylor within an inch of her life, wishing like hell I could do something and knowing I was powerless to stop what was going on in front of me. It seemed to take forever and involved lots of stroking and kissing and soft-core panting from both Celeste and my friend but finally Taylor was released to come back to my side.

While the vamp called up her next victim, I snapped my fingers under my best friend’s nose. “Taylor, wake up! Snap out of it.”

She blinked her big blue eyes and smiled at me in a dreamy way. “Addison? Are you still here?”

“Where else would I go?” I said grimly. “I was stuck here while you spilled your guts to the vampire. What was all that shit about your love life, anyway? She had you acting like you’d been left at the altar and you haven’t even dated anyone seriously in over a year.”

“She saw into me. Deep into my soul,” Taylor murmured dreamily. “I told her everything because I had to—it was the only way she could help me. And now I know what I must do to be healed.”

I *really* didn’t like the psychobabble coming out of her black lipsticked mouth. Show or no show, I wanted to leave. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” I tugged at her arm until she rose obediently and followed me out of the banquet hall, walking with a slow, measured tread like a zombie. All the way to the exit, I was sure I could feel Celeste’s dark eyes on my back but at least she didn’t say anything. I breathed a sigh of relief when the doors shut behind us and began towing my best friend toward the hotel lobby.

“You didn’t feel it, did you?” The voice was close, almost right in my ear.

“Excuse me?” I stopped my forward motion and looked back in confusion. Standing right behind me was a black man who looked to be somewhere in his sixties. He was wearing a rumped brown suit that looked like he’d been sleeping in it and his hair was almost completely gray.

“That she-devil’s power. You weren’t feeling it—I was watching you so I know.”

“Why were you watching *me*?” I took a step back and Taylor moved with me, as obedient as a well-behaved child. I *really* needed to get her home and see if I could break the weird trance she was in.

The man shrugged. “Recruitment. This is as good a place to find non-glams as any in town.” He stuck out a hand. “Gerald Holmes. I work for the VAB—the Vampire Auditing Bureau.”

“The what?” I asked, taking his hand by reflex. It was hard and callused and he pumped my own hand exactly twice before letting go.

“Vampire Auditing Bureau,” he repeated patiently. “It’s a government agency.”

“What, like the FBI or the CIA?” I asked, fascinated despite myself.

He laughed. “Actually, we’re an offshoot of the FDA, don’t ask me why. But the point is, we’re always looking for new Auditors and you have what it takes.”

I shook my head. “Look, I’ve never even heard of you or your agency and I don’t know what a uh, Auditor is or does.”

“We keep track of the vamps. Make sure they aren’t abusing their powers and glamming humans who don’t want to be glammed. Without us, the entire country would be controlled by bloodsuckers.”

“That sounds like a worthy calling and everything but I’m in grad school right now. So—sorry, not interested.”

“What are you in school for?”

“English lit. I’m going to teach on the college level if I can ever finish my dissertation.”

“English lit, huh? *Dracula*. Now there’s a book you might want to look into.”

“Sorry, I’m more into Dickinson than Stoker.”

He looked me in the eye. “‘Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me.’ Death stopped for your friend just now.”

“Look,” I said, trying not to feel exasperated. “I’m sorry but I really don’t have time to chat right now. I need to get her home.”

He looked into Taylor’s big blue eyes. “Yeah, that’s what I meant. She’s been glammed pretty good. You better watch her for the next twenty-four hours.”

“Is that how long it takes to wear off?” I asked, dismayed.

“Sometimes it never wears off,” he said darkly. “Depends on how susceptible your friend is to the glamour and how badly the vamp wants her.”

“Wants her? But why would Celeste *want* her?”

“Just look at her.” He gestured to the catatonic Taylor. “Vamps are pretty people and they like other pretty people. You ever seen an ugly vampire?”

“Well...no,” I admitted. “But I still don’t see—”

“It’s all about sex,” he said harshly. “Those dead bastards only have two drives left—the drive to feed and the drive to fuck. That’s their entire existence.”

“So you’re saying they’re all id,” I said. “All desire and appetite and no restraint.”

“Exactly.” He nodded. “That’s where we come in. They can’t restrain themselves so we restrain them. You heard the saying absolute power corrupts absolutely?”

I nodded. "Yeah, sure."

"They're too damn powerful. Anyone strong enough to dead-lift a semi and hypnotize most of the human population can do pretty much whatever he or she wants. We have to keep on top of them or the whole world is screwed. Understand?"

"I do, yes." I nodded. "I just, uh, I don't know that I'm the kind of person who could do that—keep on top of them, I mean." In fact, it had never occurred to me that vampires needed controlling or watching. They were just tourist attractions or Vegas lounge acts to me. Would you create a special government agency to police Siegfried and Roy or Wayne Newton? Despite my unease at what I had just witnessed just moments before, the whole idea seemed vaguely ridiculous.

Gerald Holms gave me a hard look, as though he knew what I was thinking. "You're underestimating the vamps and yourself. You knew something wasn't right in there and you got your friend away. But just think of all the folks that are still in there, at that she-devil's mercy."

"They signed a waiver," I pointed out.

"A waiver." He made a face like the word left a bad taste in his mouth. "Yeah, the vamps have their damn lawyers in their pockets. Got all of us signing our lives away to those bloodsuckers 'til there's not a damn thing we can do about it if somebody gets hurt."

I could see what he was getting at but his passionate speech was still falling into the category of not-my-problem. After all, I was just a poor student trying to get through school, and when I was done I was going to teach at a nice, private university somewhere and hopefully earn tenure so I could pay off my student loans. I didn't see myself as a protector of the innocent or a crusader for justice and sure as hell didn't want a career in law enforcement. I loved to read and write and I wanted to share that love with students eager to learn—not spend my nights busting vamps for infractions or barbecuing them when they got the death penalty.

So I smiled at Gerald Holms and thanked him for his offer. "I'll think about it," I lied, pulling Taylor toward the lobby exit.

"You do that. Here." He produced a card with his name and number on it, then pressed it into my hand. "You'll see," he said darkly. "When something happens to someone you love and a vamp is behind it—you'll get it then. But then it'll be too late."

"Uh, thanks." I accepted the card and, with his morbid goodbye ringing in my ears, I hauled Taylor out to the car and drove us both home.

I wished later I would have listened to his warning. But he was right—by the time I was wishing that, it was too late.

I spent the night worried about my best friend but she went to sleep naturally enough and the next day she seemed fine. A little subdued, maybe, but nothing really out of the ordinary. I had a job as an adjunct to one of the biology professors—it wasn't my field but all I really had to do was set up and take down the labs—so I had to leave her alone for a night class.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I asked her for the hundredth time as I was walking out the door.

Taylor made a face. "I swear to God, Addison, if you ask me that one more time..."

"Sorry, sorry. You just had me really freaked out last night. It was like you were some kind of robot or something."

"Well, I'm fine now. So go on and go. You're going to be late and you know how much Dr. Pince loves that."

“Well...” I had my hand on the knob and Taylor made a shooing motion at me.

“Go. I’m fine and I’ll see you tonight. We’ll order that pizza we wanted last night and drink a gallon of Margaritas if you want.”

“Extra salt on the rim.” I pointed a finger at her.

She laughed. “Like I would forget? You’re talking to the queen of saltaholics here.”

Hearing her sound so much like her old self put me at ease. I gave her a grin and stepped out the door, intent on getting to the class in time to set up that night’s lab. I told myself that she was fine and that the effects of the vampire’s glamour had worn off.

How could I know that would be the last time I saw my best friend alive?

When I came back from my class, Taylor was gone. Just gone. Her car was still in the parking lot and her clothes were in the closet. Her cell phone was lying on her bed—she hadn’t even taken her keys.

I was frantic. It was clear to me that someone or something had come into the apartment and taken her away because there was no way she would leave without those things. Unfortunately there were no signs of forced entry or a struggle and Taylor was over twenty-one so the police refused to let me file a missing person’s case until twenty-four hours went by. Incidentally, that’s almost exactly how long it takes to turn someone into a vampire but I didn’t find that out until later.

Of course my thoughts immediately went to Celeste and I was sure she had something to do with my friend’s disappearance. But when I went to the Embassy Suites where the Vampire Bedazzlement had been held, I found nothing. The show had moved on and one of the hotel employees told me it was only held there every other week anyway.

I was frantic and so were Taylor’s mom and dad. We scoured the city for days, putting up posters while I continued to try and track down Celeste. I visited glam-sex clubs, vamp topless bars and even a vampire-friendly nudist colony, which is something I would so like to be able to forget, but no one would give me more than hints. Then, finally, exactly a month after she’d disappeared, I got a call.

“I understand you’re trying to find me, little human.” The sultry feminine voice on the other end of the phone couldn’t be mistaken. It was Celeste.

I took a deep breath. “I am, yes. My friend Taylor was one of your vic...er, volunteers at a show you did about a month ago. And the day after your show, she disappeared—do you know anything about where she might be?”

I expected her to deny it but Celeste obviously didn’t believe in lying—or else I was so far beneath her notice she didn’t fear any retribution from me. “The beautiful one with long dark hair? Oh yes, I know where she went,” she said at once.

I felt my breath catch in my throat. “You’ve seen her? Where is she?”

“She’s here, with me.” Celeste let out a deep, throaty laugh that made the short hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “She’s my new pet. You may visit her if you like.”

“She...I...where are you?” I asked, barely able to get the words out.

“Sheila will give you the address.” Celeste already sounded bored. Another voice took over and gave me directions to a community in the New Tampa area where none of the houses started below the two million mark. It was a long haul from our apartment in Beach Park—the poor part of South Tampa—but I made it in record time.

When I got there I found Taylor sitting on a couch beside the petite Celeste. My friend didn’t look

particularly happy but she didn't look as miserable as she would soon become either. I found out later that this was a pattern for Celeste—she latched onto a human she thought had “potential” and turned them to serve as her companion. For a few months—sometimes even a few years—everything was a right. But the moment her new prodigy disappointed or displeased her in any way, the gloves were off.

“Taylor, what are you doing here?” I asked, thinking how unlike herself she looked. Her normal tan skin was as pale as paper and her eyes had a strange glitter to them I had never seen before.

“I live here now.” Her full bottom lip quivered but she didn't quite dare to let herself cry.

“What do you mean you live here? You live with me—we share an apartment. We're roommates, remember?”

Celeste smirked at me. “Taylor is no longer your concern. She belongs to me now.”

“She doesn't belong to anybody,” I said, fixing the vamp with a glare. “She's a person—not some doll you saw in a toy store and decided to buy.”

“Listen to me, little human.” Celeste leaned forward, focusing her eyes on mine. “Taylor is *mine*. You will accept this and stop hounding me all over town. It was amusing at first but now it is both embarrassing and tedious. Do you understand?”

I realized she was trying to glamour me. “No, I don't *understand*. I don't understand how you think you can just take someone away from their normal life and own them. That's bullshit.”

Celeste's dark eyes widened and then narrowed. “Ah, I see you are one of those rare humans who are immune to our glamour. How very tiresome.” She sighed. “Very well, we will do this the hard way. Leave now and stop harassing me or I will have you killed.”

“You can't do that,” I said, feeling like I'd suddenly been ejected from my safe life as a grad student and dropped into the middle of a mafia movie. Taylor's new mistress was literally making me an offer I couldn't refuse.

Celeste gave me a very unpleasant smile that didn't reach her eyes. “Watch me, little human—I am not one to suffer fools gladly. Taylor is one of us now. You must accept this and realize there is nothing you can do to change it.”

“You mean she's a *vampire*?” Despite Taylor's altered appearance I couldn't believe it. But my best friend was nodding, her lower lip trembling again.

“It...it's true, Addison. I'm a vampire now. That's why I have to stay here, with Celeste. She's going to teach me all about it. And besides, I need a light-tight place to sleep and you know we don't have anything like that at the apartment.”

“But...” I shook my head, at a loss for words. “But what am I going to tell your mom and dad? They're frantic, Taylor.”

Blood tears welled up in my best friend's eyes and she blinked rapidly, trying to keep them from falling. “Tell them...tell them I love them and I don't...don't know when I can see them again.”

“Taylor—” I started.

“Enough,” Celeste interrupted me. “This interview is over. Go back to your human life and your pursuits and forget about Taylor. She is mine now and I will hear no more about it.”

I wanted to protest further but Taylor gave me a frantic look and a tiny shake of her head. Flanking me on either side were some very scary looking vamps, obviously just looking for an excuse to do some serious damage.

“I’m sorry, Addison,” my best friend said softly as they took me by the arms and dragged me out.
“So sorry.”

As it turned out, I was sorry too. But there was nothing I could do about it—my best friend’s life was ruined and it was all my fault. *I should have stayed with her. Should have listened to that man’s advice. He said watch her for at least twenty-four hours, so what do I do? I leave her alone and go on to my class. What the hell is wrong with me? Why didn’t I stay with her? Why didn’t I listen to him?*

My thoughts were a vicious circle of guilt and recrimination, and there was only one thing I could do. I found the card Gerald Holms had given me and called him as soon as I got back to the apartment. A week after that, I was headed for the VAB’s version of basic training.

So I guess you could say that Taylor and I both got new professions as a result of our little girl’s night out. Unfortunately, neither one of us was very happy with our new jobs. And neither one of us could quit.

Chapter Three

I pulled up to my condo in Hyde Park and parked beside Taylor's sleek little red sports car. She always dressed in the latest fashions and drove the most expensive vehicles—Celeste was big on outfit appearances. Only I knew the struggle my best friend had every night to survive. She was the kindest, most straight-forward person I knew and she was living in a nest of snakes, cursed with an affliction that had taken her hopes and dreams from her and left her an empty existence as Celeste's flunky.

To say I hated Celeste and what she'd done to my best friend was an understatement. Vampires were considerably more than tourist attractions to me now—they were the enemy and I would have been perfectly happy to see them all fry. Except for Taylor, of course.

She had a key so she met me at the door looking lovely in a deep blue designer gown that brought out her eyes. She was decked in diamonds and her long nails were painted a deep red color I was sure Celeste had picked out for her. In her old life, Taylor had always kept her nails sensibly short and mostly polish free—you can't do serious medical work, even on animals, with a three inch manicure. But that didn't matter because Celeste wouldn't allow her to finish school. Taylor was never going to get her degree in veterinary science. It left her free to keep her nails as long as she wanted to—rather, as long as Celeste wanted her to.

"Oh Addison, I'm so glad to see you." She enfolded me in a rib cracking embrace that left me gasping for air.

"Taylor ...can't...breathe," I managed to get out.

"Sorry!" she released me abruptly. "I keep forgetting I'm so damn strong."

It seemed to me she ought to be able to remember that she could tear a bus in two by now—she'd been a vamp for six years after all—but I didn't say anything. I just motioned her to the couch and sat down. Taylor sat beside me and I put a hand on her knee.

"What happened this time?" I asked, when I could speak again.

"I don't...don't know if I can say." She started to cry, tears of blood leaving two gruesome trails down her lovely porcelain cheeks. "It's bad. Really bad."

I wondered how much worse things could get for her. She was already living with the mistress from Hell—Celeste's temper was legendary in vamp circles, not to mention she was completely unpredictable. Taylor had often told me how her maker loved to keep her flunkies on their toes. One minute she would be lovingly stroking Taylor's cheek and the next minute, with no warning or provocation, she would slap her so hard Taylor would be thrown against the wall. And that was just one example of her savage behavior.

Such treatment would have killed a human but almost nothing but sunlight, silver, or staking could kill a vamp. But though my best friend was able to heal almost any wound, she could still feel pain—and frequently did thanks to Celeste's violent temper.

I hated Taylor's maker with a passion but there was nothing I could legally do to help my friend. My job was to police vampire/human relations and check for vampire abuse of humans. But vampire abuse of other vampires was a different story. As far as the government was concerned, vampires were free to use and abuse each other any way they wanted to and we were strictly forbidden to interfere in their relationships.

For a while I had tried citing Celeste for the smallest infractions, making her professional life

hard as I could. But that only earned Taylor more abuse so I had to stop and now we were stuck at an unhappy stalemate. I left Celeste strictly alone and Taylor was allowed to “sneak out” every once in a while to vent to me about her horrible life.

I had fitted my spare bedroom with light-tight drapes and put aluminum foil over the windows for extra protection and sometimes she spent the day with me but Celeste never let her get away for long. She had a way of calling Taylor, a mind control so complete that my friend would be in severe pain if she didn't answer the summons of her maker. So, a few overnight and overday stays excluded, we were never going to be roommates again.

To be honest, it was probably a good thing Taylor couldn't stay with me permanently. Despite Celeste's original feeling that she had “potential,” my best friend was pretty much the worst vampire I had ever seen. She was unable to glamour anyone, so getting enough blood to survive was a real problem for her. Of course, with her looks, there were plenty of human men who would have been willing donors. But Taylor wasn't able to do glam-sex and even if she could have, she wasn't willing to trade sexual favors for blood. I didn't blame her there—she shouldn't have to become a whore to survive. There were other, less legal ways, to get blood and being a vampire she was strong enough to take what she wanted by force. But she wasn't the kind of person who would do such a thing, which made her unlike just about every other vamp I'd ever met.

Her incompetence in her new life—or undeath, whichever you prefer, weighed heavily on my best friend. She had always been the best and the brightest—the top of the class. But as a vamp she had finally found something she didn't excel at and now it was her entire life. Unfortunately, being a sucky vamp meant she went hungry a lot, which was where I came in. If anyone had ever told me that I would be a willing donor for a vampire, I would have laughed in their face. But I couldn't sit by and see my best friend starve—especially when her condition was my fault in the first place.

“Tell me,” I said, patting her knee gently. “Just say it, Taylor. Has she been hitting you again?”

Taylor shook her head, her long dark hair swirling with the gesture. “I wish it was only that—I used to being hit by now.” She sniffed. “You know I never broke a single bone back when I was human? Not even a fracture. But now I've had every bone in my body broken multiple times. Of course, they heal almost immediately but it still hurts. You know.”

“I know,” I said, my throat tight. God, how I hated that abusive bitch, Celeste! If Taylor was still human and a man was doing this to her, we could have gotten a restraining order and hidden my friend away in a shelter somewhere. But there was no such thing in the vampire world—it was eat or be eaten and Taylor was at the very bottom of the food chain.

“Anyway...” Taylor took a deep breath. “Celeste has guests in town this week. Some important vamps from some other state and she wants to impress them—especially this one, Roderick. He's the main VIP, I guess.”

“Yes...” I wasn't sure where this story was going but I was betting I wouldn't like the conclusion.

“So she...she...” Taylor's eyes began to fill with blood tears again. “She's been loaning me out. I mean, she gave me to him for the week. Told him to do anything he wanted with me. And he...” She shook her head. “I can't even tell you some of the things he's been making me do. He's into bondage and domination and he ties me up so I can't get away while he...he...” She put a hand over her eyes.

“Oh, Taylor.” I grabbed her other hand and didn't complain when she squeezed it hard enough to make my bones creak.

“The worst thing is the sex. He tells me I'm his whore. And the things he does to me...and making

me do to him..." She shook her head, unable to continue. "I just...I feel so *dirty*. I wish I was dead but I can't die. I've thought about staying out after dawn and just letting the sun take care of business but Celeste can feel it when I'm thinking about it and she makes me come in."

"Taylor, no!" Despite her circumstances, I was shocked to hear my friend talk about suicide. "No, you can't mean that. Don't even say it."

"Why not?" Taylor rubbed at the tears on her face, leaving bloody smudges across her high cheekbones like war paint. "I hate my life now. My entire existence is all about pleasing Celeste but no matter what I do she hates me. She says I'm the worst excuse for a vampire she's ever seen and that I deserve whatever punishment she gives me because I'm so bad. And now...I'm nothing but her whore, Addison. You know I was never one to sleep around but I don't even have control of my own body anymore. Anyone Celeste likes can use me. I can't live like this anymore. I'd rather be dead."

"Oh, honey..." I put my arms around her, feeling like my heart was going to burst. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I said, as tears stung my eyes. "This is all my fault."

Taylor pulled back from our embrace. "What are you talking about? Of course it's not."

"Yes, it is. I should have stayed with you that night. I never should have gone to that stupid class."

"You couldn't know that Celeste would come and call me to her," Taylor said gently. "And you couldn't have stopped me going out to her even if you had been there."

"Yes, I could. I would have tied you up. Called the police. Done *something*," I said fiercely. "If only I had been there. And now you're stuck in this horrible situation and even though I'm with the VAB—"

"There's nothing you can do," Taylor finished for me quietly. "Believe me, I know how it is for Addison—I'm living it."

"If only we could get some kind of restraining order," I said desperately. "Find someone who could make her leave you alone."

Taylor shook her head. "You'd have to find a vampire that was a hell of a lot stronger than Celeste and one who was willing to intervene for me. That's not going to happen."

I knew she was right. Vamps are like lions—they all have their own territory and boundaries and they generally leave each other alone unless one of them is making a hostile takeover. In which case you'd better get out of the way because they don't pull punches.

But then I remembered what she'd said. *Someone stronger than Celeste*. To my knowledge there was just one other vampire in the entire state who fit that description. *Oh no...* I moaned to myself. *Surely not. Not him...* But there was nothing else I could do, nothing else I could think of. I was stuck.

"Can you stay here tonight...er, today?" I asked my friend but she shook her head.

"No, I'm expected back in an hour. Celeste didn't want to let me go at all but Roderick had some meetings to go to so he wasn't...wasn't using me at the moment. I think she only lets me come see you at all because she thinks it hurts me to remember my former life."

"Does it?" I asked.

"Not as much as forgetting would. You're all I have left, Addison. Mom and Dad won't see me anymore since they got so religious—they say I'm the bride of Satan. And you know I never had any other close friends."

I patted her back. "We'll be friends as long as we're alive..." I suddenly remembered that she wasn't technically alive but it sounded wrong to say 'as long as I'm alive and you're undead' so I ju

shrugged. “Er, you know what I mean. And don’t give up hope or do anything crazy because I think I have a plan.”

Taylor shook her head listlessly. “I appreciate it, really I do. But I don’t think anybody can help me now. I just have to...just have to endure it. Roderick is leaving town in a month or so. Maybe things will go back to normal then. Assuming Celeste doesn’t give me to him permanently, that is.”

“She wouldn’t.” I felt like my heart had jumped up in my throat.

Taylor shrugged tiredly. “She might. She might do anything—you know that.”

“I know,” I said, filled once more with helpless rage. It was completely unfair that my friend had lost her rights as a person, her dignity, and her self-respect just because she’d been turned into a vampire. Eventually I was hoping there would be some legislation passed to protect the rights of the newly turned but people still viewed vampirism as a choice—not as something that could be done to you against your will.

“I have to go.” She started to get up but I pulled her back down.

“When’s the last time you fed?”

Taylor looked uncomfortable. “Not that long ago. I’m fine, really.”

“You’re not fine,” I said, eyeing the copious red streaks and smears beneath her cheeks. “You look about a gallon just now crying.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t come here for blood, Addison. I just needed to talk about it...to say it out loud. And honestly, I feel better now.”

“You’ll feel better if you have a quick bite.” I shrugged out of my suit jacket and offered her my arm. “Here, do the inside of the elbow this time. I think the veins are better there.”

“I shouldn’t.” But she was hungry—I could tell. She was eyeing the thick blue vein that ran along the inside of my right elbow like a starving man eyes a steak.

“Do it.” I thrust my arm under her nose, steeling myself for the pain. From what I understood some vamps were able to make this a pleasant experience—even pleasurable—but it never was with Taylor. It just hurt like hell—not that I would ever tell her.

“You’re sure?” she said, giving me an apologetic look. It was the same look she’d used to give me when we split a dessert at a restaurant and I told her to take the last bite. The memory hurt my head and I pushed my arm closer to her mouth.

Without asking again, Taylor bared her fangs and sank them deep into my vein. I managed not to yelp aloud but I bit my lips so hard I could taste blood on my tongue. It was like being stabbed with two sixteen gauge needles by an inept nurse. Luckily with my pale skin, my veins are easy to find. Taylor might never have gotten any nourishment—she seemed to lack the instinct other vamps had for finding blood vessels no matter how deep or invisible they were.

In the beginning it had been excruciating when she used to have to bite over and over to get into the vein just right but lately she’d been getting a little better about hitting the target on the first try. So maybe she was learning, just very slowly. Too bad it was Celeste setting the curve for this particular class.

Taylor sucked hard, drawing the blood out in slurps like someone sucking a thick milkshake through a straw. I sat rigidly beside her, biting my lip and holding as still as I could. I didn’t like any more now than I had the first time I had offered her my blood and it wasn’t just having her fangs stabbed into my flesh that bothered me.

Aside from the pain, it gave me a squirmy, uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach to let my best friend feed on me. I couldn't explain it except to say that it felt a little like bugs were crawling over my skin. Of course, I would never tell Taylor of the discomfort I experienced—she would feel so bad she'd refuse to take my blood and if she did that I was certain she would starve. I didn't need that on my conscious along with my other load of guilt.

Finally she finished. Just in time too, I was starting to feel light-headed and a little sick to my stomach. I forced myself to smile at her as she licked the ragged, bleeding gash she'd made in my arm to seal the wound. It stopped bleeding but it still looked awful. I suppressed a sigh. I was never going to look good in short sleeves or a bathing suit again. *Right, like you go to the beach so much.* Which was true. With my fair skin, I burn like...well, like a vampire in the sun. So despite living in Tampa, I stayed off the beach. Which was why I needed to stop feeling sorry with myself and get to bed. Another long day tomorrow and all that.

But as I saw Taylor to the door and gave her a final hug, I knew there was something I needed to do first. Pulling out my cell phone, I fished around in my pockets until I found the private number Corbett had sent his flunky to give me. I was practically grinding my teeth in frustration as I punched it in because, really, what else could I do?

"Hello?" came a deep, smooth and all-too-familiar voice.

"I need to see you," I said, forcing the words out. "I have...damn it, I have a favor to ask."

Chapter Four

I'd been rehearsing my speech for hours—ever since I'd hung up the phone with Alec Corbin the night before, in fact. But the minute I saw him, the words dried up in my throat.

Though it was only six in the afternoon, he was up and about, lounging behind a carved glass and teak desk that looked like it had cost as much as a luxury car, wearing his usual jeans and t-shirt combo. Corbin was one of the rare vamps who seemed to feel comfortable in casual clothes—maybe he was just so powerful he didn't feel the need to dress up for anyone. Whatever the reason, I had to admit that Hanes looked as good on him as Armani did on anyone else. The plain olive green shirt he was wearing emphasized the width of his broad shoulders and made his pale skin look almost tan. Around his neck was a thin gold chain with a small copper coin attached to it like a charm, and his hair, as always, was perfect.

I felt dowdy in contrast, despite the fact that I had come dressed in my best black suit. I didn't know if it was the perfect planes of Corbin's face or his exquisitely toned body, but I always felt like a grimy little girl in his presence—which might have accounted for some of the hostility I felt for him. He claimed to be attracted to me but really, how could he be? I'm not bad looking but I'm not a model, either. I have way too many freckles and I'm too short and pleasingly plump to ever carry off the "I'm a sexy stick insect" look that the fashion industry seems to favor. Sternly, I reminded myself that I wasn't there to strut the catwalk—I just needed Corbin to help me rescue Taylor. So I tried to give him a professional smile as I stood in front of his desk.

"Addison, what a pleasure to see you again so soon. I was afraid I would have to wait another long month before our next meeting." He gave me a polite smile—no fang showing this time—and steepled his long fingers on the desk in front of him. "What can I do for you?"

I took a deep breath. "I... have a proposition for you."

He arched one eyebrow. "I'm intrigued. Go on."

I wished there was some way to sugar coat this but nothing I could say would make it any easier. So I just dove in. "I have a friend who was, uh, brought over against her will. She didn't want to be a vampire, it was forced on her. And now her maker is abusing her. Making her do horrible things."

Corbin gave me a completely unsurprised look. "And?"

"And?" I said, irritated by his lack of sympathy. "And I need your help. I need someone who can force my friend's maker to let her go or at least stop torturing her."

He frowned. "I do not think you know what you are asking. The bond between a maker and his her fledgling is incredibly strong. To intervene in such a relationship and break it...that is almost unheard of among our kind. It would be like a human taking a child away from its parent."

"They do that every day," I pointed out. "Parents lose custody of their kids when they abuse or neglect them. And believe me, if Celeste was a human parent she'd be sitting in jail right now for what she's done to my friend."

"Celeste, is it?" Corbin shrugged. "Ah, she *is* a sadistic one. Although no more so than many of my kind."

I couldn't understand his careless reaction. "And that's okay with you? Do you have any idea what she's forcing my friend to do?"

He raised an eyebrow at me again. "Probably something sexual considering how upset you are."

notice that matters of the flesh seem to trouble you.”

“Just because I’m not into casual sex doesn’t mean I’m a prude,” I said, irritated and embarrassed by his piercing gaze. “But this isn’t about me, anyway—it’s about my friend.”

“Oh no, my darling.” He sat up straight and leaned across his desk. “Make no mistake about it—this is purely about *you*. I don’t really care what horrible things are happening to your friend. Whatever she is enduring will either make her stronger or kill her—that is the vampire way and all of us have been through it.”

I was so angry I wanted to kick him. “You honestly don’t care? Celeste is whoring her out—forcing her to have sex with some sadistic bastard just because he’s a VIP.”

Corbin shrugged again. “As I believe the expression goes, ‘been there, done that, have the t-shirt to prove it.’”

I glared at him. “You’ve been forced to have sex with someone you hated? Or you forced someone else to have sex?”

His silver-blue eyes narrowed. “I will let you draw your own conclusions about that. But suffice it to say, what your friend is enduring is nothing new. And since I don’t know her or care about her, the tale of her sad plight doesn’t move me in the slightest.”

I threw up my hands. “Then I guess I’m wasting my time.”

“Not at all.” He sat back again, lounging like a lazy cat behind the expensive desk. “I may still be persuaded to help you. Remember, Addison, I said this is all about *you*. So what can *you* offer me to make removing your friend from her maker worth my while? Bearing in mind, of course, that I will have to go to considerable trouble to do so.”

I thought fast. “That citation I wrote you last night? I haven’t filed it yet. We can just pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Please—is that really all your friend is worth to you? A slap on the wrist and the sum of a paltry fine?” He tsked. “Really, my darling, I had thought better of you.”

I took a deep breath. “What do you want me to say?”

“What do you *think* I want you to say?” He smiled, showing considerable fang this time.

Crap, I’m in so much trouble here! I swallowed hard. Could I do this? Even for Taylor it was a close call. But then I reminded myself of the horrible conditions she was enduring. She was being forced to have sex with a man she hated over and over again. Surely I could make myself to do the one thing, this one time to save her. Giving Corbin a level stare, I spoke in a shaky voice.

“Fine. I’ll have sex with you. But no biting at the same time. And I damn well hope you can control yourself—I don’t want to end up looking like I just went through an industrial sized blender even to save my friend.”

Corbin stood and suddenly he was around the desk and right in front of me though I had barely seen him move. Damn, he was fast. And probably incredibly strong as well. I steeled myself not to flinch as he reached for me, but instead of pulling me to him he only stroked my cheek with one finger. His touch was light but I felt a rush of tingles go through me anyway.

“So you offer me your body but not your heart.”

“Sorry.” I swallowed, forcing myself to stay where I was. “My heart isn’t up for grabs.”

“Is that because it belongs to your friend?” He searched my eyes. “Is she your lover as well?”

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