

BREATHLESS

SCOTT PRUSSING

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PROLOGUE

Eighteen years ago

Twilight was gathering when Judy Nyland stumbled out of the trees onto the narrow hiking trail, her right hand clutching her neck. Thin ribbons of drying blood streaked the back of her hand like a badly done spider web tattoo. Her long blond hair was tangled, and her normally pretty face bore a dazed, confused look as she fought to maintain her balance. At the moment, she appeared much older than her twenty-five years.

Even in the shade, the air was still warm, but the woods seemed strangely silent. What was she doing out here? She winced when she turned her head to search the path—god, her neck hurt. Pulling her hand from her throat, she stared at her bloodstained palm. Was that really her hand, covered with blood? It seemed like it belonged to someone else. Gingerly, she touched her neck and felt a wet round hole slightly smaller than the tip of her finger. How the hell had that happened? She glanced down at her stomach, only recently beginning to swell with her second child. Thankfully, the front of her light blue T-shirt was unmarked.

“Judy!” her older sister Janet shouted, hurrying down the trail. “You had me so worried.” Her eyes widened at the sight of Judy’s bloody hand. “What happened?” Janet gently grabbed her sister’s wrist and began examining her palm.

“It’s not my hand.” Judy said as she tilted her head and pushed her hair aside. “It’s this.”

Janet examined the wound. “Doesn’t look too bad,” she comforted. “The bleeding’s mostly stopped. We’d better get you to a doctor though, just in case. You might need a shot or something. What happened? Did you get poked by a branch?”

Judy frowned. “I don’t think so... I don’t remember.”

A faint image began taking shape in her brain. She struggled to bring it into focus. It was a man. Very pale and very thin. His eyes bored into hers, mesmerizing her. She knew she should run, that he meant her ill, but she was frozen, rooted to the ground. As he moved closer, his lips peeled back, revealing a single yellow fang.

Judy grabbed her sister’s arm with both hands. “Oh my god! I think I was bitten by a vampire. A one-fanged vampire.”

“Uhhh...sure. A vampire,” Janet said a bit more sarcastically than she meant to. “With only one fang. Makes perfect sense. And much more likely than being poked by a sharp branch, for sure.”

Judy touched her neck again, confused. What the hell *had* happened? Were her hormones running amok? Her husband had been teasing her about watching too many vampire shows. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remember. It had been so clear just a moment ago....

1. UNHAPPY FAMILIES

Happy families are all alike, Leesa Nyland had read somewhere, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. That statement certainly applied to her family, Leesa thought—it was hard to imagine another family anywhere that had been ruined by a mom who claimed she had been bitten by a one-fanged vampire.

As the memories came flooding back to her, Leesa's fingers began to twirl in her long blond hair the way they often did when she became anxious or upset.

She was three when she first realized her mom was different from other moms. Strangely, the first thing she remembered noticing was the tomato juice. Her mom drank nothing but the thick red juice, downing a big glass with every meal. Eventually, she even began putting it on her cereal instead of milk. Later, she began avoiding direct sunlight, claiming the sun hurt her skin. For a while, Leesa enjoyed the game they made of it, pretending they were furry little moles darting from shadow to shadow, but by the time Leesa was six her mom had stopped going outside except on the cloudiest days, doing what errands she could at night and leaving the rest to Leesa's dad.

The eccentric behavior was bad enough, but her mom's increasingly anxious and depressed ramblings eventually drove her dad away. "Why couldn't I have been bitten by a real vampire?" her mom would complain endlessly. She was convinced the one-fanged version was a crippled, sterile creature, unable to impart true vampire powers. One day, her dad simply did not come home from work, and Leesa had not seen him since. She wondered if she was part of the reason for his leaving. She had been born missing a small piece of bone in her lower right leg, making the limb an inch shorter than the other and causing her foot to twist slightly inward, resulting in a noticeable limp. Maybe her dad didn't want a gimpy daughter any more than he wanted a deranged wife. A year after her father left, her mom uprooted the family, moving them from New Jersey to San Diego. Thank God for her big brother Bradley, or her childhood would have been intolerable.

She forced the memories from her mind. She wasn't surprised they had returned now, while she sat on a hard black vinyl chair in the noisy baggage claim area of Connecticut's Bradley International Airport—how like Bradley to get an airport named after him, she thought laughingly—waiting for her Aunt Janet to pick her up. This was Leesa's first time in Connecticut, the place where her mom had supposedly been bitten by the one-fanged vampire. No wonder the story had come flooding back to her now, triggering the memories. Her light-hearted musing about Bradley and the airport quickly turned into a pang of loss, and her hand moved reflexively toward her purse and the carefully folded piece of white paper she carried with her everywhere. Catching herself, she stayed her hand—she didn't need to take the paper out to know every word printed on it.

Suddenly unable to sit still, she pushed herself to her feet and limped toward the exit. The glass doors slid open, and she stepped out onto the sidewalk, squinting in the bright sunlight. The air was hot and damp, and in just a few minutes her dark green cotton shirt began clinging to her skin.

So this is Connecticut, she thought. This was so not what she had been picturing. Where were the brooding gray New England skies she'd been imagining? There was nothing remotely mysterious, gloomy or dangerous here. No way could she picture this as a place where someone could be attacked by a vampire, one fang or not. Nor did it seem like the kind of place where a beloved older brother could

suddenly disappear. But that was exactly what had happened.

Her eyes moistened as she thought of Bradley. Until he left for college, he had been her best friend. She knew how lucky she was. Plenty of her classmates had brothers who wanted nothing to do with their little sisters; or worse, who teased them incessantly. Not Bradley, though. When she was four, he began walking with her every day, until she was able to make it to a neighborhood park more than a mile away. At the park, Bradley would push her on the swings or spin her on the merry-go-round as a reward for her efforts. Walking with her brother and playing in the park were among her best childhood memories.

The heat was beginning to bother her, so she turned and limped back into the comfortable coolness inside, settling into the same seat she had vacated a few minutes before.

She remembered the day Bradley left for college like it was yesterday. She had hugged him on the sidewalk while the cab driver loaded his luggage into the trunk. Phone calls, texts and email would keep them in close touch, he promised. Leesa told him she understood, that above everything she wanted him to be happy, that it was time for him to make his own life, though she secretly wondered why he had chosen to go all the way to Weston College, in Connecticut of all places.

Bradley had been true to his word, calling or writing every day without fail. In the middle of his sophomore year he told her about a girl he had met, someone very special. Leesa was so happy for him, but not long after that things began to change. His calls and emails became shorter, and he began skipping a day now and then. She let it slide. She was fine with it—until the day she received that fateful email.

No longer able to stop herself, she reached into her purse and pulled out the printed copy of his final message, unfolding it with exquisite care and laying it open on her lap. As her eyes moved down the paper, she didn't know if she was reading or simply reciting the words from memory.

Dear Sis, This is the hardest letter I've ever had to write. There's something I need to do. I have to go away, and I don't know if I'll ever be coming back. Her eyes began to mist. Why couldn't he have been more specific? Why the secrecy? She could have handled his going away, if she thought he was going somewhere to make a new life with his girlfriend, far from the turmoil of his youth. The message hadn't ended there, though. Not by a long shot. *Please don't try to find me. Get on with your life in California. Forget about me.* As if! She still couldn't believe he had said that. Forget about him? No way. She had to find him. She just had to.

Sitting there alone in the airport, she read his final words. *Always remember, pumpkin, your big brother loves you.* A single tear wobbled down her cheek.

The sound of her name rescued her from the painful memory.

"Leesa, honey," her Aunt Janet called warmly, her heels clicking on the hard floor as she hurried toward her niece. "It's so good to see you."

Leesa carefully folded the paper and placed it back in her bag. She wiped the tear from her cheek and pasted a smile onto her face as she stood up to greet her aunt. "Hi, Aunt Janet," she said as she moved into her aunt's waiting arms.

For a moment, as Aunt Janet tightened the hug, Leesa felt three years old again, wrapped in the safety of her mother's embrace, before everything began to change. As she returned her aunt's hug and soaked up her loving warmth, Leesa's pasted-on smile slowly became real.

2. PLUMP AND LUMPY

It was love at first sight—all right, technically second sight, Leesa admitted to herself, since she had met her aunt once when Aunt Janet and Uncle Roger spent a week in San Diego almost five years before. That wasn't much time, especially in the life of a thirteen-year-old girl who had been a bit too busy—and a bit too frightened of forming any real attachments—to allow herself to bond with two virtual strangers. But ever since, after seeing how little Mom's disability check left after the basic necessities were taken care of, Aunt Janet had sent both Leesa and Bradley a hundred dollars every month “just between us, for those little things young people need now and then.”

This was the woman her mother could have been, Leesa thought as she studied her aunt out of the corner of her eye while a skycap piled her four worn black suitcases onto his cart. The woman her mother could have been and should have been, if not for that crazy day in the woods so long ago. Aunt Janet looked like her mom should have looked, sounded like her mom should have sounded, and felt like her mom should have felt.

Aunt Janet was forty-eight, pretty in a plain kind of way, and slightly plump and lumpy like an aunt ought to be. Though four years older than Leesa's mom, Aunt Janet somehow looked younger, despite skin more weathered than the pale, almost flawless complexion of her sun-shunning younger sister. It was her sparkling eyes that did it, Leesa decided, and her warm smile, so different from her mom's anxious frown and glassy stare. Her dark blond hair was cut medium short, styled casually with loose curls framing a round face whose most striking feature was a pair of bright blue eyes almost identical to the ones Leesa saw reflected in her mirror every day.

It was not Aunt Janet's inviting appearance that drew Leesa so strongly, however. What pulled her in was her aunt's obvious care and concern, so different from the aloofness Leesa was accustomed to from her mother. “How was your flight?” “You must be tired.” “Are you hungry? We can stop somewhere for a quick bite if you want.” Leesa could tell Aunt Janet was not just making small talk, but that she genuinely cared. And better yet, she actually *listened* to Leesa's replies.

After a forty-five minute drive south from the airport, Aunt Janet guided her blue Ford Taurus off the interstate.

“We're almost there,” she said as she turned left at the top of the exit ramp and crossed back over the freeway. “Most of Meriden is behind us. Our house is this way, though, just up the road a bit.”

The “road” turned out to be a rolling two-lane highway flanked by tall oak and ash trees with an occasional house or store tucked among them. Aunt Janet followed it for about a mile before turning onto a street marked Dursley Lane.

“If you keep going straight, it's less than ten miles to Weston,” Aunt Janet explained. “We'll never be far away when you want to come by for a home-cooked meal.”

The mention of food made Leesa's stomach rumble. “I'll be taking you up on that, Aunt Janet, for sure.”

They turned into a long driveway in front of a pale yellow Colonial house set way back from the street. Four maples shaded the front lawn, and a row of pointy spruce trees lined the side of the house, looking almost like a row of giant dark green candles. Small gardens filled with bright red and white

impatiens circled each of the maples, and an even more colorful garden fronted the house.

“Home, sweet home,” Aunt Janet said.

“It’s beautiful.”

Leesa climbed out of the car and breathed deeply of the spruce-scented air. The smell reminded her of the pine freshener her mom used to spray in their house. This was way better, though.

“Your Uncle Roger should be home any time now,” Aunt Janet said. “In the meantime, you can meet Max.”

Leesa looked at her aunt. Who the heck was Max? She didn’t have any cousins, as far as she knew. Why hadn’t anyone told her that her aunt and uncle had a kid?

She followed her aunt up the brick steps to the front door. As soon as Aunt Janet pushed her key into the lock, Leesa heard a series of loud clicks clattering toward the door. Aunt Janet pushed the door open and was greeted by the joyful face of a panting golden retriever. Aunt Janet slipped in through the doorway and scratched the dog behind its ears while Leesa stepped inside behind her.

“Meet Max,” Aunt Janet said, holding the dog’s head toward Leesa.

Leesa petted the top of Max’s head. His fur was soft and smooth.

“He really likes his chest scratched, like this.” Aunt Janet bent over and demonstrated. Max’s fluffy tail began wagging like crazy. “Go ahead. Give him a couple of minutes of this and he’ll be your friend forever.”

Leesa dropped to one knee on the hardwood floor and draped her right arm around the top of Max’s thick neck. With her left hand, she began scratching his furry chest. Max arched his head up and his tail continued wagging furiously. Leesa rubbed his chest even more vigorously. She’d never had a dog growing up, but she had always wanted one. Or at least a cat. The only pet she’d ever had was a goldfish she won at a school fair when she was eight, and the poor fish had died in less than a week.

She continued rubbing Max’s soft fur, thrilled with the way her trip was starting out. Aunt Janet was great, and now Max. Leesa just knew she was going to like her Uncle Roger as well.

3. POT ROAST AND PIE

When Uncle Roger smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears. Especially when he had such cause to smile as the delicious dinner he was currently devouring with unrestrained gusto. Except for his smile, Leesa thought Uncle Roger quite ordinary looking—square-jawed, nose a bit too broad, brown eyes and close-cropped black hair flecked with gray. He was a large man whose size would have been intimidating but for his smile. She had never seen a smile quite so wide, but guessed the smile stretching her own lips might be nearly as broad right now. Dinner was that good. And still to come was the fresh-baked apple pie from Uncle Roger's bakery. The cinnamon-laced aroma had been tantalizing her since her uncle had set it in the oven to stay warm.

Aided by a Crock-Pot that had been tenderizing a pot roast all day, Aunt Janet had whipped up the fabulous meal in less than thirty minutes. Buttery sweet potatoes and tender green beans sautéed with shallots and pine nuts accompanied the pot roast, which was quite simply the most tender piece of meat Leesa had ever tasted. The succulent beef seemed almost to melt in her mouth, and the gravy was to die for. It was the best dinner she had ever eaten, and she hadn't even tasted Uncle Roger's pie yet.

"Are you excited about college?" Uncle Roger asked.

"Yeah, I can't wait to get started. But I'm kinda nervous, too."

"What classes will you be taking?" Aunt Janet asked.

"Psychology, physics, English lit and math," Leesa replied, avoiding any mention of the controversial fifth class she had signed up for. She saw no point in roiling the waters by bringing that up. She also decided not to risk spoiling dinner by asking about Bradley, despite her impatience to start learning everything she could about her brother's time here in Connecticut. There would be time enough for that later.

She finished her pot roast in silence, enjoying every bite, then soaked up the last bit of gravy on her plate with a piece of homemade bread.

"Dinner was totally amazing, Aunt Janet. I may be dropping by for a home-cooked meal way more than you bargained for."

"Not a chance, dear. You're welcome to eat here every night if you want."

Leesa grinned. "That 'freshman fifteen' would turn into a 'terrible thirty' pretty quick if I ate like this every night." Her smile grew wider as she watched Uncle Roger drop a huge scoop of vanilla ice cream beside a slice of pie seemingly the size of a small shoebox. "But it might be worth it," she added when Uncle Roger set the pie in front of her.

The ice cream was already beginning to melt into the pie when she pushed her fork through the flaky crust, cutting off a healthy bite. The aroma alone was probably worth five pounds, she thought as she closed her mouth around the forkful. The buttery crust needed no chewing, and the tangy apple slices required little more. She closed her eyes in exquisite pleasure, savoring the delicious combination of flavors, textures and temperatures.

"Mmmmm... You must sell a million of these, Uncle Roger. It's amazing."

Uncle Roger's smile beamed again. "Not quite. But apple *is* our best seller, especially this time of year." He set a piece in front of his wife and began cutting a healthy slice for himself. "Enjoy. There's plenty more where that came from."

“Ha! Don’t even think that. I’d probably explode.” Leesa rubbed her stomach. “But I’d explode happy,” she admitted with a smile.

Later, after the table had been cleared and the dishes crammed into the dishwasher, Leesa sat with her aunt and uncle in their cozy living room, rocking slowly on a surprisingly comfortable oak rocking chair. Max sat beside the chair, cleverly positioning himself so Leesa could pet the top of his head while she rocked. Uncle Roger reclined on a plump easy chair, a cup of steaming coffee on the small wooden table next to him, while Aunt Janet enjoyed a glass of red wine on the three-cushioned floral couch. “Peaceful, Easy Feeling” from the Eagles greatest hits CD played softly in the background, and a bright fire popped and crackled in the stone fireplace. With the heat from the fire radiating across her face and Max’s soft fur under her fingertips, Leesa could not remember ever feeling quite so at home and relaxed. She didn’t want to spoil the feeling, but she couldn’t wait any longer to ask about Bradley.

“Did Bradley visit you guys much?”

“Every couple of weeks, I’d guess,” Aunt Janet replied. “Usually for dinner.”

“We saw a fair amount of him the first couple of months, less often as he settled in on campus and began making friends,” Uncle Roger added. “Still pretty regularly after that, for his first year at least. Not so much the second.”

Leesa stopped rocking, balancing instead on the front of the chair.

“Did he ever say why? Why he stopped coming so much, I mean?”

“Not to me,” Aunt Janet said. She turned toward her husband. “Roger?”

“Nope. I had the feeling his girlfriend was keeping him pretty busy. Not so unusual for a college boy, you know.”

Leesa remembered how Bradley’s calls and messages began tapering off after the girlfriend appeared. She wished she had asked him more about her when she had the chance.

“Did you ever meet her?”

Aunt Janet shook her head. “No, never. I invited him to bring her for dinner several times, but they never made it. I don’t know why.”

“Did he tell you much about her, Leesa?” Uncle Roger asked. “I know how fond of you he was. He talked about you all the time.”

Leesa felt warm and sad at the same time, thinking of Bradley sitting in this very room talking proudly about her. “No,” she said after a moment. “Only that he’d met someone special, but never anything specific. I wish I’d asked. I don’t even know her name.”

“Edwina,” Aunt Janet said. “He told us that much.”

Leesa leaned back and began to rock. Edwina. At least she had a name now. She had no idea if Edwina had anything to do with Bradley’s going away, but she had nothing else to go on, and the timing made it possible, if not likely. “Did he say anything else about her?”

Uncle Roger rubbed his chin. “She was a Weston student, I know that. I remember Bradley mentioning them being in a class together. And he called her a local, so I guess she grew up somewhere around here.”

“I remember him saying she was exotic,” Aunt Janet added. “I had asked him if she was pretty, and I distinctly remember him replying with that word. Exotic. I don’t know what he meant by it, though.”

“He was clearly quite taken with her,” Uncle Roger said. “But the longer he was with her, the less

he spoke of her, which seemed kind of odd.”

“Have you heard anything at all from him, Leesa?” Aunt Janet asked.

“Nothing,” Leesa said. “Not since an email saying he was going away.” *I don't know if I'll ever be coming back.* She didn't see any use in sharing that part with her aunt and uncle. There was nothing they could do about it anyway.

She stood up and paced in front of the fire, frustrated by how little they all knew about what had been going on with Bradley, but it hadn't seemed that important at the time. Not until he suddenly vanished, and by then it was too late. *Please don't try to find me... Forget about me.* Why would he say that? What did it all mean? She stared into the fire, but there were no answers in the crackling flames.

4. A PILE OF ASHES

It was a pleasure to burn. Rave smiled as he watched the tiny blue flames dance from his fingertips—the outward manifestation of the magical inner fire coursing through his body. The heat shone dimly through the bronze skin of his face, making his long, dark copper-colored hair seem to shimmer in the shadows of the woods. The reason for the flames crouched behind a gnarled oak some fifty yards away—a vampire, stealthily watching humans at play in a grassy park below.

This vampire was apparently young and foolish, having chosen a spot that hid it from the humans but left its back exposed. The vampire should have known better. The humans posed no threat—any danger would come from elsewhere.

Chancing upon so careless a vampire was unusual. Still, Rave remained cautious, for even a foolish vampire was a foe to be reckoned with. Vampires were strong, impossibly strong, stronger even than volkaanes. Only a fool would underestimate a vampire, careless or not, and Rave was no fool.

As the heat within him grew, he tasted a sharpness in his fire he hadn't felt in many years. Magical energies in the air and in the earth were combining—if they grew strong enough, they would produce a phenomenon called *Destiratu*. And *Destiratu* meant trouble. Somehow, in a way he didn't fully understand and none of his elders could fully explain, *Destiratu* roused the killing ire in volkaane and vampire alike. Hunger and bloodlust raged, becoming uncontrollable for many.

Rave had lived through only one such period, more than a hundred years ago now, but he remembered it clearly. He had feasted on four vampires that year, but he had lost several friends to the creatures as well. Humans suffered the most from the increased vampire bloodlust, but they remained blessedly unaware. Few knew or believed in the existence of vampires. Almost none knew of volkaanes. Such blissful ignorance might not be possible in this modern age, and that could be a problem for all three races.

Now was not the time for such thoughts, though. A tall blond girl had entered the park and was heading across the field. Moving quickly despite a noticeable limp, she was already more than halfway to the woods. The determined pace of her stride and the direction of her path made him certain she planned to take the hiking trail in front of her—a trail that would lead her much too close to the lurking vampire.

Leesa was enjoying her walk. After spending most of yesterday cooped up in a plane, it felt good to stretch her muscles and exercise her leg. The large county park was relatively empty. Off to her left, a group of young men kicked a ball in front of a white soccer goal, and another small gathering of people sat at rustic picnic tables near the edge of the field. Thin white smoke wafted up from one of the grills, and the succulent smell of slow-roasting meat made Leesa's mouth begin to water.

Beyond the open field, she spotted several trails leading up into the woods, just as her aunt had promised. She angled across the grass toward one of the paths and headed into the trees. The trail was wide enough for three people to walk abreast, and the dirt surface was packed hard, making walking easy. It sloped upward, but not steeply enough to affect her pace.

The woods were beautiful—much more lush than what she was used to in San Diego. Young saplings and leafy underbrush flanked the path, while just a bit farther from the trail tall oak and ash trees spread a green canopy that blocked out all but the tiniest pieces of gray sky. The air felt at least five

degrees cooler in the shade. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves, and unseen birds whistled busily from the higher branches. Leesa wished she knew what they were saying to one another.

She hadn't gone far when she was suddenly struck by the feeling she was not alone. Something briefly rustled the bushes off to her left, but she couldn't see anything through all the growth. Probably a squirrel or a rabbit, she thought. Whatever it was, it was likely more frightened of her than she was of it.

She had gone less than a dozen steps when the rustling sounded again. She whipped her head around and thought she saw a dark shadow flow swiftly through the trees, but it was gone before she could be sure. Her heartbeat quickened. Even the birds had fallen silent, as if they shared her fear. She tried to calm herself, but could not shake the feeling of being watched. Someone—or something—was out there.

Her mom's story came flooding back to her, making her heart race. She had to force herself to breathe. What was going on? This was so not like her, to be scared by a mere noise in the woods. It was broad daylight, for god sakes. She wondered if her fear came simply because she was in Connecticut, home to childhood tales of one-fanged vampires. Maybe New England *was* as spooky a place as she had imagined.

Rave crept from his hiding place, his gaze fixed upon the vampire. The creature flashed to a spot closer to the trail, making almost no sound. Rave followed, moving just as swiftly, and even more silently. From his new vantage point, he could no longer see the girl, but his keen ears heard her footsteps drawing closer. There was little time left. He was going to have to act more quickly than he would have liked. Haste could be dangerous, but he had no choice. With luck, the vampire's attention would be totally focused on the girl.

The vampire darted through the trees once more, perhaps overeager, for it made a bit more noise than before. The sound of the girl's footsteps stopped. Had she heard the vampire's approach? Or had she simply sensed that something was amiss? The woods had grown silent. He needed to act now.

Drawing a deep breath, Rave launched himself forward. The vampire barely had time to turn before Rave was upon it, locking his muscular limbs around its chill body and pressing his open mouth over its nose and lips. The raging heat of his magical fire sucked the life force from the creature, funneling it into Rave's lungs. The vampire writhed in agony as the scorching heat burned to the core of its body, robbing the beast of its immense strength before it could twist free of Rave's grasp. In less than a minute, it was over. Rave let the vampire's limp corpse drop to the ground.

Rave remained crouched over the body, hidden in the lowest, thickest layer of underbrush. Enhanced by his vanquished foe's energy, the blue flames danced more brightly now, forming a flickering blue halo around his fingers. He closed his fists to hide the glow.

Except for a slightly unnatural twist to its torso, the vampire looked unharmed, almost as though sleeping. But even now, the heat from Rave's fire continued to consume the beast from the inside out. He watched the vampire's pallid face slowly grow lighter, becoming almost translucent, until with a sudden, barely audible crackling sound, the creature shimmered and crumpled to a pile of gray and white ash.

Leesa heard a soft thud, like two bodies crashing together, followed by a very brief thrashing in the undergrowth. She wondered if two animals were fighting. If so, why did neither make a sound? She had heard a coyote take a cat once back in San Diego, and the screeching had been horrific. Whatever this was, it had come from the same direction she'd last heard the rustling. She listened closely, ready to turn

and run, but heard nothing else. Gradually, she felt her muscles relax and her breathing slow. The birds were singing again, and she chided herself for her fears. She was going to have to be a lot braver than this if she was going to find her brother.

Gathering her courage, she left the trail and moved warily into the bushes, gently pushing aside the leafy branches that grew more thick and tangled the farther she got from the path. Every few steps, she stopped to listen, but heard nothing amiss. Less than fifty feet from the trail, she found a place where the undergrowth was crushed and broken. An oblong pile of gray and white ash filled the center of the damaged area—someone had sure picked a strange spot to build a fire. Were these ashes somehow linked to the sounds that had frightened her? Edging closer, she knelt beside the pile and carefully stretched her hand toward it. Her fingers were within inches of the ashes when she gasped and yanked her hand back—the ashes were still warm! Her heartbeat spiked again as she shot to her feet and looked quickly around, listening intently and straining to see through the underbrush. She detected no sign of danger, but could not shake her fear. Something was going on here she didn't understand. Being brave was one thing, but being foolish was quite another. She gave a final quick glance at the ashes, then scrambled out of the trees and hurried back down the path. All thoughts of completing her hike were gone. Right now, she wanted only to get out of these woods.

5. RAIN, RAIN DON'T GO AWAY

The day broke gray and dull. The sun was only a rumor, hidden behind a thick, glowering blanket of low clouds.

“The weather certainly has turned,” Aunt Janet said, tugging her jacket closed as she and Leesa watched Uncle Roger load Leesa’s luggage into the back of his white Ford Expedition.

Leesa gazed up at the leaden sky. “I love it.”

The air even smelled different, she thought, sharper in some way, imbued with a faint chemical odor. “It’s been nothing but sun the last six months back home. I’ve been looking forward to some real New England weather.” She wondered if she was beginning to take after her mom, with this craving for clouds and foul weather. Maybe she had some of her mom’s “vampire” blood in her after all.

“Let’s see if you’re still singing that same tune come January or February,” Uncle Roger said with a laugh.

Leesa laughed with him. “You’re right, I’ll probably be begging for some sun by then.”

They climbed into the car, Uncle Roger and Aunt Janet up front, Leesa in back. Max was already on the backseat, waiting. As soon as Leesa settled in, he rested his muzzle on her thigh. Smiling, Leesa stroked the top of his head. She hadn’t mentioned yesterday’s incident in the woods to her aunt and uncle, and now, sitting here in the car with the two of them and Max, the whole thing seemed a bit foolish. She was glad she hadn’t said anything.

Her uncle backed out of the long driveway, and a moment later they were cruising east on Highway 66, toward Middletown and Weston College. A misty drizzle began to float down from the sodden sky, dotting the windows with tiny droplets. Nothing the locals would bother to call rain, she guessed, but she smiled nonetheless. It was still more rain than she had seen in months. With any luck, the sagging sky would send them even more.

Alas, the sky’s promise proved false, and within a few minutes the drizzle ended. At least the clouds remained threatening. Leesa lowered her window half way to smell the damp air. Max seemed to think it was a fine idea, because he leaned across her lap and stuck his nose out the opening.

“How are you feeling?” Aunt Janet asked. “Excited? Nervous?”

“A little of both,” Leesa admitted. “It feels like that yummy omelet you made for breakfast is doing flip-flops in my stomach.”

“Should have had pie,” Uncle Roger joked. “Pie is your friend, I always say.”

“You may be right, Uncle Roger,” Leesa said, thinking back to the scrumptious peach pie he had brought home last night.

“It’s normal to be a bit nervous,” Aunt Janet said. “But you’re going to do great. I know it.”

“I hope so, Aunt Janet.”

“You will. Look how well you did in high school. College is just like high school, except the kids are older.”

“Ugh! I hope it’s not like high school. Some of my classes last year were sooo boring. I’m looking forward to something a little more interesting.” Especially that one class, Leesa thought, but refrained from saying anything out loud.

As much as she enjoyed the atmosphere and scenery along Highway 66—called Washington Street here in Middletown—she was unprepared for her first sight of the Weston campus. She had seen

plenty of pictures on the college's website, but none of them came anywhere close to the real thing. Beautiful, imposing, inspiring and intimidating were some of the words that popped into her mind.

Behind a long, black wrought iron fence, a perfectly manicured hillside dotted with stout maples stretched like a green lake up to a brick building a few hundred feet away. A row of fluted white columns gave the building a stately, monumental look. Off to the left, a row of beautiful old houses lined a narrow road flanking the hillside. In the distance, Leesa could see a tall white church spire, its needle-like point etched sharply against the dark sky.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Aunt Janet asked.

"It's amazing," Leesa managed to reply. "Just amazing."

"Wait until the leaves turn. It's breathtaking."

Leesa tried to imagine the trees ablaze in fiery colors. She was certain the real thing would far exceed the pictures she had seen.

"I can't wait."

Uncle Roger swung the Expedition through a wide stone gateway onto the campus. He drove slowly along the shady lanes, past impressive old brick and stone buildings, some fronted with white columns, others faced with arched, Gothic-style windows. A few sat close to the road; others were farther away, behind lush green lawns and thick hedges. And everywhere, there were trees. And more trees.

Finally, Uncle Roger eased to a stop in front of a rectangular four-story building. Twisting vines of dark green ivy covered the weathered brick to the top of the first-floor windows. The words Ohmsford Hall were etched into a white triangular frieze above the front entrance. Leesa felt a small lump in her throat. Her dormitory. Her new home.

Uncle Roger switched off the engine and they all got out of the car.

As if to celebrate Leesa's arrival, the gray sky squeezed out another round of drizzle, slightly heavier than before. Uncle Roger seemed to take no notice of the mild rain, unhurriedly lifting Leesa's suitcases from the back and setting them down on the sidewalk. Max didn't seem to mind the drizzle, either as he scampered up and down the narrow strip of grass between the street and sidewalk. Leesa smiled and raised her face to the sky, letting the tiny droplets dampen her cheeks. When she opened her eyes, she found her aunt and uncle watching her.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly. "You have no idea how good this feels."

"Don't worry, dear," Aunt Janet said. "Take all the time you want."

"You two don't need to get wet just because I want to feel the rain," Leesa said.

Uncle Roger grinned and held out one of his wide palms. "Wet? I'd hardly call this wet." He glanced up at the darkening sky. "Might be fixin' to be wet soon, though. We should probably get your stuff inside."

Aunt Janet opened the back door of the Expedition. "In you go, boy," she said to Max. "I doubt you're allowed inside the dorm."

Max jumped up onto the seat. Leesa limped over to the open door and leaned inside. She rubbed her hand along Max's soft back and kissed the top of his head. "Bye, Max. I'll see you soon, I promise."

Uncle Roger grabbed the two biggest suitcases, lifting them easily in his thick hands and heading up the wide cement walkway. Aunt Janet took the medium-sized bag and followed her husband. Leesa limped along behind them, pulling her wheeled carry-on bag.

They stopped in front of one of the dorm's two elevators. Leesa pushed the up button, which glowed yellow.

“We didn’t have an elevator in my dorm back in college,” Uncle Roger said. “Fourth floor, I was. Three years trudging up and down those stairs a dozen times a day. Finally got smart my senior year and moved down to the second floor.” He patted his rotund midsection. “Kept me trim, though.”

“I’m on the fourth floor, too,” Leesa said. “Room 402.”

A loud ding heralded the elevator’s arrival. Uncle Roger went in first, dropping the two big suitcases to the floor with a thud. Leesa and Aunt Janet followed him in. Leesa pressed the “4” button and the doors slid shut.

Room 402 was across the hallway and a few steps down from the elevator. Convenient, Leesa thought as she retrieved her key from her pocket. Fingers trembling with excitement, she fumbled awkwardly for a few seconds before getting it into the lock. She grinned sheepishly at her aunt and uncle before twisting the key and pushing the door open.

The room was pretty much what she had expected. A bit on the smallish side—though no smaller than her bedroom back home—and furnished in a simple, practical way. Cut into the far wall, a very cool Gothic-style, arched window with square lead frames let the meager gray daylight filter into the room. Leesa flipped the light switch beside the door and a square glass fixture in the middle of the ceiling came on, brightening the room. Her nose detected the faint scent of bleach from a recent cleaning.

To her right, a twin bed rested against the pale brown wall—Band-Aid brown, she would hear it disparagingly called by another girl a few days later. Beyond the bed were two mirrored sliding closet doors. The opposite side of the room contained a four-drawer oak dresser and a pair of blue vinyl chairs flanking a small round table. Mounted in the center of the wall above the table was a flat screen television.

Leesa limped across the tan industrial carpet and deposited her bag and purse on the bed. Aunt Janet and Uncle Roger followed her inside and set Leesa’s suitcases down in the center of the floor.

“Small, yet somehow not cozy,” Uncle Roger said, smiling.

“Oh, shush,” Aunt Janet said. “It just needs a few personal touches, that’s all.”

“I know it’s kinda small,” Leesa said, “but I wanted my own room.” She didn’t tell them she had spent a fair amount of time debating whether to choose a single room or one of the more elaborately furnished suites. She didn’t make friends very easily and a suite would have allowed her to get to know another girl or two quickly, which would have been nice. She hoped the dining room and the communal bathroom down the hall would provide enough opportunity to meet the other girls, even for someone as shy as she was. In the end, she decided her plans might benefit from the privacy of a single room.

“Do you want any help unpacking?” Aunt Janet asked.

“No, thanks, Aunt Janet, I’ll be fine. There’s no orientation stuff until later this afternoon, so I’ve got plenty of time to get settled.”

“Okay,” Aunt Janet said. “Give us a call if you need anything.”

Uncle Roger pulled a hundred-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to Leesa. “For any incidentals you might need.”

Leesa hugged her aunt and uncle and walked them to the elevator, where she hugged Aunt Janet one more time. Once the doors closed, she headed back into her room. She pulled the door shut behind her and let out a big sigh. She couldn’t believe she was finally here.

6. RULE SEVENTEEN

“Once when I was six years old, I saw a magnificent picture in a book about the jungle,” the Dean of Students told his audience, “and that started a life-long love of books and learning for me. I hope all of you will find the same joy in learning during your stay here at Weston College.”

As Dean Holloway droned on, Leesa wriggled uncomfortably on her folding metal chair, trying to find a position that didn't hurt her butt. The dean was a short, white-haired man she guessed to be around sixty. He had been speaking to the more than six hundred students in this year's freshman class for twenty minutes now, and Leesa could detect no sign he was anywhere near finished. She wouldn't have minded if any of what he was saying would be useful, but it was all clichés and platitudes about learning, college life, independence and other such rot. She hoped some of the following speakers would have more practical information to share.

She stole a quick glance at the dorky guy with wild red hair sitting next to her. His eyes were riveted on Dean Holloway, as if he expected the old guy at any moment would share the secrets of the universe, or everlasting life, or at least how a geeky guy like him could manage to get laid. Not that she should talk, being a virgin herself, but she was pretty sure she could find someone to do her if she wanted. Her “condition” would have surprised many of the kids back in high school, since she had dated Will from the basketball team for the better part of senior year, but he'd never gotten past second base with her—or should it be half court in his case? And he had only gotten that far once. She had often wondered why Will had hung in there so long with so little to show for it.

A smattering of applause drew her attention back to the stage. Dean Holloway had finished his speech and was stepping away from the podium. Leesa joined in some polite applause as a pretty Asian girl a few years older than Leesa replaced the dean behind the podium. She was dressed in jeans and a white Weston sweatshirt, which Leesa took to be a good sign after the stuffy dean. The girl flipped her long black hair behind her shoulder and bent the microphone down closer to her mouth.

“Hi, everyone,” she began in a cheerful voice, “I'm Jing-Mei, a senior here at Weston. I hope you all enjoyed Dean Holloway's motivating words. I'm here to give you some tips you may find a bit more useful.”

For the next fifteen minutes, Leesa scribbled several pages of notes as Jing-Mei provided tips on how to make the best use of the library, the dining halls and the Student Center. She told them about the cultural and athletic resources available on campus and in Middletown, and how to stay safe in both places. Her lively sense of humor kept it all interesting.

“And finally, probably the most important advice I can give you is this,” Jing-Mei said, her voice serious now. “Most of you don't know anyone on campus yet, or at best have a high school acquaintance or two here. So make friends as quickly as you can. Don't be shy. Approach people in your dorm and in your classes. Try to make a *best* friend. Someone you can do things with, laugh with, even cry to if needed, whether it's about a class you're struggling with or about a boyfriend.” She paused for a moment, smiling again. “I guess that last one goes mostly to my fellow coeds. But guys, maybe you'll need a buddy to brag to about the latest chick you scored, or whatever it is you guys talk about when we girls aren't around.”

The room erupted in laughter. Leesa found herself laughing as well, but with a touch of sadness inside her. She'd never had a best friend—how could she, with a mom like hers at home? But Mom was

three thousand miles away now, so maybe things could be different here—there was no reason she couldn't bring a friend back to her room. She smiled. Now if she could just figure out how to go about making a best friend. "Don't be shy" was easier said than done.

There was one more speaker, a guy this time, the senior class president. Though not as entertaining as Jing-Mei, Leesa found a few of his tips useful, so she jotted them down. He finished by inviting them all to an informal reception in the adjacent room.

Leesa stood near the edge of the huge meeting room, the fingers of her right hand twirling in her hair, hoping she didn't look as uncomfortable as she felt. Throngs of students milled about, chattering and laughing as they got to know one another. Jing-Mei's voice echoed in Leesa's head—*Don't be shy, make friends*. She knew she should join one of the groups, but she had no idea how to insinuate herself into an already formed cluster.

"Wow, you're really cute," a female voice beside her said.

Leesa turned to see a short, slender girl smiling up at her. "Huh?" was all she could manage in reply.

"I said you're really cute."

Leesa forced her fingers from her hair as she studied the girl. Her straight black hair, highlighted with burgundy streaks, was clipped an inch or two above her shoulders. Dark red lipstick accentuated her bright smile, and her left cheek was pierced above her upper lip with a tiny ruby-colored jewel stud. A small port-wine stain shaped eerily like California marred the otherwise smooth skin of her right cheek. The color of the strange birthmark almost exactly matched the streaks in her hair.

Stop staring, Leesa admonished herself, pulling her eyes from the blemish and taking in the girl's outfit instead. It was quite an outfit, for sure—a light brown short jacket worn over black cotton shorts, with tight white leggings cut off a few inches below her knees protruding from beneath the shorts. A pair of black leather boots almost reached the bottom of the leggings. It was an outfit Leesa knew she could never even begin to piece together—it was too out there for her taste, anyway—but it worked for this girl.

"Thanks," Leesa said, unsure how to react. "So are you," she added after a few seconds, her discomfort obvious.

"Don't worry, I'm not into girls, if that's what you're thinking," the girl said, laughing. "I like guys *way* too much."

"No, I wasn't thinking that, really."

"Rule seventeen: always make friends with a really cute girl. There's bound to be more guys around than she can handle, so maybe I can scoop up some of the leftovers."

"Oh, I see," Leesa said, though she was unsure exactly what "rule seventeen" meant. Maybe it was just another one of those things most girls knew that she was clueless about. "I'm probably not a very good choice for that."

The girl cocked a dark eyebrow. "Cute *and* unassuming. Perfect." She held out her hand. "I'm Kelly, but everyone calls me Cali, cuz of the birthmark. Don't worry, I'm not self-conscious about it. I figure it makes me stand out." She grinned and made a quick pirouette, displaying her outfit. "You can probably tell I don't mind standing out."

Make friends, Leesa heard again in her head. Cali certainly seemed cool enough and was definitely outgoing—maybe some of it would rub off on her. God knows she could use some of both. She shook Cali's hand. "I'm Leesa. Nice to meet you."

Cali took in Leesa's gray zippered hoodie with SAN DIEGO written in blue cursive letters across the front. "You from San Diego?"

"Yeah, I am. Since I was seven, anyhow."

"Why the hell'd you leave San Diego for this place?"

Leesa wasn't ready to talk about Bradley yet, and definitely not about one-fanged vampires. She shrugged. "Just wanted a change, I guess."

"If I lived in California, I'd never leave." Cali tapped her birthmark with her fingertip. "Bet I'd fit in great with this thing."

"Where're you from?" Leesa asked.

"East Hampton. Right across the river."

"There must be other kids from your school here, then."

"A few, yeah."

Avril Lavigne's powerful voice suddenly erupted from Cali's small purple and brown embroidered handbag, singing about a skater boy. Leesa thought of the boring default ringtone on her cell. Personalizing ringtones was something she had never gotten around to doing.

"My high school boyfriend," Cali said, leaving the phone in her bag. "I'll talk to him later. He hasn't gotten it into his head yet that I'm a college girl now."

Leesa wasn't surprised Cali's old boyfriend was probably a skater guy. "How come you're not hanging with the kids from your school?"

Cali grinned. "Pul-eeze! They are so not cool enough."

Leesa's heart sank. If Cali was looking for cool, she was talking to the wrong girl.

"They're not cute enough, either," Cali added. She studied Leesa's face for a moment. "You're not even wearing makeup, are you?"

Leesa's hand moved reflexively to her cheek. Makeup was another of the many things her mom never taught her, so she seldom used it. "No, I'm not."

"Wow," Cali said, shaking her head but keeping whatever other thoughts she had about the matter to herself. "I'm thirsty. Wanna grab a soda?"

"Sure," Leesa said, relieved to change the subject. She limped a few steps alongside Cali, who stopped when she noticed Leesa's limp.

"What's wrong with your leg?"

Leesa looked down at her foot. "I'm missing a small piece of bone," she explained. "It's no big deal. I was born like that."

Cali looked at Leesa's leg more closely. "Does it hurt?"

"Nope, not at all. And I can walk as fast as the next person," Leesa added defensively. "I do a couple of miles almost every day."

"Cool." Cali tapped her port-wine stain again. "Makes us a good pair. We each got our own little thing. Besides, nothing draws guys faster than a pretty girl who looks like she needs help."

"Ha! Sorry to disappoint you, Cali, but it sure didn't seem like that in high school."

"Bah, I bet you just didn't notice." Cali took in Leesa's sweatshirt, black T-shirt and plain jeans. "We sex up your outfits a bit, you'll see. The guys'll be flocking around you."

"I'm not really looking for all that much attention."

"Maybe not," Cali said with a grin, "but I am." She grabbed Leesa by the arm. "C'mon, I'm still thirsty."

They each got a diet soda, then spent the next hour chatting. By the time the reception ended, Leesa felt like she had known Cali forever. Even better, Cali also lived in Ohmsford, on the third floor, so they walked home together and spent another hour talking in Cali's room until Leesa decided to call it a night. She headed up to her room, very pleased to have already made a new friend.

7. VAMPIRE

A screaming comes across the sky, and Stefan de Kula tasted it with every inch of his slender body. *Destiratu!* he thought, throwing his head back and spreading his arms to fully drink in the magical energies. Only the merest hint so far—faint ripples on his skin, a tiny burning in his blood—yet a delicious hunger nonetheless, one that would grow stronger and more delicious should the *Destiratu* continue to form. No vampire could resist it, not even those who had lost their desire to hunt for human blood. Too many of his fellows were content to remain in the shadows, unwilling to draw attention by taking humans, subsisting instead on the blood of deer and lesser animals. But Stefan was young, less than four centuries from the glorious day Lord Ricard had ushered him into the ranks of the undead, and he had never lost his thirst for human blood. Only the commands of his elders held him in check, allowing him to take just enough human prey to barely satisfy his lust.

Destiratu would be felt by others, he knew. By the hated volkaanes, who would be roused and dangerous as at no other time. He had lost more than a few comrades to the vampire hunters. Yes, it would be a time for lust, but also a time for caution. And perhaps a time of pleasures scarcely imagined. His pointed fangs extruded from his upper jaw in anticipation. He had bested volkaanes before, and their burning blood was like nothing else he had ever tasted.

Shoving the memories aside, he returned to his hunt, weaving silently through the trees until he reached a thick stand of mountain laurel a short distance above a popular hiking trail. Nearly invisible in the dark shadows of the bushes, he crouched and waited, listening carefully and sniffing the air for the scent of prey.

The afternoon wore on, but he was in no hurry. What did hours matter to one who counted his existence in centuries? Despite his hunger, he let several groups of hikers pass unmolested, confident the day would eventually bring him what he needed. Finally, his keen ears heard the sound he had been waiting for—a single set of footsteps approaching up the trail. By the weight of the tread, he knew it was a woman.

Moving with vampire quickness, he flashed down onto the path before she came into view. The woman did a mild double take when she spotted him. His black shirt, black jeans and black boots were hardly typical hiking apparel—and his pale complexion was definitely not the outdoor type—but his appearance was not so unusual to cause any real alarm, especially in a world where so few believed in vampires.

The human was tall and healthy looking, almost certainly a student at the nearby college. She might have made a fine vampire, but the coven had been full for many years, so turning her was not an option. As he came abreast of her, he pretended to stumble. She responded as he guessed she would, reflexively grabbing his arm. Straightening up, he smiled gratefully and locked his eyes onto hers. Her eyes widened at the depth of his gaze. Her eyelids began to twitch, as if she were struggling to pull her eyes away from his piercing stare. But she could not, and a glazed, unfocused look slowly spread across her countenance. A vacant smile formed upon her lips, and she offered no resistance as he took her by the arm and led her into the trees.

8. VAMPIRE CLASS

“‘I see,’ said the vampire thoughtfully, and slowly he walked across the room towards the window.” The old professor scanned the crowded lecture hall from behind a dark brown wooden lectern. “How many of you can tell me what book starts like that? Raise your hands.”

Perched on a comfortable cushioned seat in the top row of the amphitheater-style classroom, Leesa recognized the quote. She looked down on a sea of raised hands, amazed at how many seats were filled. Close to a hundred kids, she guessed, twice as many as in her other classes. Except for her row, which was only about half full, there were few empty seats. To her left, a group of seven or eight guys and girls clad in black were clumped together in the back two rows. Two wore white makeup on their faces, and the rest were exceedingly pale. You didn’t see many full-fledged goths nowadays, but she wasn’t surprised they were drawn to this class.

This was the class she had so looked forward to, the one she dared not mention to her mom and chose to keep quiet about with her aunt and uncle as well. Vampire Science. The name seemed an oxymoron, and Weston was one of only two colleges in the country offering such a course. With the amazing popularity of vampire books, television shows and movies, a growing number of schools were catering to the demand by offering classes on vampire lit, but vampire science was something else indeed. Leesa found the books and shows to be filled with contradictions and inconsistencies. If vampires truly existed—and while she tried to keep an open mind on the subject, she was not ready to believe they did—she wanted to learn what might be true and what wasn’t. And Bradley had told her how much he enjoyed this class, before he disappeared. She wondered if something he’d learned here had anything to do with his departure.

“Take notice of all the hands,” the professor continued. His deep voice carried easily through the hall. “More than half of you. Ten years ago, the number would have been much smaller, even though *Interview with the Vampire* has been around for almost thirty years now. And I bet some of you with your hands down have read the book, but didn’t recall the opening line.”

He stepped out from behind the lectern. His thin frame was slightly stooped with age, but he moved with surprising ease, given his frail appearance. Long white hair hung limply from his head onto his shoulders, the color a sharp contrast to his rumpled black suit. His black Converse sneakers did not go with the suit, but Leesa could tell he was the kind of man who didn’t care.

“As I’m sure you’ve all guessed by now, I’m Dr. Clerval,” the professor said. “And this handsome young fellow”—he indicated a young man in his mid-twenties wearing a brown sweater and dark tie sitting on a folding chair near the corner of the stage—“is Mr. Randolph, my teaching assistant. I prefer to call him Renfield.”

The remark brought a smattering of laughter from the class.

Dr. Clerval smiled. “A poor joke, I know, but one that amuses me.” He shuffled forward to the front of the dais. “Let’s have some fun before we get more serious. Another show of hands. How many of you fine young students have read the original *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker?”

Leesa looked down on perhaps half as many hands this time.

“Fewer hands, that’s obvious,” the professor said. “What else do you notice?”

He waited while the students glanced about the room, trying to decipher what he was looking for.

Leesa noticed hers was one of the few female hands raised, even though the class was more than half girls. But she remained quiet.

“No one?” prodded the professor. “Okay, hands down. Let’s try this. How many of you have read *Twilight*?”

Many more hands shot up this time. Chuckles began to break out around the lecture hall, spreading quickly into louder laughter. Leesa laughed quietly to herself. Most of the hands were female.

Professor Clerval waited for the laughter to subside. “I see you got it that time,” he said. “Mostly women. For those who didn’t notice, with *Dracula* it was almost all men. What does this tell us?”

“Guys dig blood and guts,” a male voice answered. “Chicks go for the sappy romance.” The room erupted with more laughter.

“I may not have phrased it quite that way,” Professor Clerval said when the room quieted, “what with the PC police lurking like vampires behind seemingly every corner.”

Leesa joined in yet another round of laughter. Professor Clerval was wonderful. She was going to like this class even more than she thought. Way more than physics and math, which, judging from the first classes, promised to be deadly dull. The jury was still out on English lit, but psychology seemed like it might be pretty cool.

“Political correctness aside,” the professor continued, “our young man has a point. Vampires have something for everyone. Renfield, if you please.”

Randolph tapped his fingers on a gray keyboard resting on his lap. The lights began to dim and a large white screen descended with a low whirr behind the professor.

“Something for everyone, I was saying,” Professor Clerval said. “From Count Dracula”—he waved his hand toward the screen and the gruesome visage of the black-caped Bela Lugosi appeared—“to Lestat.” Tom Cruise’s aristocratically handsome face replaced Lugosi’s. “To Edward.” The young teen heartthrob Robert Pattinson now smiled out at them.

“We have blood and guts, as our young man so nicely phrased it.” A series of pictures flashed by—a man’s neck being torn by vampire fangs, a wooden stake thrust into the heart of a vampire, another reduced to ashes by sunlight streaming in through a window. At least ten violent images, some quite graphic in their depictions of blood and death, glowed hauntingly from the screen. Leesa cringed a little in her seat, but was mesmerized nonetheless by the parade of images. She recognized about half of them.

The screen went dark for a few seconds.

“And we have romance,” the professor continued, his voice softer now, almost feminine in tone. Brad Pitt and Kirsten Dunst as Louis and Claudia appeared, their loving faces in total contrast to the previous images of violence. Next came Bella and Edward, locked together in a passionate embrace. “And yes, we have sex, too.” The face of a woman Leesa didn’t recognize replaced Bella and Edward, her expression one of utter rapture as a vampire bit her pale throat. Her image was followed by a picture of the three nearly naked Brides of Dracula hovering in diaphanous gowns above a sleeping Keanu Reeves.

“We have heroes”—Louis, then Edward appeared again, in different shots than before—“and even lovely heroines.” Several pictures of Kate Beckinsale as the beautiful Selene from the *Underworld* movies filled the screen, followed by the sexy red-haired image of the video game character Rayne.

Finally, the screen went blank and the lights brightened. Professor Clerval moved back behind his lectern. “Dozens of books and movies, a couple of television series, even video games,” he said. “So many choices. Something for everyone. Far too many choices, I fear. With every author and director taking the parts they like, dropping what they don’t, and adding what they need, how are we to know what

is true?" He leaned forward, his hands gripping the sides of the lectern. "Do vampires burst into flames when touched by daylight, or do they merely glitter under the sun? Do they sleep in coffins, or in beds like you and me? Do they fear crosses, cringe at garlic, and burn at the touch of holy water? Do we slay them with a wooden stake, by beheading, or by burning?"

A low murmur of quick, whispered conversations rumbled through the room.

"You sound like you believe vampires actually exist," a guy in the second row said skeptically.

Professor Clerval smiled. "I would never say that," he said, his tone implying he would like to do just that. "The administration would have me out of here so fast my head would spin. Only the exploding popularity of vampires in the last couple of years has convinced them to let me offer a class in vampire science—and you should have seen what I had to go through to get that name accepted. Before this class, only the vampire lit course was offered."

He walked to the edge of the stage. When he continued, his voice was lower, conspiratorial. "Just for the sake of this class, let's assume vampires really do exist." He winked. "It will make things so much more fun, don't you think?"

Leesa was enthralled. The professor made her feel that maybe vampires *were* real. And she could tell she wasn't the only one in the class to feel that way. She remembered a few times when her mom had been so convincing Leesa almost believed her story. She wanted to ask Professor Clerval about one-fanged vampires, but she was nowhere near ready for that yet.

"Dr. Clerval," a male voice called out, "I have a question."

Leesa was surprised to see the questioner was the red-haired geek from orientation. She hadn't expected to find him in a class like this, but wasn't surprised he had planted himself in the front row, near the teacher. She bet he sat in the front of all his classes. And he was either wearing the same outfit as at orientation, or all his clothes looked alike. Probably both, she thought, grinning.

"Certainly, young man," the professor replied. "Your name, and then your question."

Leesa admired the kid's guts. She could never in a million years see herself asking a question in a group this big. She was too afraid she would sound stupid or something, but she guessed the guy was some kind of brainiac and harbored no such fears. Class would be his element, like Cali at a party. Leesa wondered what her own element was.

"My name is Stanley," he said, with no hint of anxiety in his voice. "Let's assume vampires are real, like you said. They're supposed to be immortal, right?"

"Yes," Professor Clerval replied. "All accounts seem to agree on that. Stoker used the term 'undead.' Basically, vampires are already dead, so they cannot die. Technically, that means they can't be killed—they must be destroyed."

"So, if they live forever, and every time they bite someone that person becomes a vampire, shouldn't there be an awful lot of vampires running around by now?"

"You make a good point, young man. Mathematically, you'd be correct—though not all victims bitten by a vampire actually become a vampire. It turns out that's not the case, though, which is something we'll discuss in a future class." Dr. Clerval moved toward the side of the stage. "We're about out of time this evening, but I think we laid a good foundation today for further discussion. Renfield, would you pass out the reading lists, please."

Randolph began trudging up the steps, handing a sheaf of reading lists to the person at the end of each row. As Leesa watched him climb nearer, her eyes were drawn to a guy sitting at the end of her row. Trying not to be too obvious, she leaned forward to get a clearer look past a couple of guys sitting

between them.

She sucked in a sharp breath—the guy was absolutely gorgeous! He definitely was not there at the beginning of class, or she would have noticed him for sure. His thick, wavy hair had a copper hue to it—sort of like an old penny, she thought—and his smooth skin seemed to have a similar, though lighter, tint. He had impossibly high cheekbones, a strong straight nose and a firm chin. His profile reminded her of pictures of classic sculptures she had seen in art history books in high school. It may have been a trick of the lighting, but his face seemed almost to glow, as if some inner light were trying to shine through. It was a face to make any girl drool, for sure, and Leesa almost rubbed her lower lip to make certain she wasn't doing just that.

As if sensing her eyes on him, the guy turned to look at her. She thought she saw the barest flicker of surprise crease his handsome features, but it was gone before she could be sure. He smiled, his eyes holding hers for the briefest of moments, then turned his head and rose from his seat. Moving with an athlete's grace and without seeming to hurry, he disappeared swiftly out the back of the room.

Leesa sat paralyzed, her heart hammering. A strange warmth radiated through her body. She had never felt anything like this and had no idea what to make of it. Guys just did *not* make her feel this way. She only knew she wanted to see more of him, if only to assure herself he wasn't some vision conjured up by her imagination and the talk of vampires. But why had he left so abruptly?

She limped hurriedly out to the aisle, excusing herself as she squeezed past the two guys, and rushed to the door for one last look at him. Outside, she swung her head from side to side, but saw no sign of him on the broad grass courtyard. It had only been moments—how had he managed to vanish so quickly? He had to be out here somewhere, but he wasn't. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again, but the courtyard was still empty. Shaking her head, she wondered if he had ever really been there at all.

She hated that this class met only once a week. She had already been looking forward to the next one, but now she could hardly wait.

9. GIRL COUNCIL

Serene was a word you could use to describe the Weston campus that warm evening, but definitely not to describe Leesa. Confused, curious, excited, perplexed, agitated, aroused—any of those would have done nicely. But not serene. “Serene” would have strolled through the lobby and waited for the elevator. Instead, Leesa swept across the lobby straight to the stairwell, yanking the door open and racing up the stairs as quickly as her leg allowed. She needed to talk to somebody, right now. She sure hoped Cali was home.

She burst through the second-floor doorway and hurried down the hallway to Cali’s room. The door was open, and she heard Kesha belting out the bawdy lyrics to “Tik Tok” from inside. Thank god Cali was here. Leesa swung into the room.

“Cali, you won’t believe...” she stopped in mid-sentence, seeing two other girls she didn’t know in the room with Cali. “Oh, sorry,” she said, her fingers darting toward her hair.

Cali was sitting on her bed, legs stretched out in front of her, her back against the wall, an open can of Red Bull in her hand. She wore a pink hoodie unzipped over a black T-shirt and teal leggings. Small black and white squares ran diagonally down one sleeve of her sweatshirt, and something gold sparkled across her breasts. Her nails were painted to match her leggings. She smiled brightly at Leesa’s hurried arrival.

“Hey, Leesa, pull up a seat.” Cali patted the mattress beside her. “And get your hand out of your hair—you’re with friends.”

Leesa dropped her hand self-consciously to her side, then limped across the room and plopped down on the edge of Cali’s bed. She smelled pizza. The spicy aroma reminded her she hadn’t eaten dinner.

“This is Caitlin and Stacie,” Cali said. “From down the hall. We were just hangin’ out. Ate some pizza. Sorry, but there’s none left.”

Leesa masked her disappointment as she exchanged hellos with the two new girls. Stacie was a pretty, petite, half-Japanese girl with long silky black hair almost to her waist. A royal blue cami paired with white capri pants showed off her olive-toned skin. She sat in the lotus position on the rug in the center of the floor, looking completely comfortable. Leesa wished her legs would bend like that.

Caitlin was a tall, thick girl with shoulder-length hair, blond on top and dark brown underneath. Dressed in jeans and a tight black T-shirt stretched across her full breasts, she sat sprawled on one of Cali’s chairs, a contented smile on her face. Big pink letters on the shirt proclaimed I’VE BEEN NAUGHTY. Definitely not the shy type, Leesa decided.

“What’s wrong with your foot?” Caitlin asked.

Cali jumped in before Leesa could answer. “She got stepped on by an elephant when she lived with the circus,” she said straight-faced. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

Leesa shoved Cali playfully on the shoulder. Her friend seemed to have forgotten she had asked the same question the first day they met. “I’m missing a piece of bone in my leg,” she explained. “It’s no big deal.”

“You gotta excuse Caitlin,” Cali said. “She’s from Jersey. She doesn’t know any better.”

“I was born in New Jersey,” Leesa said.

“Really? Where?” Caitlin asked.

“Springfield.”

“Holy crap!” Caitlin exclaimed. “I’m from Maplewood. We’re practically neighbors.”

“We moved when I was seven,” Leesa said. “I don’t remember much about it.”

“Lucky you,” Cali said, grinning. “Leesa lives in San Diego now,” she told Caitlin and Stacie.

“Wow, what brought you all the way back here?” Stacie asked.

Leesa shrugged. “I wanted to get away from home. Try something different.”

“You came rushing in here like you’d just won backstage passes to a Coldplay concert or something,” Cali said. “What gives?”

Leesa glanced toward Caitlin and Stacie. This was so not the way to make a first impression. “Oh, nothing really. It can wait.”

“C’mon, Leesa,” Cali prodded. “Caitlin and Stacie are cool. Give it up.”

Still, Leesa hesitated. Her mouth began to feel very dry. She was so not good at this social stuff. And even worse when it came to talking about guys. But she was in college now, she reminded herself, and finally on her own. Having made a friend like Cali was a great start. She decided to go for it.

“It’s about this guy,” she began.

“Sweet!” Cali said. She grinned and pulled her legs up under her on the bed. “Now you’re talkin’. Time for Girl Council.”

“Yeah, let’s hear it,” Caitlin said.

Leesa took a deep breath and plunged on, hoping she wasn’t going to sound foolish. “He was in my class today. I didn’t even notice him till right near the end. He was sooo good-looking. Different from any guy I’ve ever seen.” Her cheeks began to grow warm, but she forced herself to continue. “When he looked at me, I felt...I don’t know...I can’t even describe it.” She could feel her heart beginning to pound again. What was going on? How could merely talking about this guy make her feel like this?

“You’re turning red as a lobster,” Caitlin laughed. “You got it bad, girl.”

“Got the hots all right, big-time,” Cali agreed.

Leesa wanted to crawl under the blankets and hide. She felt her hand moving toward her hair, but forced it down. Instead, she pulled her knees up against her chest and wrapped her arms around her shins. She had never felt so embarrassed. Or so confused. Guys just didn’t do this to her. She’d seen cute guys before—San Diego was loaded with ’em. But no one like this guy, not even close. He was different in a way she couldn’t even begin to explain. Or even understand. She hoped some of the way she was feeling right now was from talking about it in front of two girls she barely knew, instead of from just thinking about the guy. Yeah, that would be better.

“Earth to Leesa,” Cali said, waving her hand in front of Leesa’s face. “Come back to us, girl.”

“I’m sorry,” Leesa said, shaking her head. “It’s just... I’ve never felt like this.”

“Rule twenty-three...” Cali began with exaggerated seriousness.

Uh-oh, here we go again, Leesa thought. Cali had confided to her that she made up most of her rules on the spot, and that even the genuine ones—like making friends with a really cute girl—didn’t have actual numbers. Leesa wondered what Cali was going to come up with now.

“When you start feeling all funny inside,” Cali continued, “it’s time to get laid.”

Caitlin burst out laughing. “I *like* that rule!”

Stacie giggled. Leesa felt herself blushing again.

Cali looked at her. “How long’s it been, Lees?”

Now Leesa *really* wanted somewhere to hide. She was sooo not comfortable talking about this. If

her face had been red before, she dreaded how it must look now. All three girls were staring at her expectantly. She had to say something. They were going to find out sooner or later, and knowing Cali, sooner was way more likely.

“Ummmm,” she said finally, her eyes fixed on her feet. “About eighteen years?”

For an instant, her words were met with silence, as the girls deciphered her reply.

“Wow,” Caitlin said. “A virgin.”

“For real?” Cali asked.

Leesa nodded. Cali put her hand on Leesa’s shoulder. “That’s cool. Means even more leftovers for me. Rule twenty-five: guys don’t stay with girls who don’t put out.” She laughed. “I guess rule twenty-three’s no use, though.”

“I’m one, too,” Stacie said.

Everyone turned toward Stacie. Leesa was so happy to have the spotlight off her, and even happier not to be the only one. Thank you, Stacie!

“I came close on prom night,” Stacie admitted. “But my boyfriend was drunk and clueless. I’m glad we didn’t do it.”

“I’ve never even been close,” Leesa said. “Guess I’m pretty clueless myself.”

“Well, if you don’t know what you’re missing, how can you miss it?” Caitlin joked. They all laughed.

“So, back to this guy who’s got you so hot and bothered,” Cali said. “What’s he like?”

“He’s hard to describe,” Leesa said, though she could see his face in her mind as clearly as if he were sitting right there with them. “He’s dark. Really tan, I guess, but not like any tan I ever saw in California. Almost bronze.”

She thought she saw Cali stiffen, but kept on. “Dark copper hair, almost to his shoulders. Really cute.”

“Uh-oh,” Cali said, her face serious now.

Leesa looked at her friend in alarm. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you know him, Cali?” Caitlin asked.

“Not specifically,” Cali replied, “but I think I know a bit *about* him.”

A puzzled expression replaced the alarm on Leesa’s face. “What do you mean?”

“He sounds like he could be part of this strange clan that live near my town,” Cali said. “The Mastons. They have their own settlement, keep to themselves, mostly. Sort of old-fashioned, like the Amish. They don’t drive or use electricity or phones. Can you imagine? Not having a cell? Yikes!” She grinned. “A few of the kids show up at school now and then, but they never stay around long. They all have that strange coloring you described. Nobody knows much about ’em, but there’s all kinds of crazy stories. Some people say they’re Indian, but there’s no official tribe anyone’s ever heard of.”

“You called them Mastons,” Caitlin said. “What’s that mean?”

Cali shook her head. “Dunno. It’s like the name of the tribe, or everyone’s last name or something. Like a clan or a cult, maybe.”

An uncomfortable feeling began to gnaw at Leesa’s stomach. “What kind of stories?”

“Oh, some are totally ridiculous, like human sacrifices and stuff. I remember one time after school, this jerk loser dropout, Nick Nedland, decided it would be fun to bust a water balloon on one of the Mastons. The guy looked so angry, I thought he was going to deck Nick on the spot. I swear you could see steam comin’ off him, he was so hot. A few days later, Nick disappeared. The story started

going around that the Maston kid had killed him, but I think Nick probably just ran away somewhere. He was such a loser—tried to kiss me once and got all pissed off when I wouldn't let him." Cali scrunched her face at the memory. "Speaking of kissing...all the parentals say if you kiss a Maston, you'll die some horrible death. Said they'd gotten the story from their parentals, who got it from theirs. I was tempted to try that one out," she added mischievously, "but I never could get close enough to one. Not cute enough, I guess." She looked Leesa up and down and winked. "I bet *you* could get close enough."

"Well, I couldn't today," Leesa replied, shaking her head. "And believe me, I tried. To get close I mean, not to kiss him," she added hastily.

The girls all laughed.

Stacie had a look on her face like a light bulb had just turned on in her head.

"Wait a minute," she said. "Are these the people connected with the Moodus Noises? We learned about the Noises in school."

"Moodus?" Caitlin said, making a face. "Is that even a word?"

"If you'd grown up in Connecticut, you'd have heard about them in history class," Cali said. "They're not far from East Hampton, so we got all kinds of stuff about 'em."

"What are the noises?" Leesa asked.

"Rumblings and tremors underground," Cali explained. "Stories about the noises go all the way back to Indian times. They're called the Moodus Noises cuz they occur by the Moodus River...right near where the Mastons live," she added in a low, spooky tone. "They've studied the crap out of the place, but no good explanation has ever been found why there're so many tremors there. The Indians thought it was a god expressing his anger. We more enlightened folk blame it on those Maston people. The Noises are real, though. All the other stuff—strange blue fires that flare up and vanish, horrible screams in the night—those are just stories. Google it. There's all kinds of stuff on the Noises."

Oh great, Leesa thought. The one guy she's drawn to doesn't drive a car or have a phone and comes complete with earth tremors, blue flames and a deadly kiss. Oh, well, what should the daughter of a mom bitten by a one-fanged vampire have expected, anyway? Some guy off *The Hills*? She still hoped she'd see him in class next week. Might have to hold off on that first kiss though....

10. FRAT PARTY

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Leesa couldn't believe how fast the first month of school flew by. She was thrilled to finally have a best friend, and she and Cali hung out as often as they could. They did lots of stuff with Stacie and Caitlin as well. Caitlin had a Wii in her room, and quiet Stacie had turned out to be quite the star at *Guitar Hero*. Leesa didn't play the game much, but she enjoyed listening to the music and watching her friends pound their toy guitars like amped-up rock stars. She was doing well in all of her classes, even enjoying a couple of them, especially Professor Clerval's. The leaves around campus were beginning to turn, and she knew it wouldn't be long until they began to explode with color.

She was getting to know the surrounding area, usually with Cali, who knew lots of fun places to go. Leesa, Cali and Stacie had gone hiking at nearby Sleeping Giant State Park—Jersey girl Caitlin had remained behind because she “didn't do woods.” Sleeping Giant was the place Leesa's mom had suffered her “incident” so many years before, but Leesa hadn't shared that story with the other girls. She thought the mountain park was quite beautiful, with miles of wooded trails and numerous rock outcroppings providing scenic vistas of the Quinnipiac College campus below. She found nothing foreboding or sinister about the place—maybe the one-fanged vampires hung out on different trails than the ones she and her friends had hiked.

The downside to her first month was two-fold. So far, she had been unable to learn anything about Bradley's disappearance. She had visited his freshman dorm, but three years had produced a complete turnover in the residents. Bradley had lived off campus the next year, but the few people in the old apartment building who remembered him had no idea where he'd gone. She had painstakingly searched through four years of Weston yearbooks for information about his girlfriend, but not knowing her last name, she'd been forced to wade through thousands of names looking for any Edwinas. It wasn't a very common name, and she found only four. None of the pictures looked at all “exotic.” Still, she visited or talked to all of them, without any luck. It seemed Uncle Roger was wrong; Edwina had not been a student at Weston. Maybe she'd only been sitting in on a class with Bradley, or perhaps Edwina wasn't her real first name. Maybe Uncle Roger had simply misremembered what Bradley said.

The second negative concerned the Maston guy. He hadn't shown up in vampire class since that first night, but Leesa couldn't get him out of her mind. Twice, she thought she had sensed his presence, once back in the stacks of the library and once walking home to her dorm in the evening, but when she looked around, there was no sign of him. Perhaps she was just imagining it—or desperately hoping for it—but the feeling had been awfully strong. An Internet search for information about the Mastons and the Moodus Noises produced lots of tales and rumors, but precious little fact. She had found a few pictures of the Mastons and had little doubt the guy from class belonged to that strange group. Her friends advised her to forget about him—indeed, to stay away from him even if he did show up—but after almost a month he remained in her thoughts as powerfully as ever. She had even dreamed about him a couple of times, dreams that made her blush whenever she thought about them. Maybe it *would* be best if he never showed up again. She couldn't make herself believe that, though.

She wondered whether the frat party Cali was taking her to tonight—dragging her to, more precisely—would end up in the best of times or worst of times category. This would be her first frat party, and she suspected it was going to be the latter. The Beta Psi Delta fraternity was hosting the party, and BPD

was notorious enough that when Caitlin heard about it, she reacted with an exuberant, “Cool, you’re gonna party with the Borderlines!” When Leesa asked what she meant, Caitlin explained BPD also stood for Borderline Personality Disorder and that BPD parties were famous for living up to their wild nickname. Leesa tried to talk Cali out of going—she didn’t even drink, for god’s sake—but Cali was having none of it, saying it was great Leesa didn’t drink, that Leesa could keep her out of trouble.

So here she was, trying without much success to put together an outfit for a party she didn’t really want to go to. She felt confident her loose red and gray diamond-patterned skirt, chosen by Cali on a shopping trip to Middletown a few weeks ago, would be suitably hip. She knew Cali would want her to wear the red leather shoes she had picked to go with it, but they were walking to the party, and there was no way Leesa was doing that on three-inch stilettos.

She looked up as Cali flounced into the room.

“Hey, party girl, you almost ready?” Cali asked in a tone that matched her “I’m here to party” outfit.

She was wearing what looked almost like a private school uniform top, plaid with a Peter Pan collar, or what would have looked private schoolish if it wasn’t unbuttoned farther down than Leesa would ever dare and didn’t have skulls and hearts leading diagonally down the front to a frayed edge. She had paired it with a short black skirt that sat low on her hips and red fishnets ripped in several places. Black platform shoes made her nearly as tall as Leesa. Leesa wasn’t sure she would have been able to stand in the shoes, much less walk in them.

“Not even close,” Leesa replied. She indicated her new skirt. “I don’t know what to wear with this thing.”

Cali crossed to Leesa’s closet. “Let’s see what you got.” She began sorting through the hanging clothes. “We don’t want you lookin’ *too* sexy now—gotta save that for me.” She pulled out a gray tie-neck top with a scalloped bottom edge. “Try this.”

Leesa pulled the top on and studied herself in the wall mirror. The cutely attired, modestly sexy girl staring back at her was unfamiliar, but she liked the way she looked. The shadow and liner Cali had shown her how to apply really made her blue eyes pop. She hoped she’d be able to do all this by herself before too long.

“Are you sure it’s cool to bring me along?” Leesa asked. Cali had been invited to the “Thirsty Thursday” party by a guy in her history class.

“Yeah, no problem. Sean said the only qualification to get in is a pair of tits.” She winked. “And you got that covered, for sure.”

Leesa blushed and reached for her hair.

Cali grabbed Leesa’s wrist and pulled her hand down. “Rule thirty-nine. No twirling your hair at the party. Guys think it means you’re horny. It’s gonna be hard enough to keep those frat boys off you.”

“Ha! Doubtful.” Looking at Cali’s provocative outfit, Leesa guessed her friend would be the one drawing the lion’s share of the attention, and that was just fine with her.

“I think we’re ready to rock,” Cali said. “Let’s go.”

“Should we take sweaters?”

“Nah. It’s not that far. It’s gonna be hot inside. They’d just be a hassle once we’re there. It’s not too cold—except maybe for wimps from San Diego,” she teased.

As Cali promised, the early October evening was crisp but not uncomfortable. Streetlights fashioned to look like hundred-year-old gas lamps poured golden light onto the sidewalk, and a three-

quarter moon added to the brightness. Leesa smelled freshly cut grass and guessed one of the nearby lawns had been mown late in the day. They walked quickly, Leesa limping and Cali tromping in her platforms. Leesa thought she and Cali must look like quite the pair—more like a couple of drunk kids stumbling home *from* a party than two stone-sober girls on their way to one.

She heard the festivities before they even turned the corner onto Fraternity Row. Thumping dance music seemed almost to vibrate the sidewalk, and the tumult of voices and laughter was nearly as loud. Anyone heading for the Borderline's party wouldn't need exact directions, that was for sure.

The BPD house was white with green trim, located near the center of the string of huge wooden houses that made up Fraternity Row. Three big green Greek letters—beta, psi and delta—were attached above the raised front entrance. Light spilled from all but one of the dozen or so front windows. A bed sheet painted with giant green letters proclaiming “Thirsty Thursday” flapped beneath one of the upper windows. Outside, a small crowd of kids milled about on the front lawn and sidewalk, but the bulk of the noise emanated from inside the old house.

Cali grabbed Leesa's arm and led her toward the front steps. A short line of kids filled the stairs, waiting to show ID to receive the precious hand stamp marking them as old enough to drink. Leesa was willing to bet that once inside, it probably didn't matter whether you were stamped or not. Not at a party like this one. She began to regret letting Cali talk her into coming, but she pushed the feeling aside. She had to grow up sometime—why not start now?

“Rule forty-six,” Cali said as they took their place in line. “Don't drink anything unless you pour it yourself, even soda or juice, or if someone gives you an unopened can. Some of these frat boys will do anything to get you naked, including drugging your drink.”

“Don't worry,” Leesa said. “It's Diet Pepsi or Coke for me.”

“Unopened,” Cali repeated. “They can drug a can of soda as easy as a glass.”

The two guys flanking the doorway at the top of the stairs were clearly upperclassmen, good-looking in a preppie sort of way, confident in their manner, enjoying their position of authority. Both wore casual tan sport coats open over black T-shirts. One guy's shirt bore a picture of President Obama; the other's was decorated with a screaming gray skull. They gave Leesa and Cali practiced once-overs when the two girls reached the top of the stairs.

Skull guy flashed a wide grin. “Hello, ladies. Welcome to BPD.”

“Let me stamp your hand,” Obama shirt said, grabbing Leesa's wrist without even waiting to see if she had ID.

Leesa gently disengaged her arm from his grip. “I don't drink.” She thought she saw a flicker of disappointment cross his face.

“But I do,” Cali said, smiling and extending her hand flirtatiously.

The guy laughed and took Cali's wrist, quickly stamping the back of her hand. He held his grip even after he was done, letting his eyes move up and down Cali's trim body. “I bet you do,” he said, smiling. He gave her wrist a light squeeze before letting go. “Have a great time, girls.”

Leesa and Cali squeezed past the two guys into the house.

“I told you hanging with you would pay off,” Cali laughed, holding out her arm and admiring the dark skull stamp on the back of her hand.

Inside the confines of the crowded house, the noise seemed to have doubled. The bouncy beat of one of Beyonce's latest dance hits echoed through the place. Loud chatter competed with the music, and frequent shrieks of laughter or shock—Leesa couldn't tell which—rose above the din. The room was

filled with dancers gyrating wildly to the song's punchy drumbeat, and there seemed to be at least four women here for every guy. These frat guys sure had a good thing going, Leesa thought as she and Cali threaded their way to the far side of the room, where the crush of people was a bit less thick.

Despite the open door and windows, the air was hot from so many bodies, and Leesa was glad she hadn't worn a sweater. She watched Cali begin to sway to the music, looking enviously at Cali's mostly unbuttoned top. Heck, even the rips in her fishnets looked like they would help keep her cool. Leesa was glad her own legs were bare.

A guy in what seemed to be the standard BPD uniform of sport coat and T-shirt edged his way close to Leesa and Cali. His T-shirt was brown, adorned with a classic peace symbol. The guy was cute in a not cute sort of way, with thick black hair and big brown eyes. Leesa noticed a band of sweat glinting on his forehead. She wondered how hot the place would have to get before the BPD jackets came off.

"Can I get you girls a drink?" he asked.

"We'll get our own, thanks," Cali replied. She smiled and put her arm through his. "You can take us to the bar, though."

The guy grinned back, then led them through the crowd into what seemed to be a dining room near the rear of the house. Three BPDs were busily mixing drinks behind a row of portable tables. A large plastic cooler contained cans of soda and bottles of water, while a second cooler held cans of Red Bull and Monster. It was quieter back here, but not much, with a steady stream of kids coming and going from the makeshift bar. A bit of cool air filtered in from an open doorway in the back of the room, but it was still plenty warm. Leesa decided cold water would be just the thing and grabbed a bottle.

Cali pulled a Red Bull from the cooler and handed it to their escort. "I'll have a Jagar Bomb."

The guy grinned, clearly pleased by her choice. "You got it."

He took a plastic cup from a stack atop the table and grabbed a dark green bottle of Jagermeister. He said something to one of his frat brothers behind the table, who handed him a shot glass. Leesa watched as he poured a full shot of the dark brown liquor, then filled the plastic cup half full with Red Bull. He held the cup in his left hand and the shot in his right. With a dramatic flourish, he dropped the shot glass directly into the Red Bull, and then gave the cup to Cali. Leesa grimaced as Cali swallowed the mixture in one long series of gulps.

"Want another?" the guy asked, his face a picture of friendly innocence.

"You wish," Cali said, grinning. She held out her hand. "I'm Cali."

"Nice to meet you, Cali." He shook her hand. "I'm Andy."

"And this is Leesa," Cali said.

Leesa and Andy shook hands, then he led them into another room, still crowded, but less busy with people coming and going. What started as a three-way conversation quickly morphed into an animated chat between Cali and Andy, leaving Leesa feeling a bit like a third wheel. Baby steps, she told herself. At least she was here.

She spent a few minutes gazing out at the crowd, watching how the other kids interacted and studying what the girls were wearing. She noticed how many seemed drunk already—maybe that was the secret to their social ease. She hoped she wasn't going to have to resort to drinking to feel comfortable in these kinds of situations. With that happy thought, she nudged Cali on the shoulder.

"I'm hot. I'm going out back for some air."

Cali twisted her head around. "Want me to go with you?"

Leesa shook her head. "No, stay here." She winked. "You look like you're having fun."

Cali grinned. "You sure?"

Leesa nodded.

"Okay. Be careful, though." Cali ruffled Andy's thick hair. "You gotta watch out for these frat boys."

Leesa laughed as she began edging her way through the crowd to the door and out into the night. Please, someone come talk to me, she thought as she stood looking out into the clumps of kids gathered in the backyard. And not some drunk jerk on the make, either. Someone cool. And interesting. And as long as she was wishing, cute certainly wouldn't hurt.

Never in a million years could she have guessed what her wish would bring.

11. STRANGE MEETINGS

It was an odd-looking vine. Large, striated leaves clung to the corner of the building, inches from Stefan's face, their shadows hiding his dark, motionless form from the noisy students milling about in the nearby yard. He watched them idly, not hunting now, for he had been given no permission to do so. It would be awhile before he was allowed to take a human again, but there was nothing to stop him from observing or even mingling with them if he chose. So far, no one in the yard was of much interest to him—until a new arrival caught his eye. Tall and blond, she stood by herself a few feet from the back steps. Not beautiful, but near enough. Something about her tugged at him, made him want to get closer. A lust and a hunger, yes, but different in some way. The pull was thrilling, but disconcerting. Different was intriguing. But different could also be dangerous.

Backing farther into the shadows, he let his eyes sweep the yard and surrounding grounds, alert to anything amiss, anything out of place. Sensing nothing, he circled the yard slowly, keeping to the shadows and pausing every few steps to peer into the darkness, listening intently and sniffing the air for danger. All seemed as it should be. Satisfied, he turned his attention back to the girl and studied her more closely.

She was still alone, standing with one arm held against her waist, sipping a bottle of water with the other. Her face was tan, her skin smooth, her eyes startlingly blue. She rotated her head from side to side, taking in the other kids, but not looking all that interested in joining any of them. She looked uncomfortable, like she knew she didn't quite fit in here. She was right, he thought. She didn't fit in. He wanted to find out why.

He eased out of the shadows and headed casually in her direction, avoiding any move or look that might attract her notice or be regarded as threatening—just another partier wandering outside, someone who would notice her only when he got closer. She would think it was chance that brought him to her, not a purposeful act.

He had approached within a few paces when she sensed his presence and turned toward him, her face tightening into a guarded, but inquisitive look. He flashed a friendly smile. At a party like this, she would be expecting guys to hit on her, but his easy manner, practiced over the centuries, was natural, unthreatening.

"Hi," he said. "You having any fun?"

Leesa studied him for a moment before replying. This guy was different from the other guys here, she sensed immediately. He spoke with a hint of an accent—exotic, perhaps European. He wore his long-sleeve black button-down shirt untucked over black jeans, but the loose shirt couldn't hide the slender, athletic form of his body. His hair was even blacker than his clothes, if that were possible, pulled back into a tight ponytail. His clothes and hair made his unusually pale face seem almost to float in the moonlight, and a bristly soul patch appeared so dark against his pallid skin it looked like a tunnel into his chin. Handsome, she thought, and sexy, too—in a more raw, sensual way than the Maston guy.

"Not really," she said guardedly.

"Me neither." He grinned. "I'm Stefan. How about you and me not have fun together for a couple of minutes?"

Leesa laughed, her unease diminishing. "Sure, why not? I'm Leesa." Stefan made no move to shake hands, so she kept hers at her side.

“So, Leesa, what brings you to this not-so-fun party? This doesn’t really look like your kind of thing.”

“It’s not,” she admitted. “My friend brought me. I’m trying to learn how to fit in. She’s inside, chatting up some guy.”

Stefan pursed his thick lips. Sensual lips, she thought.

“Why do you care about fitting in? Fitting in is overrated, if you ask me.”

Leesa swept her eyes up and down his black-clad form. “I can see that,” she teased. “Tell me, do you have something against color?”

He smiled. “Not at all. I’m especially fond of red. But black helps me disappear into the night, if necessary,” he added in a low, flirtatious tone.

“Why would you need to disappear?” Leesa made a show of looking about the yard. “Got a girlfriend around somewhere?”

He laughed. “No, no girlfriend. Not for a very long time, I promise.”

There was something strange about the way he said it, some seriousness in his tone despite the laugh. She believed him, but felt like he had told her something far deeper than she’d asked. Maybe she just wasn’t used to talking to sexy guys. God knows she’d had little enough practice at it.

“You from around here?” he asked.

“No. San Diego.”

“You’re a long way from home. You miss it?”

“Nope. I’m happy to get away, actually.”

He stared at her, his gaze strangely penetrating. His dark eyes took on the look of bottomless pools—pools she suddenly found herself wanting to sink into. Dangerous, yet inviting. Flustered, she took a drink from her bottle, breaking eye contact.

He seemed to realize he was looking too hard. His gaze softened and he rubbed his hand on his pale cheek. “I bet I’d burn to a crisp in California, with skin like this.”

“Ha! Probably. You from Connecticut?”

“For the most part, yeah.”

There it was again—the sense that he was telling her more than he was saying. Before she could respond, he suddenly stiffened. He lifted his head and moved it slowly from side to side, his eyes flicking back and forth. He reminded her of a jungle cat now. Feral, powerful, alert. She thought he could even be sniffing the air for danger, if such a thing were possible.

He seemed almost to have forgotten her presence. What was going on? One moment he was totally focused on her, almost mesmerizing her, and now it was as if she didn’t even exist. What could have drawn his attention so completely? Glancing around the yard, she saw nothing out of the ordinary.

“What is it? Is something wrong?”

Stefan knew better than to ignore his instincts. Danger was near—not immediate, but close.

“I have to go,” he said. He took two quick steps away, then stopped and looked back. “I will see you again,” he promised.

Leesa wasn’t quite sure how she felt about that promise. He was certainly attractive—she was sure Cali would say “hot”—and his manner seemed friendly enough. But there was something unsettling about him as well, beyond even that brief moment when she almost lost herself in his eyes. She watched him cross the yard, moving quickly without seeming to hurry, gliding across the lawn with a smooth grace that once again reminded her of a jungle cat. His black clothes seemed to draw the shadows into

them, making him difficult to follow. In just a few seconds, he vanished into the darkness beyond the yard. A sense of déjà vu passed over her. What was it about her that kept causing hot guys to disappear so abruptly?

Across the street from the BPD house, hidden by the dark shadow of the ancient maple against which he leaned, Rave watched Leesa limp up the steps with her friend and disappear into the house. He had been watching her frequently the last few weeks. A couple of times he thought she might have detected his presence, but he was skilled at disappearing and had managed to remain unseen.

He still wasn't sure why he was following her. Perhaps it was a sense that she needed his protection, but he knew there was more to it than that. Something about her pulled at him, and the feeling was unlike anything he had ever experienced. A warm tingling, so like the first hint of prey, yet so completely different. It was an ignition, surely—but of what? He glanced down at his fingers, expecting to see the faint flicker of blue flame, yet somehow not surprised to see nothing. None of it made sense.

What was it about her? Sure, she was pretty, extremely so, but he had seen lots of pretty women in his long life. Unlike some of his kind, Rave did not mind humans. He mingled with them now and then, and had even called one a friend many years ago. He knew human women were drawn to him. Over the years, he had grown skilled at keeping them away without distressing them. Never had he had felt the pull in return, though. Not until now. He was finding it more and more difficult to stay away.

And so here he was, watching her yet again. For a little while he could see her through one of the windows, standing with her friend, but then they moved deeper into the house, gone from his sight, and the night seemed to darken a notch. He was tempted to go inside, but he didn't like crowded spaces, so he remained where he was, always the patient hunter, enjoying the music and watching the students come and go through the front door.

Eventually, he grew weary of his vigil and decided to move around to the back of the house for a while. He circled the block and crept behind the row of frat houses. As he drew closer to the party house, he saw lots of kids milling about in the spacious backyard, so he melted deeper into the shadows. When he was certain he was effectively invisible, he hoisted himself effortlessly into a leafy tree and found a comfortable perch from which to watch.

He spotted Leesa near the stairs by the back door. She was talking to someone, but he couldn't see who. He guessed it must be her friend, but despite the elevation provided by his vantage point, his view was blocked by a group of tall young men. He hoped they didn't move and block his view of Leesa as well.

He loved watching her—the shy downward tilt of her jaw, her bright smile, the way her fingers twirled in her hair when she was nervous. Even from this distance, he still felt the pull.

He watched contentedly for a few minutes, until the group of kids blocking his view edged away, allowing him to see the person she was talking to. The guy was tall and slender, dressed in black. Rave began to grow warm. Vampire? He was surprised he hadn't sensed the creature sooner. The girl was more distracting than he had thought.

Blue fire began to glow unbidden from his fingertips. He curled his hands into fists to hide the telltale glow and willed the heat down, forcing himself to be patient. There was no need to rush. If the guy *was* a vampire, he would do nothing in so public a place. But what was he doing here? And why had he singled out Leesa? Was it mere chance, or something more ominous?

His mind raced. He had to do something, but this was no place for a fight. Too many humans

could be hurt, not to mention the attention a confrontation would bring. He could not allow the creature to continue working its spell, though. He felt the heat begin to rise inside him again. This time, he let it grow, careful to keep it under control.

He saw the guy stiffen, watched his head swing from side to side. There was no longer any doubt about him being a vampire—he had sensed Rave’s heat and registered the danger. Rave forced his fire down now, locking it inside him. He didn’t want the creature to locate him, merely to let it know the threat was there. He hoped it would be enough.

And it was. He watched the vampire spin away from Leesa and glide quickly across the lawn and out of the yard. Rave followed at a safe distance, making sure it was truly leaving. Rave considered taking it once they were alone, but decided against it. The vampire was alert to the danger—there could be no guarantee of the outcome. For now, it was enough that the creature was going.

Rave circled back to the party, his senses on high alert. He probed every inch of the shadows until he was satisfied the threat was gone. Everything seemed as it should. But the game had changed. It was time to talk to the girl.

She was still outside, arms wrapped around her waist as if she were cold. He was afraid she might head back into the house at any moment, and that would not do. He needed her to remain alone. Running his fingers through his hair, he walked toward her.

She looked up at his approach. A surprised expression crossed her face. Rave was pleased to see the surprise was followed by a smile. He smiled back.

Leesa’s body began to tingle as the Maston guy drew nearer. This was crazy. One smile, and already her knees felt weak. He was even better looking than she remembered—his bronze skin flawless, almost like marble in its smoothness, his smile wide and especially bright against his dark complexion. His coppery hair glistened in the moonlight, seeming almost to smolder when the light hit it just right, and a simple bronze medallion on a leather thong around his neck did the same. His clothes—plain brown T-shirt and jeans—fit his athletic body perfectly, especially the jeans. She found herself wishing he would turn around for a moment, and felt herself begin to blush. A minute ago she had been feeling cold, but suddenly she felt very warm. Her hand moved to her hair.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

“Yes...I mean, no, I don’t mind.” Her fingers began twirling in her hair. “Yes, you can join me,” she added, struggling to make herself clear.

His smile widened. “I’m Rave.”

“Leesa,” she managed to reply.

“Hi, Leesa.”

“What kind of name is Rave?” She hated the question the as soon as she asked it.

“The only kind I’ve ever known,” he said simply.

She took a breath and forced herself to stop staring at his gorgeous face. What to say now? She said the first thing that came to mind. “I bet I can guess your last name.”

He looked amused. “Oh? And how would you do that?”

“I have psychic powers,” she said, trying to make her voice deep and mysterious, hoping she wasn’t sounding like a fool.

She reached forward to put her hands on the side of his head—anything to touch that hair—but he stepped back more quickly than she could have imagined and her hands closed on empty air. She tried to

hide her surprise—and her disappointment. She etched a look of concentration onto her face instead.

“It’s.....ummmm.....Mas....Masters. No, wait! Not Masters...Maston. Yea, that’s it. Maston.”

He laughed, and the sound melted her remaining nervousness.

“I see you’ve heard about us.” he said. “Nothing good, I expect.”

“My best friend grew up in East Hampton. She told me about your people.”

Rave put his hand over his heart and sighed with exaggerated drama. “Oh, no! Even worse.” He grinned. “Those townspeople tell all kinds of stories about us.”

“Are any of them true?”

“Human sacrifices and stuff? Sorry, no. Nothing so exciting.”

Leesa feigned disappointment. “Drat. I could use the excitement.”

“Is that why you were talking to that guy who just left?”

Leesa was surprised. How long had he been watching? Was he jealous? She hoped so. “Stefan? He didn’t hang around long enough for me to find out.”

The name rang ominously in Rave’s ears. It was a name he had heard before. Stefan was a *very* powerful vampire. “You need to stay away from him.”

The seriousness of his tone alarmed her. “Why? Do you know him?”

“I know of him.”

Leesa thought how similar that was to what Cali said about Rave. “What do you know?”

“I know he is very dangerous.”

“My friend said the same thing about you. Should I stay away from you, too?”

Rave did not reply right away. “Your friend is right,” he said after a moment. “I am dangerous. Perhaps even more dangerous than Stefan, though that remains to be proven.”

He stepped closer, cutting the distance between them in half. Leesa thought she felt the temperature rise a few degrees, but that had to be her imagination—didn’t it? She thought briefly of strange blue fires and deadly kisses, then tried to brush those stories from her mind.

“But I hope not dangerous to you,” he added softly.

She studied his face. He didn’t look dangerous, but there was something undeniably powerful and mysterious about him. Could that be why she found him so attractive? She knew girls back in high school who had a thing for bad boys, but she had never been one of them. For now, she would give him the benefit of the doubt. “I believe you,” she said at last.

He smiled, looking relieved.

“Why is Stefan so dangerous?” she asked. “What do you know about him?”

Rave wasn’t sure how much to tell her. If he opened that door, how far would he have to go? “I’m not sure you’d believe me. Worse, you might think I’m crazy.”

Leesa tilted the water bottle to her lips and drained the last of the water. This whole night was getting stranger by the minute. First Stefan disappeared for no apparent reason, and then Rave shows up minutes later, after she had spent weeks hoping to see him again. And he somehow knew Stefan. Knew *of* him, she reminded herself. She needed to learn more.

“Try me,” she said.

Rave thought for a moment and decided he had no choice. He had to tell her. The most important thing was for her to be safe, to stay away from Stefan. He hoped she would believe him. “This is going to sound crazy, I know,” he said. “Stefan is a vampire.”

He saw the shock register in her eyes, but it was a shock of surprise, not disbelief. Unexpectedly, she seemed open at least to the idea of vampires. Perhaps it was the vampire class she was taking; perhaps it was something more. Either way, she didn't dismiss it out of hand, as he feared she might—as most humans would.

Leesa studied Rave's face. She saw no hint of humor or guile. It was the last thing she had expected to hear, but he was serious. "A vampire? Are you certain? How do you know?"

"Believe me, I know." He wasn't ready to go further just yet. His people worked hard to remain in the shadows, to keep who they were and what they could do secret. "Trust me, please. Whatever you do, do not let yourself be alone with him." He glanced over her shoulder and saw Cali inside moving toward the doorway. He definitely did not want to talk to both of them. Especially since Cali was from East Hampton. "Your friend is coming. I need to go."

Here comes the disappearing act again, Leesa thought. At least this time they had talked. "When will I see you again?" she asked.

"Soon," he promised, before turning and heading toward the back of the yard.

Leesa thought she could still feel the warmth of his presence. "Soon" echoed in her head as she watched him disappear into the shadows.

"Hey, Leesa, whatcha been doin' out here?"

Leesa turned at the sound of Cali's voice. Her friend was all smiles as she clomped down the steps. Leesa wondered if she'd had another one of those Jager bomb things.

"Oh, just fighting off the guys," Leesa said in a tone she hoped sounded nonchalant. "Where's Andy?"

"Tending bar. He's pretty fun. And he's a *senior*. He made me another J-Bomb—he got even cuter after that." Cali laughed. "I gave him my number." She fluffed her fingers through her hair, letting the cool air hit her neck. "What about you? Talk to any cute ones out here?"

"Yeah, two of them, actually. I didn't give them my number, though. Maybe next time." She would tell Cali soon about Rave, at least, but not yet. First, she needed to try to make sense out of everything that had just happened.

12. A PLEASANT STROLL

It's another hot night, dry and windless. Indian summer, Cali had called it. Not something Leesa was familiar with in San Diego, where it was like summer most of the year, and not all that cold the rest of the time. But here in Connecticut, the near-eighty degree temperatures were fifteen degrees warmer than normal for the second week of October. For three days now, the kids at Weston had been sporting shorts and T-shirts, or even bathing suits, spending as much time outside as they could, tossing Frisbees and footballs or lounging on colorful towels and blankets spread out on the grass.

Definitely not vampire weather, Leesa thought as she strolled home from the library, the night air feeling especially warm after her stint in the air-conditioned building. She made a mental note to ask Dr. Clerval about that in class tomorrow. Did vampires really hate the sun, or was that just part of the legend that had grown up around them? If they existed at all, she reminded herself. Rave certainly spoke as if they did.

She hadn't seen Rave since last week's party, or Stefan, either, for that matter. She thought she'd sensed Rave's presence a couple of times, but never spotted him. Maybe it was simply wishful thinking. As if on cue, she felt that same strange warm feeling again, but decided it was just her imagination. She smiled—he had certainly made an impression on her, considering she had only seen him twice, and not for very long at that. If only his folk used phones, she could at least have given him her number. Then if she didn't hear from him, she would know his interest was not as keen as hers. She resisted the urge to turn around and look for him.

“Hi, Leesa.”

And there he was, walking next to her, as handsome as she remembered, somehow materializing out of the night without a sound. Was he really there, or had she conjured him up like some guardian genie out of a fairy tale? He sure looked real—if someone so gorgeous could be real. She kept walking, trying to hide her surprise. Stay calm, she told herself. Act nonchalant.

“Hi, Rave. How've you been?”

He grinned that wide grin of his, and Leesa felt her heart flutter. So much for staying calm, she thought.

“Feeling pretty good right now, I have to say,” he replied. “It's a beautiful night for a stroll.” He casually looked her up and down. “You look really good in red.”

Leesa was wearing a dark red Weston T-shirt and white shorts. She felt herself begin to blush and hoped he couldn't see it in the darkness. “Thanks.”

“How was the library?”

She stopped and turned to face him. How long had he been around tonight?

“You been stalking me?” she asked teasingly.

“I wouldn't call it stalking,” he said, still smiling. “More like keeping an eye on you now and then. Making sure you're safe.”

“Safe from Stefan?” she asked. “You jealous?”

Rave's face turned serious. “I meant it when I told you how dangerous he is. Please trust me on that.”

Leesa was struck by the seriousness of his tone and discovered she liked his concern. “I believe you,” she said. “I haven't seen or heard from him.”

“I’m glad to hear that. But stay careful, please.”

They resumed walking. Leesa could feel his attention focused on her, but also noticed how aware he seemed of everything around them. She wasn’t sure how she knew it, but she was certain no sound or movement anywhere nearby escaped his notice. In addition to myriad other feelings, some of which she still didn’t understand, she felt safe with him nearby.

“It must be strange not to have a phone,” she said after a few moments.

A bemused expression appeared on his handsome face. “Is it strange not to have wings?” he asked.

His question confused her. She was certain her puzzlement showed on her face.

“You don’t miss what you’ve never had,” he explained. “It’s just the way things are.”

Leesa guessed that was true, at least partially. “But what about a car? How do you get anywhere?”

Rave stopped and lifted his foot off the ground. “With these,” he said, smiling. “I walk, like we are now. Only a bit faster.” He started forward again, seeing no need to add that his kind could cover fifty miles in a matter of hours, if necessary.

“Can you at least take a bus or a cab if you need to?”

He shook his head. “Nope. We walk. Run if we’re in a hurry,” he added with a grin.

Leesa wasn’t satisfied. She wanted to know more about him—wanted to know everything about him, in fact. “Why don’t your people use any modern stuff? Is it a religious thing?”

“No, it’s not religious. It’s just the way we are, the way we’ve always been. Change comes slowly to us. My people and modern technology don’t seem to get along, for some reason.” The reason was simple, but he wasn’t ready to reveal it. The heat and energy within a volkaane’s body did not mix with electrical or battery-operated appliances.

They were approaching Leesa’s dorm. She didn’t want the evening to end and tried to think of a way to keep it going. Maybe she should continue walking, pretending this was not her dorm. But if he had been keeping an eye on her the way he said, he might already know this was where she lived, and she would look foolish.

Rave halted at the walkway to the dorm. Leesa’s heart sank. He did know.

“You in a hurry to get home?” he asked. “Or can you walk a bit longer?”

Leesa felt her heart skip a beat. She smiled—this was getting to be almost like a date. “I’d love to walk some more. Like you said, it’s a beautiful night.”

They strolled past her dorm, continuing up the sidewalk toward the athletic fields. The campus was noisier than usual—music, television and voices rode out through windows thrown open to the warm night. The first fallen leaves crackled now and then under Leesa’s feet, and she wondered why Rave never seemed to step on any. She listened carefully for a few steps but heard no sound at all from his footfalls. His soft-bottomed moccasin-style shoes were silent. What must he think of her as she limped along, crunching every dead leaf in sight?

But he didn’t appear to notice, or at least not to care. The farther they walked, the more conscious she became of the feeling of heat between them. *Take my hand*, she thought as they walked, trying to will him to show his interest. *Please, take my hand*. If only she knew what he was thinking...

Leesa would have been thrilled to know what was going on in Rave’s head, for he felt happier strolling beside her than he’d been in a long, long time. He wondered what it was about her that drew him so strongly. It was more than her looks, more than her smile, more than the soft tones of her voice. He

suddenly felt an almost irresistible urge to hold her hand, but touching her would raise questions he was not prepared to answer, so he forced the urge down.

The night grew quieter as they strolled past the ball fields, empty and dark tonight, then much louder when they passed near Fraternity Row. Lost in the thrill of Rave's company, Leesa noticed neither. Their conversation flowed easily, and their few silences were equally comfortable. An hour flew by, feeling like mere minutes. They walked all the way to the main campus entrance before turning and heading back.

Rave bid her goodnight in front of her dorm. For a moment, Leesa hoped he might kiss her, but somehow knew he wouldn't. Most guys would have been all over her given half a chance, and probably would have tried to inveigle their way up to her room, too. But Rave was different from other guys in every way imaginable, so why shouldn't he be different in this as well? She would have to trust what her heart was telling her—that he liked her a lot, maybe as much as she liked him. And he had promised he would see her again soon. She could hardly wait.

"You did *what*?" Cali exclaimed.

"It was just a walk," Leesa said defensively.

Needing to share her excitement with someone, she had gone straight to Cali's room after her walk with Rave. Cali sat cross-legged on the bed, wearing a camouflage tank top and tan shorts, a textbook open on her lap. She had painted her toes in rainbow hues, Leesa noticed. The room's lone window was open, and she could smell the night air. "Use Somebody" by the Kings of Leon rumbled from Cali's iPod Dock.

"Just a walk," Cali mimicked. "All alone in the dark with a guy from some cult that does human sacrifices, for all we know."

Leesa hopped onto the bed beside Cali. "Oh, come on. You don't believe that stuff."

"Well, maybe not that," Cali admitted. "But those people are weird. You should be careful." She shook her head and grinned. "Imagine, *me* being the voice of reason. What's the world coming to?"

They both laughed.

"He's really nice," Leesa said. "We had a lot of fun. He didn't even try to kiss me goodnight. Heck, he didn't even hold my hand. I wanted to so bad I almost reached out and grabbed his." She felt her heart begin to quicken at the thought.

Cali laughed again. "See, I told you he was weird. Any normal guy would've tried to get a little tongue, at least. Just be careful, okay? I don't want to have to find a new best friend."

Leesa wondered why everyone was telling her to be careful. Was Middletown, Connecticut, really such a dangerous place? Rave said be careful of Stefan; Cali said be careful of Rave.... Who would Stefan tell her to be careful of? Cali?

Cali thumped her book closed and dropped it onto the bed beside her. "I'm tired of studying. Let's go see if Caitlin and Stacie are up for some *Guitar Hero*."

Leesa got up from the bed. She could use a little distraction—was it starting to get warm again?

13. FRIENDLY WARNINGS

The sun was slowly sinking into the deep green hills west of the campus as Leesa and her three friends waited on the sidewalk in front of the dorm for Uncle Roger to pick them up and take them to Meriden for a home-cooked meal. Leesa had been back for dinner several times since school started, but this was the first time she was bringing her friends. After a month of subsisting on dorm food, they were going to love her aunt's cooking, and she couldn't wait until they tasted one of her uncle's pies.

The Indian summer of a few days before was now but a pleasant memory, and the late afternoon had grown crisp. Leesa zipped her San Diego sweatshirt up against the chill. Cali had dressed down for the occasion—"rule ninety-nine: don't make the relatives think I'm a bad influence," she had joked—wearing her pink hoodie with the checks on one sleeve, hip-hugger jeans with no rips, and a pair of gray Nike running shoes adorned with pink swooshes. Her "girly sneakers," she called them. She had six or seven leather and bronze bracelets dangling from her right wrist to keep her from feeling "too plain." Stacie wore a fuzzy, oversized powder blue sweater that hung below her butt cheeks like a short dress, with tight black leggings and gray Ugg boots, while Caitlin sported a black argyle sweater with gray and white diamonds in vertical columns down the front, dark gray pants and black flats.

Uncle Roger pulled to the curb at precisely six o'clock, as promised. He left the engine running as he climbed out of the Expedition and waddled around the front to give Leesa a big hug. Leesa hugged him back, then pulled free and introduced her friends to her uncle.

"Nice to meet you all," he said, smiling warmly. "Leesa's told us all about you."

"Not *all* about us, I hope," Cali joked.

"Ha! Don't worry," Leesa said. "Only the good stuff."

"Well, let's get going," Uncle Roger said. "My wife's eager to meet you, too."

Led Zeppelin was singing about some lady who was sure all that glittered was gold as Leesa climbed into the front seat. Her friends slid into the back, with Stacie getting stuck in the middle. The car smelled deliciously of fresh-baked pie. Uncle Roger had come straight from the bakery, and three steaming pies lay across the back cargo area. Leesa recognized the aroma of cinnamon-laced baked apples and thought she detected the smell of peach as well.

"Yum!" Caitlin said, breathing deeply of the sweet aroma. "Maybe we should have dessert first."

"You know what we say in the bakery business," Uncle Roger said. "Life is short—eat dessert first. I'm not sure my wife would approve, though. She's making pizza."

"Double yum," said Caitlin.

Saturday traffic was light, and the ride to Meriden passed quickly. Leesa led her friends into the house after Uncle Roger assured them he could handle the pies himself. Max raced to greet her as soon as she stepped through the doorway. She dropped to one knee and gave him her traditional chest-rub greeting, then introduced him to her friends, who fawned over him with equal enthusiasm. With so much attention, Max was in dog heaven.

Finally, the girls stood up, and Leesa introduced them to her aunt, who pulled off her spattered blue and white checkered apron and hugged each of them in turn.

"It's so nice to meet all of you," Aunt Janet said. "I hope you'll come often."

"If that pie tastes as good as it smells, Caitlin may never leave," Cali joked.

"There'll be plenty to take back with you," Aunt Janet said, laughing. "I hope you all like pizza."

“Are you kidding?” Stacie said. “What college kid doesn’t?”

“Go ahead and sit,” Aunt Janet said, refastening her apron. “Dinner will be ready in a couple of minutes.”

The girls arranged themselves around the table, Caitlin and Stacie on one side, Leesa and Cali on the other. The table was covered by an ivory tablecloth and set with sand-colored dinnerware and crystal goblets. Two tall red candles flickered in brass candlesticks a third of the way from each end. Max wasn’t allowed near the table while people were eating, so he retreated to his favorite spot in front of the fireplace. After depositing the pies in the kitchen, Uncle Roger joined his guests at the head of the table.

Aunt Janet emerged from the kitchen carrying a big wooden salad bowl filled with tomatoes, green and red peppers, mushrooms and cucumbers on a bed of Romaine lettuce. She set the salad down in the center of the table. Leesa thought it looked delicious.

“I don’t know if you young ladies like salad,” Aunt Janet said, “but I know Leesa does, and I’m sure your mothers will be happy I offered.”

She disappeared back into the kitchen, returning a moment later with three flasks of homemade dressing. “Balsamic, Italian and Ranch,” she said, placing the bottles on the table. “Help yourselves.”

Leesa dug into the salad, filling her plate, then passed the bowl to Cali, who took enough to be polite. Caitlin took about the same, while Stacie took almost as much as Leesa.

“Pizza’s on,” Aunt Janet said, carrying a rectangular wooden cutting board covered with a steaming pizza into the dining room. The aroma of spicy tomato sauce preceded her. “It’s Hawaiian style, Leesa’s favorite. I hope you girls don’t mind ham and pineapple on your pizza.”

“No problem,” Caitlin said. “It smells great.”

“Eat all you want—there’s another one in the kitchen.” Aunt Janet set the pizza down next to the salad. “Is Diet Pepsi okay for everyone? I have bottled water if you’d prefer.”

The girls all chose soda. Aunt Janet brought four cans from the kitchen, and the girls filled their goblets. Uncle Roger poured red wine for his wife and himself.

“To new friends,” he toasted, lifting his glass.

They all clinked glasses, then got down to the business of eating. The first part of the dinner passed in relative quiet, as the hungry girls concentrated on the pizza. The talk consisted mostly of comments about how good the pizza tasted and how bad dorm food was. The first pizza disappeared quickly, and Aunt Janet brought in the second. She and Uncle Roger were happy to let the girls enjoy their meal. As their appetites became sated, the conversation blossomed.

“Did Leesa tell you she met a guy she has the hots for?” Cali asked from behind her soda, her tone all innocence.

Leesa blushed and kicked her friend’s ankle under the table.

“No, she didn’t,” Aunt Janet said, looking at Leesa and smiling. “Pray tell.”

“It’s no big deal,” Leesa said. “I’ve only talked to him twice.”

“I’ve warned her to be careful,” Cali continued. “He’s a Maston.”

Uncle Roger turned to Leesa. “Oh?” he said.

Leesa thought she saw a bit of concern on her uncle’s normally cheerful face. “You know about the Mastons?” she asked.

“A little.” Uncle Roger wiped his mouth with his napkin. “I grew up in East Haddam. That’s not all that far from Moodus. My buddies and I used to go up there when we were in high school, see if we could hear the noises. Never went into the Maston settlement, though.”

“Did you ever hear the noises?” Stacie asked.

“One time, yes. It was the strangest thing, sort of like a subway rumbling underground. It lasted almost ten minutes.”

“Did you ever see any blue fire or hear any screams?” Cali asked.

“Oh, come on, Cali,” Leesa said, frowning. “You know that stuff’s nonsense.”

“I didn’t, no,” Uncle Roger said. “But a friend of mine swears he saw blue flashes out there one night.”

“But no human sacrifice?” Leesa asked, looking sarcastically at Cali before pointedly helping herself to another slice of pizza.

Uncle Roger chuckled. “No, no sacrifices, human or otherwise.”

“I know the Mastons don’t drive, or use phones or computers or anything,” Aunt Janet said.

“What else have you heard, Roger?”

“The same crazy stuff Cali was talking about. Voodoo magic kind of stuff. Nothing to believe.” He turned to Leesa. “I’m surprised one of them goes to your school though. I didn’t know they mixed with regular folk like that.”

“He’s not a student,” Leesa said. “He just hangs out on campus now and then. He’s *really* cute.”

“Well, that trumps everything,” Uncle Roger chuckled. “As long as he’s *really* cute.” He scratched absently at his neck. “I wonder why he hangs around Weston. That’s a pretty long walk from Moodus.”

“Probably looking for young virgins to sacrifice,” Cali said, laughing.

Leesa pushed at her friend’s shoulder. “Stop it!” she said, but she was unable to keep herself from chuckling. The others joined in the laughter.

“Seriously, though,” Uncle Roger said when the laughter subsided, “there’s something a little weird about him walking all the way to Weston to mingle with students. I don’t think it’s a good idea to get involved with him, Leesa.”

“I agree with your uncle,” Aunt Janet added. “No matter how nice he is, I’m not sure what could come of it. You live in such different worlds.”

Leesa knew that what her aunt and uncle said made sense—more sense than what Cali kept saying, for sure. She couldn’t call Rave, or even text or email him. And how would they ever go anywhere, when he wouldn’t ride in a car or take a bus? She wondered if it was okay for him to ride a bike. That would be something, at least. Was he allowed to go to the movies, watch TV or play *Guitar Hero*? Her aunt and uncle were right—she and Rave did live in different worlds. But her aunt and uncle had not felt the feelings that surged through her whenever she saw him—heck, when she even thought about him. She wasn’t sure she could give that up even if she wanted to.

She was glad she hadn’t mentioned Stefan to anyone, except in passing to Cali as a guy she’d talked to briefly at the party. They would be on her case doubly hard, especially if she told them that Rave said Stefan was a vampire. She could only imagine their reaction to that. No way was she going there. They’d think Rave was out of his mind, for sure. This family had heard enough about vampires.

“How about some pie?” she asked instead.

“I’ll second that,” Caitlin said.

14. SHADOWS AND LIGHT

“They say when trouble comes close ranks,” Professor Clerval told the class. “And that’s what the vampires did. Once solitary creatures, they began collecting into covens, for protection and to maintain some kind of order, to put limits on the indiscriminate killing that was calling too much attention their way.”

“Protection from what?” asked a voice Leesa recognized. She had chosen the back row, as always, in case Rave showed up again. A few rows down to her right, she spotted the questioner’s familiar red hair. Stanley. The guy asked at least one question every class, usually a good one. She wished she were as confident.

“From us,” the professor replied. “And whatever else hunts them.”

“You’re not saying vampires are afraid of *us*, are you?” asked another guy, the disbelief evident in his voice.

“Individually, no, of course not. Vampires are much too powerful. But when people gather in an armed mob, even a vampire can be threatened. By limiting the number of victims they take, they remain in the shadows, living near us, around us, unseen and unsuspected. But you can bet that some of the thousands of people who are killed or who disappear in this country every year were taken by vampires.”

Leesa was fascinated. Ever since Rave told her vampires were real, she had viewed this class in a whole new way, no longer thinking the professor might only be pretending vampires existed. Instead, she felt he was talking with genuine authority. How he had come by all his knowledge she had no idea, but she was eager to learn everything she could.

“Speaking of shadows,” said a voice to her left, “do vampires come out only at night?”

Leesa turned and saw it was one of the goth guys, clumped with his fellows in their usual place near the back. She gasped when she saw Stefan sitting next to them. What was he doing here? He was dressed all in black again, this time a black T-shirt instead of the button shirt he’d worn at the party. He blended in with the goths, but she could tell he was not really with them. Using them for camouflage, she guessed. His dark eyes caught hers, and he smiled. Reflexively, she returned his smile, then remembered Rave’s warning and looked away.

“Of course,” replied a guy on the other side of the room. “Sunlight burns ’em up.”

“No, it doesn’t,” a girl countered. “But sunlight makes their skin glitter, which gives them away.”

“I believe the truth is somewhere in between,” Professor Clerval said. “The idea of vampires burning or disintegrating in the sunlight provides a nice dramatic angle, allowing bits like having them sleep in coffins and creating great visual effects for the movies.” He moved out from behind the lectern to the front of the stage. “According to the most authoritative sources I’ve been able to find, vampires don’t like the sun because it hurts their skin. So they prefer the night, or overcast days like today. And they will certainly keep to the shadows as much as possible.”

Leesa thought of her mother, avoiding the sun because it burned her skin.

“But they can handle the sun if necessary,” Professor Clerval continued. “And they definitely don’t glitter, in spite of what *Twilight* tells us. So you could be talking to a vampire and never know it.”

“Then how can you tell if someone is a vampire?” goth guy asked.

“Well, since they avoid the sun,” Professor Clerval replied, “they’re usually quite pale.” He

grinned. “But then again, so are you.”

Leesa joined her classmates in laughter. The professor waited until the room quieted. “If you can get one in front of a mirror, you’ll know by the absence of a reflection,” he said. “Otherwise, you have no way to tell.”

“Until the fangs come out,” a guy in front remarked, drawing more laughter.

Professor Clerval chuckled. “Well, there is that. But it’s probably a bit late at that point.”

The talk of fangs presented Leesa with the opening she had been waiting for, but dreading. She had hoped to catch the professor after class one day to ask him privately, but he always had a cluster of students around him when class ended. Taking a deep breath to muster her courage, she raised her hand, hoping she wasn’t going to sound stupid.

Professor Clerval pointed a bony finger at her. “Yes?”

“Have you ever heard of a one-fanged vampire?” she asked.

Professor Clerval moved across the stage to a spot directly in front of Leesa and looked up at her silently, as if studying her. “You would be Ms. Nyland?” he said finally.

Leesa sucked in a startled breath. How had he known her name? Her cheeks grew warm as she found herself looking down onto a sea of upraised faces. Whether everyone was looking at her because she’d asked a stupid question or because the professor knew her name, she had no idea. Her fingers began dancing in her hair. She wished she had an invisibility cloak or a magic ring to make herself disappear. “Yes,” she managed to reply. “Leesa.”

“Well, Leesa, it turns out I have heard of one-fanged vampires. And not just because another student asked me that same question a couple of years ago. Interestingly, that student had the same last name as yours.”

Leesa’s heart jumped. Bradley! Yes, her brother certainly would have asked about it. And he probably didn’t wait until the sixth class to do it, either.

“My brother,” she said.

“I thought as much when I saw your name on my roster. I was wondering when you’d get around to asking.” Professor Clerval smiled. “Your brother was a lot less shy.”

Don’t I know it, Leesa thought, feeling as if she might melt under all the eyes still staring up at her. She wished she and Dr. Clerval could talk about this alone. That would be sooo much easier.

“Might you and I have a word after class?” Professor Clerval asked.

“Yes, of course,” Leesa said, breathing a sigh of relief. Someone had heard her prayers!

The professor ambled back to the lectern. “Vampires are thought to be models of physical perfection,” he said to the class. “Fast, strong, handsome or beautiful. And by and large, much of that seems to be true. But there are stories that every now and then, something goes awry in the transmission process when a victim is bitten. The result of such an occurrence is a flawed creature, without the powers of a true vampire. Vampires have a name for such a creature—*grafhym*. The chief marker for a *grafhym*, it is said, is one fang instead of two.”

Leesa’s head was spinning. She thought back to her mom’s tale, to all her strange behavior. Was it possible there was some truth behind it after all, as incredible as it seemed? She was suddenly aware that Stefan was now seated beside her. She’d been so distracted she hadn’t even noticed his arrival, which was hard to believe, looking at him now and feeling his raw sensuality.

“Stefan!” It was all she could do to keep her voice quiet.

Stefan smiled at her. “Hi, Leesa. Nice to see you again.”

His accent only heightened his sensuality. “What are you doing here?” she whispered. “You’re not in this class, are you?”

“No, but sometimes I hang out with my ‘friends’ over there.” He nodded toward the goth group. “I don’t stand out quite so much that way. Besides, I like hearing about vampires. They’re fascinating creatures.”

Leesa thought back to Rave’s warning that Stefan *was* a vampire. He certainly looked the part—as if she had any idea what a real vampire looked like, she reminded herself—but sitting here next to him in class, the idea seemed ridiculous. Now, if he had popped up at midnight in some dark place...

“And it gives me a chance to say hi to you,” he continued, making no effort to hide the flirtation in his voice.

She couldn’t tell whether he meant he was here because she was, or simply that once he had seen her, he wanted to say hello. She wasn’t sure which she preferred, and she was too embarrassed and afraid to ask. “It’s nice to see you again,” she managed to say, hating how lame she sounded.

“I see you have a special interest in vampires,” Stefan said, his eyes beginning to take on that same bottomless look Leesa remembered from the party. She felt herself being drawn into them. “I’m curious,” he continued. “Where did you hear about the one-fanged kind?”

“Oh, just some stories my mom told me when I was little,” Leesa said, trying to make it seem of little importance.

There was a general shuffling in the room, the sound of notebooks closing and students getting to their feet and filing out of the lecture hall. She hadn’t even heard Dr. Clerval end the class.

“I know you need to talk with Professor Clerval,” Stefan said. “It was good to see you again, Leesa.”

They stood up. “You too,” Leesa replied.

“Maybe next time we’ll have a chance to discuss our mutual interest in vampires,” Stefan said as they began edging toward the end of the aisle.

The flirtation, or whatever it was, was stronger in his tone now. His magnetism was undeniable. “Maybe,” Leesa replied, trying to keep her voice noncommittal. She turned and began descending the stairs. “Bye, Stefan.”

When she reached the stage, she found Dr. Clerval and Randolph surrounded as usual by a cluster of students. As Leesa limped closer, the professor smiled at her.

“Okay, everyone,” he said. “Further questions will have to wait. Or feel free to pepper young Renfield with your queries for as long as you want. I wish to spend a bit of time with Ms. Nyland.”

A couple of the students drifted away, one girl fixing Leesa with an envious stare. Two stayed behind, talking to Randolph while Dr. Clerval shuffled over to Leesa. Close up, he looked even older than he did from the back of the room. His skin hung loosely from his face and was lined with thin red capillaries and mottled with age spots. In contrast to his aged appearance, his gray eyes were bright and alive.

“Will you join me in my office?” he asked. “It’s right upstairs.”

Leesa didn’t hesitate—the more privacy, the better. “Of course, Professor. I’d love to.”

Professor Clerval led her through a doorway behind the stage and into a musty stairwell, showing no effects from his age as they climbed to the third floor. At the top of the stairs, they stepped out into a silent, deserted hallway. Light spilled from an open doorway near the far end of the corridor, but otherwise, the place appeared empty. Their footsteps echoed lightly off brown plaster walls badly in need

of a fresh coat of paint.

The professor stopped in front of an old wooden door about halfway down the hall. A brass nameplate, darkened with age in testimony to his tenure here, was affixed to the middle of the door. He inserted a long cylindrical key into the old-fashioned lock and pushed the door open. After flipping the switch to turn on a dim overhead light, he stepped aside in a gentlemanly manner and let Leesa enter first.

She was surprised by how small his office was, smaller even than her dorm room. She had expected a full professor to have a much bigger space. Tall bookcases crammed with books lined every wall, making the room feel even smaller. Cut into the far wall was an arched window similar to the one in her room, though lead strips divided this one into small diamond-shaped sections. Beneath the window was a beautiful antique roll top desk, cluttered with papers. She detected the lingering aroma of old smoke—not at all unpleasant—so she guessed pipe, not cigarettes. Looking closer at the bookcases, she saw the shelves were filled with vampire books. She recognized some of the titles, but there were many she had never heard of. A glass-fronted bookcase housed what looked to be very old, leather-bound manuscripts.

“Please, have a seat,” the professor invited, indicating an old wooden chair with a dark burgundy cushioned seat similar to some she remembered from her grandmother’s house. He switched on a red and gold glass Tiffany lamp on the corner of the desk to give them a bit more light.

Leesa lowered herself gingerly onto the chair, not really sure how strong it was, but found it quite solid. Professor Clerval pulled a wheeled desk chair from under the desk and spun it around to face her. He sat down and took a curved black pipe and a pouch of tobacco from the top desk drawer.

“Do you mind?” he asked as he tamped a pinch of tobacco into the bowl.

“No, of course not,” Leesa replied, happy it wasn’t a cigarette, or even worse, a stinky cigar.

“As we get older, we tend to relish the simple pleasures.” He lit a wooden match and held it above the bowl, sucking in through the pipe repeatedly until the tobacco was lit. The smoke had a pleasant, fruity scent—cherry, Leesa thought.

The professor leaned back into his chair and puffed on his pipe. Leesa could see his aged features begin to soften as he relaxed. After a moment, he reached into another drawer and pulled out a brass key. He held the key out to Leesa.

“Open that bookcase,” he said, indicating the glass-fronted case. “Take out the third volume from the left on the second shelf. Be careful—it’s very old.”

Leesa took the key and opened the glass front of the case. Using two hands, she gently lifted out the leather-bound volume. The feel of the dried leather reminded her of the dry, crinkly hide of a stuffed iguana she’d once handled in high school biology.

“Here, let me have it,” the professor said.

Leesa handed him the old book. “What is it?”

Professor Clerval rested the book on his lap. “It’s an original manuscript from the early nineteenth century, said to be the memoirs of a female vampire.” He put his pipe into a brass ashtray atop the desk and carefully opened the book. Leesa could hear the leather binding crinkle. She scraped her chair closer.

“Whether it is in fact that, or the work of someone’s imagination, I’m not sure. But it contains a small section about the matter of such interest to the Nyland family—one-fanged vampires.” He thumbed slowly through the pages, stopping about halfway through. “Ahhh, here it is.” He looked up at Leesa. “I don’t expect you read Italian?”

Leesa shook her head. “No, just English.”

“I’ll summarize it for you, then. She writes of a man she wanted to take for her consort, to make him vampire and live by her side. She says she knew something was wrong the instant she began drinking his blood. Some feeling she had never before experienced. The word she uses does not translate well, but *a sourness* would be a good approximation. When she finished, she failed to see the expected change in his eyes, the look she normally saw when ushering a human into the realm of the undead.”

Professor Clerval carefully turned the page. “At first, the man didn’t know anything was wrong.” He looked up at Leesa. She was sitting on the edge of her chair, her attention riveted upon him.

“How could he know?” he asked. “After all, a person only gets bitten once. But the vampire knew.” The professor returned to the book. “She writes that he smiled at her and reached out his hands for hers, but was taken by surprise when she faltered back. I’ll quote her now: ‘I recoiled in horror as he opened his mouth, for it revealed a thing of which I’d only heard stories, had never seen, and hope never to see again. Just one lone fang dropped from his upper jaw—the mark of a *grafhym*. The man I wanted for my consort was damaged, imperfect.’ She goes on to say he was banished from the tribe immediately, forced out into the forest to live his life alone.”

He turned another page. “The final section talks about the phenomenon of *grafhym* in general. How their powers are sorely limited. And most importantly, how they cannot turn a victim vampire, can at best turn them into weaker versions of themselves.”

He closed the book and looked up, smiling. “Kind of like making a copy of a copy, I guess. So tell me, Leesa, why the family interest in something so out of the ordinary as one-fanged vampires? Your brother never said.”

Leesa debated briefly how much to tell him, but decided to give him the full story, sensing she might need his help in the future. She began with her mother’s “accident” and her claim about being bitten by a one-fanged vampire, and then detailed the bizarre behavioral changes her mom had suffered over the years and how they had shaped her family.

Professor Clerval listened carefully, puffing absently on his pipe as Leesa talked. He didn’t interrupt with a single question.

“So whether your mother’s story is true or not,” he said when she finished, “doesn’t really matter. Its effect on your family has been quite powerful.”

“Do you think it could be true?” Leesa knew it wouldn’t really make any difference—the past is past—but there would be some small comfort in knowing her mom wasn’t crazy.

Professor Clerval shrugged. “I don’t know. But nothing your mother said contradicts anything of what we just read. And at least some of her behaviors are consistent with *grafhym*. I’d love to meet her, talk to her.”

“She’s still in San Diego. I doubt I could convince her to come back here.” Leesa thought about the idea for a few seconds. “But I guess I could try. Maybe on a red-eye,” she mused.

“Please try,” the professor said. “Because there’s one very important thing we must consider regarding your mother.”

Leesa was struck by the seriousness of his tone. “What’s that?” she asked.

Professor Clerval looked at her solemnly. “If your mother simply made up her tale, where would she have heard of a one-fanged vampire? Awareness of the existence of *grafhym* is exceedingly uncommon.”

The professor’s words struck Leesa like a slap. Since she had not known one-fanged vampires

existed, she had always assumed the story was a creation of her mom's imagination. But how likely was her mom's imagination to have hit so close to what Dr. Clerval had just read from the old manuscript? One fang, maybe—there would have to be only one fang to explain the single puncture in her neck. But the idea of a flawed transfer of power? That was too close to the mark. Leesa breathed deeply. Not since she was a very young child had she found herself believing her mom's story like this.

"I'd love to talk to you and your brother together," Professor Clerval said, pulling Leesa from her musings.

"I wish you could," Leesa replied sadly. "But Bradley's gone."

"Gone?"

"Over a year now. He sent me an email, telling me he was going away and not to try finding him."

Professor Clerval leaned forward. "Uh-oh," he murmured.

Leesa popped out of her chair. "What is it? Do you know something?"

"No. Sorry. Nothing specific, at least. Please, sit." He waited until Leesa sat back down. "I'm betting it had something to do with the girl."

"Edwina?"

"Was that her name? I never formally met her. Bradley brought her to class a couple of times. There was enough room, so I permitted it. They usually sat near the front."

"Why do you think Edwina had anything to do with Bradley's disappearance?" Leesa had guessed it probably did, but she never had any concrete reason to support the belief.

"Something about the way she looked, the way she moved," Professor Clerval said. "But it was more than that. It was the way she looked *at* you. Arrogant, challenging. Especially whenever I said something out of the mainstream about vampires. Like, who was I, some old man, to try to reveal the mysteries of the undead? As if she possessed a secret knowledge no one else had. Afterward, when I had time to think about it, to put some pieces together, I began to wonder if maybe she *was* a vampire. And now to learn Bradley is gone. If Edwina is a vampire, God help him."

Leesa's mouth went dry. First her mom, and now Bradley. She stood up and began to pace the tiny office. Even if the stories were all nonsense, the idea of vampires continued to wreck her family. And if they were real, that was even worse. She looked at the professor. He seemed to have aged in the last few minutes. "You don't really think Edwina was a vampire, do you?"

"I have no way of knowing, but she certainly looked the part. And with what you just told me about your family, she could have used that to ensnare your brother." Dr. Clerval picked up his pipe and took a long puff. "If Edwina hinted at forbidden knowledge, Bradley would not have resisted."

Nor would she, Leesa knew. She would have to follow this trail. "Was Edwina a student here?"

"Not to my knowledge. I could look back through the school's databases, I suppose."

"I've already checked the yearbooks. But go ahead, please, in case there's something in your listings." She sat back down. There was a question she had to ask, but she dreaded the answer. "Professor, if she really was a vampire, what does that mean for Bradley?"

The professor's countenance darkened. "If he's been gone as long as you say," he said, "then one of two things, I'm afraid. Either Bradley is a vampire now, or she's made him into a feeder."

Leesa did not at all like the way the professor said that. "What's a feeder?"

"A feeder is a human captive kept as a continuous source of blood. The host drinks the feeder's blood regularly, never biting deeply enough or taking enough blood to turn the victim vampire. The blood

is allowed to replenish itself before the vampire drinks again, giving him or her a personal, never-ending well of blood. I would think it a nightmarish existence, caught between the world of the living and the world of the undead.”

Leesa shivered. The thought chilled her own blood.

15. GLOVES AND A BROKEN PHONE

The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Out for her daily walk, Leesa was frustrated with the nothing new. She didn't have class until eleven today, so she decided to do her four-mile loop: out the north gate, down the hill to downtown Middletown and south along Main Street, then back onto campus from the east. Despite the bright sun, the morning was cold enough for her to see her breath—something rare back in San Diego—and she enjoyed puffing out little clouds of steam for the first few minutes of her walk. She had donned three T-shirts under her red Weston sweatshirt and walked with her hands pulled up inside her sleeves. At least I'm stylish, she thought wryly, glancing down at the multicolored layers protruding from her sweatshirt around her hips. And warm, which was really all that mattered, with layers she could peel away as she grew more heated from her exertions.

Her frustrations centered around Bradley. She had heard nothing from Dr. Clerval, which probably meant he had failed to find anything about Edwina in the school's databases. She had finally connected with Bradley's freshman RA and had talked with him on the phone. He spoke highly of her brother, but knew nothing about what he'd been up to during his sophomore year. She wasn't sure where to turn next. Topping off her frustrations, she hadn't seen Rave in more than a week. Not for the first time, she wished he had a damn phone!

But it was too nice out to brood on such negative thoughts, so she turned her attention to the beautiful scenery. The fall foliage was nearing its peak, painting the landscape with a kaleidoscope of colors unlike anything she'd ever seen in San Diego. The maples dotting the long hillside above the north gate were exploding with fiery reds and dark purples, while the oaks glowed gold and yellow. A light breeze rustled the leaves, sending a few of them spiraling to the ground, where a growing carpet of red, yellow and brown speckled the still lush green lawn. She breathed deeply, inhaling the earthy fragrance of the decaying leaves.

As she neared the wide brick columns marking the campus gateway, she felt that familiar, strange sense of Rave's presence. She looked around, but as usual, saw no sign of him. Just for fun, she stopped one step inside the gate and said loudly, "Hi, Rave."

To her surprise, he stepped around the corner and into the gateway. Despite the cold, he wore no jacket, just a navy blue long-sleeve T-shirt and jeans. A pair of black leather gloves covered his hands. He looked perplexed.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked.

"You're always popping up out of nowhere," she said, trying to restrain her smile, "so now I stop before every corner I come to and call your name, just in case."

Rave laughed. "I almost believe you. You going anywhere special?"

"Nope. Just taking my morning walk. Down into Middletown, along Main Street." She started down the sidewalk. "Wanna come along?"

"Now you're reading my mind," he joked as he fell into step beside her. "What other hidden powers do you have?"

She laughed. "I'll never tell." She took in his lack of a jacket again. "Aren't you cold?"

He held up his gloved hands. "As long as I keep my hands warm, I'm good." He didn't tell her his real reason for the gloves—she would find out soon enough.

"Isn't this beautiful?" Leesa asked as they strolled down the hill under a canopy of bright red and

gold trees toward downtown. At the end of the long, colorful tunnel, the sun-dappled Connecticut River flowed by, a narrow ribbon of blue and flashing gold. Even the line of cars rumbling alongside them couldn't mar the scene's beauty.

"Yes, it is," Rave said, turning to look at her. "Very beautiful."

Leesa blushed. His dark brown eyes seemed almost to caress her, and she almost missed a step with her bad leg, nearly tripping.

"You're not really talking about the trees, are you?" she managed to stammer.

Rave grinned. "What trees?" he asked innocently. He made a show of looking up at the trees. "Oh, yeah. Not bad. Not bad at all."

Leesa shook her head in a "What am I going to do with you" manner, but couldn't help smiling. She had never felt so at ease with a guy, so comfortable. And it got a hundred times better when Rave reached out and took her hand. Even through his glove, she could feel the inviting warmth of his hand. All her frustrations were temporarily forgotten, shoved aside by her joy.

Hand in hand, they resumed their walk. Leesa warmed up quickly and wondered how much was from the sun and the walk, and how much was from Rave's presence. After a few minutes, they stopped briefly so she could remove one of the T-shirts from under her sweatshirt. At the bottom of the hill they turned right, onto a wide sidewalk lined with shops, bars and restaurants. There were few trees here, the colors coming instead from weathered canvas awnings and painted signs. This street was not as pretty as the one they had just turned off, but Leesa didn't care—not with Rave beside her, still holding her hand. She caught their reflection in the wide window of an old drugstore and liked the way they looked together. At least he's not a vampire, she thought suddenly, recalling what Professor Clerval had said about their lack of a reflection.

"How come you know so much about vampires?" she asked. "Did you take Professor Clerval's class?"

"No, I just pop in to listen now and then," Rave replied. He squeezed her hand. "I'm glad I did."

Leesa squeezed back, but before she could reply, a series of beeps from the small nylon pouch on her hip told her she had a text. It had to be Cali. "Do you mind?" she asked, reaching toward her hip.

"Go ahead," he said, smiling. "I know how attached you people are to those things." He started to pull his hand free from hers, but she grasped it more tightly.

"Oh no you don't," she said. "I can do this with one hand."

She took out her cell, saw it was indeed a text from Cali, and opened it. Before she could read the message, the letters began breaking up and the screen faded to gray. She pulled her hand from Rave's and held the phone in both hands, pressing several keys. Nothing happened. The phone was dead.

"I don't get it," she said, staring at the blank screen. "I charged this thing last night. It can't be dead already."

Rave knew why the phone had stopped working. She should have let go of his hand, but he wasn't ready to tell her that. This was why his people didn't use anything with batteries.

"Don't ask me," he shrugged. "I don't have a clue about those things."

Leesa shook the offending instrument, as if that might bring it back to life, but nothing happened. She dropped the phone back into her pouch and reached out for Rave's hand. This was more fun, anyway.

They continued their walk, heading back up the hill to the campus. Halfway up, Leesa peeled off a second T-shirt. When they began to near her dorm, she wished she had time for another loop. She didn't want this wonderful morning to end. But physics began in less than an hour, and missing even one session

of that difficult course would set her back.

“I have to get ready for class,” she said when they reached her dorm. “But I’d much rather stay with you if I could.”

Rave took both her hands in his. “Me, too.”

As she gazed into his beautiful dark eyes, Leesa remembered the comment he had made the last time they were together about not having wings. Right now, she felt like she *could* fly, wings or no wings. Even if he was still wearing those darn gloves. Now if he would just kiss her...

Rave felt himself beginning to get lost in Leesa’s crystal eyes. The pull to kiss her was powerful, almost irresistible. It would be so wonderful to let himself go, to give in to the pull. He forced his eyes down to her hands, still clasped in his.

“You’d better get going.” His voice was almost hoarse, caught in his throat. “You don’t want to be late.”

Leesa blinked. What had just happened? She had been sure he was going to kiss her. She was sooo not good at this stuff. “Will I see you again soon?” she managed to ask.

“Count on it.”

He squeezed her hands once, then let go and began walking away. He stopped after a few steps and turned back to her, lifting his hand to his ear and miming a phone.

“I’ll call you,” he joked. His handsome face broke into a wide grin.

Leesa laughed, then spun around and hurried into the dorm.

16. VAMPIRE COUNCIL

Imagine a ruin so strange, you wonder can it truly exist. Imagine a hole so deep sunlight never penetrates the gloom, a cave so hidden no human has ever discovered it. Imagine a place so dead even vermin and insects avoid all but its outer reaches. And then imagine a cavern so huge and elaborate its twisting chambers can easily house scores of vampires. This is the grotto the Connecticut coven of vampires call home.

For hundreds of years, the vampires have used the perpetual night of this deep cavern to avoid the hated sun and to remain hidden from the ever-increasing human population as well. Cut eons ago under the tree-covered hills on the eastern side of the Connecticut River by a now-vanished underground waterway, the cavern was the perfect hideaway. Thousands of hours of labor shaped the various chambers to suit the vampires' needs—but what were hours, or even years, to the undead, who had eternity?

The largest of the chambers, a vast natural amphitheater a hundred feet across with a ceiling almost thirty feet high in the center, served as their Council chamber. Rows of stone benches carved from the uneven floor faced seven seats hewn from the limestone wall. Small candles in iron holders drilled into the rock spilled meager illumination into the chamber, all the light needed for the more than three score vampires who filled the benches. Seated in the seven places of honor were the members of the High Council, the ruling body of the coven. Stefan, the youngest and least senior among them, sat proudly on the left end. Occupying the middle seat was Ricard, Lord of the Coven and the vampire who had turned Stefan.

A vampire for nearly a thousand years, Ricard was an imposing figure—tall and muscular, with long silver hair gathered by an ornate silver clasp into a ponytail reaching to his waist. The features of his handsome face were sharp and aristocratic.

He raised his arms to signal the waiting crowd to silence.

“By now,” he began, his voice deep and sonorous, “even the lessermost among us have sensed the rising energies that foretell *Destiratu*.” The word sent a murmur rumbling through the cavern. Ricard waited patiently before continuing. “And with that rise comes an increase in our hunger, our need to feast. But we must be careful. Many things have changed since *Destiratu* last surged through our veins. In centuries past, we had little need to restrain ourselves, and it was a time of unbridled feasting. But the humans have grown far more numerous and have developed weapons dangerous even to us. We must make certain we do nothing to draw their attention our way.”

Ricard rose to his feet and took two steps forward. “And let us not forget, others will feel the magical energies as well, and their hunger shall also rise. The volkaanes will be hunting, driven by their need as we are by ours.” He paused, making sure every eye and every ear was focused upon him. “The Council has come to a decision, binding on every member of this coven. Henceforth, no one outside the Council shall be permitted to venture from these caverns alone. We have already lost Francona, missing more than a fortnight now. From this day forward, only groups of three or more may go out, and then only after gaining permission from a Council member.”

A second murmuring echoed through the cavern, louder than the first, but no one voiced an objection.

“Will this truly be *Destiratu*, my lord?” a raven-haired female in the front row called above the clamor.

Ricard sat down. “No one can say, Edwina. But the signs are there. If the energies continue to grow, further measures will be taken. *Destiratu* carries pleasures that cannot be reached at any other time, and so brings temptations not felt at other times as well.” His lips twisted into a wide smile as he remembered triumphs from *Destiratus* past, especially the burning blood of volkaanes he had bested.

Stefan rose to his feet. “I have a suggestion, my lord.”

Ricard turned to his favorite protégé. “Yes, Stefan? What say you?”

“Perhaps more feeders should be taken,” he said, looking out over the assembled coven. “To lessen the hunger and the temptations of the younger and weaker among us.”

Ricard considered the idea. “Your suggestion has merit. I leave it to you to talk to those without feeders. Find out who might want one now. The Council will meet again in a few days to decide how to proceed. I take it *you* have not changed your mind on the subject, Stefan?”

Stefan shook his head. “No, my lord. I seek a consort, and I shall settle for nothing less.”

Ricard studied Stefan’s face. “Do I sense that you have someone in mind?”

Stefan grinned. “I might.”

“Use caution, Stefan. Powerful though you be, you are not immune to danger.”

“I know that, my lord. I shall be careful, as always.”

17. TEASING

“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,” Cali quoted, her voice soft and dreamy. “I love thee enough to hold *both* thy hands. Woo hoo!” she teased. “But not enough to take off his freaking gloves!”

“Stop it!” Leesa said, laughing hard. She was sitting on the wooden chair in front of Cali’s desk, her left elbow resting on the desktop, holding a plastic cup of wine. Green Day was squawking something about Jesus being in suburbia—Leesa had never been able to make complete sense of the song. She set her wine down on the desk to avoid spilling it while she laughed. This was her second glass, the first time she’d ever had more than one, and her head was buzzing. She had already decided two glasses would be her permanent limit. She wasn’t all that fond of wine—had tried some only a couple of times before—but this one, a mellow chardonnay with a slightly fruity taste, was actually pretty good. Andy had brought a couple of bottles to Cali’s room the night before. He and Cali drank some—Leesa did not want to know what else they did—but there had been a bottle left over, and she and Cali were putting a nice dent into it tonight.

She hadn’t come down to Cali’s room to drink; she just wanted to share the details of her walk with Rave that morning. But Cali suggested they have some wine, as long as it was there, and Leesa figured why not? She had planned on sipping hers while Cali drank, but the wine tasted better than she expected, and she drank faster than she had planned. The more she drank, the more romantically she described things.

Cali, perched on her bed as usual, was wearing a comfortable pair of baggy purple sweatpants and an oversized gray long-sleeve T-shirt with black and white slashes across the front. She, too, was beginning to feel the effects of the wine and couldn’t help teasing as Leesa became more and more sappy.

“You wouldn’t be making fun if you were there,” Leesa said when she managed to stop laughing. “It was so...” She paused, trying to find the right word in her wine-fogged brain. “So magical.”

“Oh, well, as long as it was magical, I’ll have to stop teasing you.” They both giggled.

Leesa took another sip. Her mind drifted back to that wonderful moment when Rave held both her hands and his dark eyes locked onto hers. “For a minute, I thought he was going to kiss me.”

“Ooooh, he almost kissed you!” Cali mimicked, grinning. “What is this, sixth grade?” They both started giggling again.

“Stop it, Cali,” Leesa pleaded, trying to control her laughter.

“Do you want to hear if Andy *almost* kissed me last night?”

“Ha! Please, no. I beg you.” Leesa knew Cali and Andy had gone out twice before last night and she had already heard about the passionate goodnight kissing that followed their second date. “I heard enough last time, thank you.”

They both broke out laughing again.

Caitlin poked her head in through the doorway, drawn by all the laughter. She was wearing a bright red T-shirt with I LOVE BOYS printed across the front in giant gold letters. Leesa realized she had never seen Caitlin wear any of her flirty shirts outside the dorm and thought perhaps her friend was not quite as wild as she tried to appear.

“Sounds like you two are having an awful lot of fun,” Caitlin said, smiling. “Can I join you?”

“C’mon in, Cat,” Cali invited. She lifted the nearly empty bottle of wine. “Want some wine? There’s a little left.”

“Sure, thanks.” Caitlin grabbed a cup from the stack on Cali’s desk and plopped down on the edge of the bed, holding the cup out to Cali, who emptied the bottle into the cup.

Caitlin took a big swallow and smacked her lips together with exaggerated delight. “Not bad,” she said. “So, what’s got you two so fired up?”

“Oh, not much,” Cali said. “Leesa’s been telling me about her walk with Rave this morning.” She paused, and then spoke with exaggerated excitement. “He finally held her hand!”

“Ooooh,” Caitlin said, grinning. “Was it good, Leesa?” she teased.

“Oh, great,” Leesa said, shaking her head. “Now I’ve got two of you on my case. I should keep my big mouth shut.”

“He kept his gloves on, though,” Cali added.

“Uh-oh,” Caitlin said in mock seriousness. “That’s worse than keeping his socks on during sex.”

“Maybe he’ll wear the gloves during sex, too,” Cali said. “Talk about using protection!”

Cali and Caitlin burst into laughter. “Rule number one: no gloves during sex,” Cali said through her laughter.

Leesa tried to control herself, but failed. She joined in the laughter, though not as loudly as her friends. It did seem kind of silly now, but that didn’t detract from how wonderful it felt at the time, Cali and Caitlin be damned.

“It gets better,” Cali said after a few moments. “He *almost* kissed her.”

Caitlin fluttered her hand dramatically against her chest. “Be still my beating heart,” she said. “Really?”

“And it was *magical!*” Cali continued.

The laughter started up anew, even louder than before. Leesa didn’t care. Her friends could tease her all they wanted. What were friends for, anyhow? Besides, it *was* magical.

When she stopped laughing, Caitlin turned to Cali. “Our little girl is growing up so fast. We’d better have the *talk* with her.”

“You two are too funny,” Leesa said, smiling. “Have you thought about taking your act onstage?”

“We’re only teasing cuz we love you,” Cali said. “You gotta admit, it’s pretty funny, at least for us.”

“I know,” Leesa admitted. “Just don’t lay it on too heavy, okay? I’m kinda new to this stuff—unlike a certain pair of wenches I know.”

“Ooooh, that hurts,” Cali said, clutching her chest.

“Guilty as charged,” Caitlin said, grinning and stretching her I LOVE BOYS T-shirt out from her chest. “Cali warned you those Maston guys were strange, remember?”

“Seriously though,” Cali said. “Rave has a gig most guys would kill for. That no-phone thing is too perfect. The perfect excuse never to call. And since he can’t call ahead, he can just show up whenever he wants. If this gets out, guys’ll be ditching their cells by the hundreds.”

They all burst into laughter again. This time, Leesa laughed as hard as the others. She much preferred laughing with, than being laughed at.

Twenty miles to the east, across the river from where the three girls talked and teased and giggled, Rave stood in the dark outside the door of an old cabin, the same incident replaying in his mind. He had so badly wanted to kiss Leesa. For an instant, the pull had been so strong he’d almost forgotten himself, forgotten what he was, forgotten what could happen if his mouth met hers. He had recovered in time, of

course, but the memory still burned strong in his mind. He needed to know more, to know what his options were, to know if he could somehow kiss her without killing her.

The cabin was the oldest in their settlement, older than Rave, built of rough hewn logs cut from the surrounding forest more than two hundred years ago. Dried mud black with age chinked the spaces between the logs. The two front windows were tiny—glass had not been an option when the cabin was built, so deer hide had hung over the openings back then. Glass had been added later, and Rave could see flickering light inside, telling him that Balin—his friend, his mentor, the closest thing he had to a father—was inside.

The long-lived volkaanes didn't breed the way humans did. A couple of times each century, all the women of childbearing age became fertile, and the Festival of Renewal took place. A day and a night were spent in song and dance and prayer, and the coupling that followed would produce ten to fifteen offspring, enough to insure the continuation of the tribe. When the infants were born, they were taken from their mothers to a large cabin in the center of the settlement and raised communally, never knowing their true mother or father. It took a full two score years for a volkaane to reach maturity and be deemed ready to take their place among the tribe—ample time to form an attachment to one or more of their teachers, as Rave had with Balin.

Still, he hesitated outside Balin's door. As close as he felt to the old volkaane, he was unsure how or even whether to broach the subject of what was happening between him and Leesa. In the more than a century and a half of his lifetime, no volkaane he knew had ever paired with a human. He'd heard such a thing had been done on rare occasions, but he didn't know if the stories were true. There was only one way to find out. He sucked in a deep breath and knocked on the old wood door.

The volkaane who opened it was tall and thin, an inch or two taller than Rave's six-foot height, with a lean body only slightly bent from more than five hundred years of living. He wore handmade buckskin clothes, the same as he had worn when he was younger—unlike many of his folk, he had never switched to more modern garb. His long hair was dark gray, the color of lead, with streaks of the characteristic Maston copper still visible in places.

Balin's lined face broke into a broad smile when he saw Rave waiting on his doorstep. "Young Rave," he said, "what a nice surprise." He stepped back from the doorway. "Come in, come in."

Rave shook his head as he followed the old volkaane inside. He had been "young Rave" a century and a half ago, and guessed he would remain "young Rave" until Balin finally passed away, probably in another couple hundred years. Rave was in no hurry for that to happen.

The inside of Balin's cabin was Spartan, even by Maston standards. The entire place was one room, six paces wide and ten paces long, furnished with simple, handmade wooden furniture. A rectangular dining table with a split log bench on either side filled most of one end of the place, and a straw-filled sleeping mat covered the floor at the other end. A small fire crackled in a stone fireplace in the far wall, adding its flickering light to the illumination cast by four tallow candles high on the walls. Volkaane fireplaces were used for cooking and light, since they needed no fires for warmth. If necessary, their inner fire could even be used for cooking, but it was usually simpler and more efficient to put something over the fire. Four crude wooden chairs formed a half circle in front of the fireplace—volkaanes enjoyed watching any kind of fire flicker and burn.

"Sit down, young Rave. Can I get you something to drink? Water? Mead?"

Rave sat in front of the fireplace. What to drink was an easy choice. The way he was feeling, it was definitely a night for mead.

“Mead,” he said. Like all volkaanes, Rave enjoyed the homemade brew, and Balin’s was considered the best in the village.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Balin said, grinning as he uncorked a large bottle and filled two pewter mugs with amber liquid. “Gives me an excuse to have a wee bit myself.”

Balin handed Rave one of the heavy mugs and sat down beside him. They clinked mugs and each took a long pull. The sweet brew slid easily down Rave’s throat. He detected an extra taste to the honey-based liquid. Something fruity. Balin was always adding extra flavors to his brews.

“Apple?” Rave asked.

Balin nodded. “You’ve got a good palate, young Rave. Apple it is.”

Rave took another swallow, smaller this time, now that the edge had been taken off his thirst.

“So, what brings you to my humble abode this evening?” Balin asked.

Rave blew out a big breath. “I’m not sure where to start.”

“When in doubt, the beginning’s as good a place as any, I always say.”

So Rave began at the beginning, with his first sight of Leesa in the vampire class. He told Balin of the immediate pull he felt toward her, and how the feeling grew stronger each time he saw her. He spoke of their first walk, and of the night at the party—how protective he felt when, almost unbelievably, he found her talking to a vampire. He finished by recounting the details of their walk that morning, and how at the end, he had almost kissed her.

Balin listened closely, sipping his mead and never interrupting, his growing concern showing on his face as Rave spoke.

“Thank goodness you didn’t,” he said when Rave was finished.

“I know, I know,” Rave said. “But I wanted to so badly. Isn’t there some way I can do it safely?”

Balin drained the last of his mead and rose to his feet. “This is a two-mug problem, I think.” He took Rave’s mug and crossed to the table to refill both mugs.

“Such a thing is not unheard of, but it’s exceedingly rare,” he said after handing Rave his replenished mug. “When I was young, younger than you are now, one of my fellows took up with a human female. For a month or two, everything seemed fine, but one night, he lost control.” Balin stopped and took a long pull of mead.

Rave took a drink as well. He saw the sadness in Balin’s eyes and knew he wasn’t going to like the end of this story. “Go on,” he said, needing to hear the details.

“His passion grew too inflamed, and he breathed too deeply of her. He realized it instantly and stopped himself before she burned, but it was too late. The life breath was gone from her.” He looked into Rave’s eyes. “He was never the same afterward, young Rave, never forgave himself for his loss of control. He died before reaching his second century mark.”

“That’s horrible,” Rave said. He closed his eyes and sipped his mead, replaying in his mind everything Balin had said. “But it can be done?” he asked at last. “You said it’s not unheard of, just rare.”

“Yes, it can be done. With caution and with practice.” Balin rested his mug on the chair beside him and took Rave’s free hand in both of his. “But I’m not sure it can be done by you. Your power is very strong, young Rave. Perhaps strong enough to make you chieftain one day.”

Rave had long known his power was greater than most, and this was not the first time Balin had talked about Rave someday becoming chieftain. But it was the first time the thought brought sadness and regret with it. He didn’t know how he could give up Leesa.

“I shall delve into the scrolls and see what I can find,” Balin said. “But you really should let her

go before this goes any further.” He stood up and paced a few steps, then turned back, his heart heavy. “I’m sorry, but if you love her, the best thing you can do for her is to leave her alone.”

Rave buried his head in his hands. He knew Balin was right, that everything he had said was true. The closer Rave let himself get to Leesa, the more danger she would be in. The smart thing, the safe thing, would be to let her go. But he didn’t know how. He lifted his head and looked solemnly at Balin.

“I don’t know if I can do that,” he said. “We have to think of something, Balin. We have to.”

18. GOING ROGUE

The boy with fair hair lowered himself down the last few feet of rock and headed toward the trees. His name was Robert, and he was a boy in appearance only, for he had been born almost sixty years before. But he was just fifteen, a sophomore in high school, when he was made vampire, and he had aged in appearance not at all. Keeping to the shadows, he glided swiftly through the trees. The morning sun was strong enough to burn—already his skin ached dully from his exposure climbing down the cliff face—and the shade from the leafy canopy provided welcome relief. Just as importantly, he needed to stay hidden, lest watchful eyes from the cavern discern his flight.

Robert was boyishly slim, with thin blond hair that fell across a corner of his face. Filled with youthful impetuosity, he was violating the Council's will by venturing out alone. The desire to feed had grown overwhelming, and he had not been vampire long enough to learn how to control his urges, not with the looming *Destiratu* fanning his need for blood. As long as he was not seen leaving, no one would be likely to notice his absence. He had waited for a bright sunny morning, when his brethren would be most lax about anyone going out, to make his break. Now that he was out, he hoped the blanket of gray clouds covering the western sky would soon block the sun. But even if it didn't, the chance to feed was worth the pain.

He wound his way south through the trees along the eastern shore of the Connecticut River, the opposite direction from his intended destination, before boarding the old Chester-Hadlyme Ferry, which had been carrying passengers and cars across the river since long before he was born. The big ferry took less than ten minutes to cross to Chester, but even so, he spent the crossing in the protective shade of the old boat's cabin. As soon as they docked, he scurried into the shadow of the nearest building. The gray cloud layer continued its eastward march across the sky. Soon clouds and sun would meet, and he would be able to move about more comfortably. Staying in the shadows as much as possible, he finally ducked into a covered walking bridge near an old mill that had been converted into a restaurant. The shade inside the wooden tunnel was blessedly cool, so he sat down on the wooden planks to await the clouds.

He didn't have long to wait. In less than thirty minutes, the daylight outside the bridge's entrance began to dim, growing progressively less bright as the clouds overran the sun. He moved to the end of the bridge and surveyed the sky. The cloud layer was thick, unbroken. Smiling, he stepped out from the bridge and began his journey north.

He could have hunted here in Chester, but he wasn't familiar with the town and thought it still too close to the cavern, despite the intervening river. His hometown of Middletown was but fifteen miles away. Middletown would be far safer, with plenty of places to hide nearby, and it offered a greater bounty of prey besides.

The land between Chester and Middletown was heavily wooded, with only a few small towns he easily avoided. He made good time, moving with vampire speed through the trees and reaching the outskirts of Middletown with an hour of gray daylight remaining. He stopped at a small cave in the hills overlooking the city that he remembered from his youth. Little more than a hole in a rocky outcropping in the hillside, the entrance was overgrown with brush and maple saplings, making it a perfect hideaway. The cave would serve as shelter from the sun for however long he decided to remain here. He didn't need much room—his time in the cave would be mostly spent sleeping.

But not yet. The late afternoon was comfortably dim, and he was too revved up to sleep. The

excitement of his escape—and his anticipation for his first real feeding—sent a current of pulsating need through his body. Never had his hunger burned so fiercely.

And he knew just where to satisfy it. Less than a mile away, a campus full of careless young humans awaited him. He threaded his way through the trees down the hillside and before long was strolling across a broad lawn in front of the library. A steady stream of students flowed from the library's ornate front entrance, and the walkways crisscrossing the lawn also teemed with humans. All he had to do was get one alone for a few moments, somewhere no one could see. With his boyish appearance, he didn't expect that would be difficult.

Darkness descended quickly, but brought little slackening in the number of students in the library quadrangle. The walkways in front of the library were well lit, but the farther one moved from the library, the larger the pools of darkness became. Licking his lips in anticipation, he turned away from the library and headed into a darker area to await his prey.

Always keeping far enough back to avoid making a target nervous, he followed four different women before one finally turned down a short street toward a half-empty parking area. Robert's keen eyes swept the street. They were alone. This was his moment.

He sprang forward, closing the gap between them in a flash and wrapping his powerful arms around her before she even knew he was there. One hand covered her mouth to stifle her screams, while the other pinned her arms to her side as his fangs sank deep into her neck. As her warm blood gushed into his throat, he lifted her easily and carried her into a clump of thick shrubs to complete his meal. He drank greedily, stopping only when there was no more blood to drain. He smiled as he wiped his lips with his sleeve. This was so much better than the animal blood that had been his sustenance until now, so much more satisfying. This was what vampires were made for. And this was what he swore he would enjoy from this day forth.

He had no interest in turning his victim vampire, so he simply left her lifeless body among the bushes. At the last moment, he remembered his lessons—always hide the manner of death to avoid drawing attention to his kind. He took a short-bladed knife from the pouch at his waist and slashed a deep cut into the woman's neck, obliterating the puncture marks from his fangs. A puzzle for the pathetic humans—what had become of her blood? He grinned and disappeared into the night, his thirst slaked for now.

Two days later, he did it again, this time carrying the corpse off into the woods and burying it where it would never be found.

19. FIRST KISS

Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space—Leesa rubbed her forehead, trying to wrap her brain around *that* concept for her physics midterm. She had been studying hard all week, sleeping little and playing less, and felt confident she'd done well on her first three exams. Physics tomorrow would be the toughest by far, though. Her tired head was filled with symbols, equations and theories. Luckily, Professor Clerval didn't believe in exams—instead, he had assigned the class a paper that wasn't due until next week. So after her physics test, the crunch would be over—until finals, anyway. Ugh!

At least she wasn't alone in feeling stressed. Her dorm was filled with girls wandering the halls like zombies, wearing no makeup, their eyes bloodshot, vacant looks blanking their tired faces. Yellow light leaked under doors and soft music filtered through the walls at all hours of the night as many of her floor mates pulled all-nighters. Leesa had been up until the early hours twice already this week and would be putting in another late night tonight. It was nearly one o'clock now, and she still had two more chapters to review.

Even the usually effervescent Cali had been subdued this week, joking more than once she wished she had bought stock in Red Bull. Caffeine and herbs could do only so much, though, and Cali was showing the effects of the late hours. Leesa had tried her first Red Bull ever at the beginning of the week, and she was now downing a couple of cans a night. She was pretty sure some of the other girls were using something stronger than energy drinks and coffee, but Red Bull was more than enough for her.

On top of everything else, she hadn't seen Rave all week. Not that she would have had time for him, but he didn't know that, since they couldn't talk on the phone or text like normal people. So where the heck was he? He could have come by, even though she would have had to shoo him away. At least that would have been something. She wondered if he had gotten cold feet in addition to his cold hands.

The words on the page were beginning to blur, so she decided to take a short break. Standing up reminded her how long she'd been hunched over her desk—her spine creaked and protested like she was eighty frigging years old. She forced her shoulders back, trying to stretch the muscles in her upper back, then slowly rolled her neck in small circles. She needed to get out of her room, so she headed toward the stairway to see how Cali was doing.

Cali's door was open, and Leesa saw her friend sitting on the bed wearing her purple sweatpants and pink hoodie, a textbook on her lap and a notebook full of scribbled pages open beside her. Five empty cans of Red Bull tossed haphazardly off the side of her bed showed how long she had been studying.

Cali looked up at Leesa's arrival. A tired smile curved her lips. "Hey, Lees, c'mon in." She closed her book. "I could use a break."

Leesa stepped into the room as Cali unfolded herself from the bed, moving as stiffly as Leesa had a few minutes earlier. "I know the feeling," she said sympathetically as she watched Cali try to stretch out the kinks.

"This ain't like high school, huh?" Cali said.

Leesa shook her head. "Not even close."

"I was never up past midnight—not studying, anyhow," Cali said, grinning.

"And I never had a Red Bull until this week," Leesa said. "I guess new experiences are what

college is all about.”

“Yeah, but I’m liking some of those experiences better than others.” Cali stifled a yawn. “Just one more day, and this experience will be over.” Her face brightened. “Then we have the big Halloween party. That’ll be fun.”

“I hope so.”

“Miss Enthusiasm strikes again,” Cali teased. She grabbed Leesa’s arm. “C’mon, let’s take a walk around the dorm. Stretch out the kinks.”

Leesa followed Cali into the empty hallway. It was fairly quiet. All the doors except Cali’s were closed. The only music she could hear was soft and muted—studying music. No light peeked out from beneath Caitlin and Stacie’s door, but most of the others glowed with the telltale yellow strip that said, “Yep, we’re still up studying.”

“Stacie’s sleeping, lucky girl,” Cali said. “She’s some kind of braniac. Caitlin says she never studies past midnight. Still gets all A’s and B’s.”

“And here we are, prowling the hallways at one o’clock, with more studying still to go,” Leesa said, sighing. “What I wouldn’t give to be in bed right now. What about Caitlin? Don’t tell me she’s sleeping, too.”

“Nah, she’s pulling an all-nighter at the library. Says if she stays here, it’s too easy to get distracted or go to bed.”

“Distracted like walking the halls?” Leesa said, laughing.

Cali smiled. “This is a break, not a distraction. There’s a difference.”

“Okay. As long as it’s a break, let’s take five more minutes, and then I have to get back to work.”

Leesa closed her Blue Book and took what felt like her first real breath in almost two hours. A glance at the clock told her she still had five minutes left for the exam, but she was done—sooo done. She felt good about her performance, though, and was confident she had gotten at least a B. Definitely good enough for physics. All her studying had paid off. She had been up until four that morning, slept until eight, then snuck in some last minute cramming before the exam. Now she just wanted to go home, maybe take a nap.

She walked her booklet up to the front and dropped it on top of the few others already there. A couple of science geeks had been finished for a while, but most of her classmates were still frantically scribbling in their booklets as the final minutes ticked away. The professor, a preppy blond guy in his late thirties, nodded and gave her a small smile—her reward, she guessed, for finishing early. Leesa smiled back before turning and heading for the door.

The bright sunny day grew much brighter when she saw Rave smiling up at her from the bottom of the steps. He was wearing a black long-sleeve T-shirt and jeans. And those darn gloves, even though it wasn’t all that cold. Seeing him here was the last thing she expected, and her fatigue seemed to melt away. She smiled back and limped quickly down the steps.

“Hi, gorgeous,” he said. “How’d you do? Did you slay that physics monster?”

“I done good,” Leesa said, smiling. “The monster’s dead, at least for now. But how did you know what I was doing? I never told you about my midterms.”

“I have my methods.” Rave grinned and took both her hands in his. “Just because you don’t see me doesn’t mean I’m not around.”

Leesa’s smile widened. “Somehow, I believe that.” She squeezed his hands. “And I like it, too.

Though I prefer seeing you.”

Rave’s expression turned serious. “I need to talk to you. How about I take you to lunch?”

Leesa raised her eyebrows, feigning shock. “You mean almost like a real date?” She let her body go partially limp, held up only by his strong hands. “I may faint.”

Rave laughed. “Yeah, like a real date. *Almost*,” he mimicked. His face and voice turned serious. “After you hear what I have to say, you may not want any more dates, real or otherwise.”

Leesa stared into his eyes, her mind racing. What could he possibly say to make her not want to see him? Any thoughts of a nap disappeared.

“How about over at Clayton?” she suggested, naming the Student Center building. “It’s the nearest place with food. Not great food, for sure, but food.”

“As long as we can get some privacy, I don’t really care about the food.”

Privacy. Need to talk. May not want any more dates. What was going on here? Rave was being even more mysterious than usual. No way was she going any farther than Clayton before hearing what he had to say.

“Let’s go, then.” She let go of one of his hands, but kept a tight grip on the other as she led him around the corner toward the Student Center.

The dining hall was cavernous, furnished with plain, utilitarian plastic chairs and square wooden tables that could be pushed together to accommodate groups of any size. The rear wall was almost all glass and looked out onto a grassy courtyard. To the right was the cafeteria-style food service section, dominated by a long glass-covered counter stocked with sandwiches, salads, vegetables and side dishes. Behind the counter at the far end, a giant grill sizzled with hamburgers and hot dogs.

Leesa and Rave crossed to the food line, where Rave grabbed two red plastic trays and handed one to Leesa. The line was mercifully short and moved quickly, with most of the kids skipping past the salads and vegetables and heading right for the sandwiches, fries and burgers. The smell of grilled beef and fries beckoned them, even here at the far end of the counter.

Leesa also ignored the salads. She was too anxious to hear what Rave wanted to talk about to waste time picking out salad fixings. A burger and fries would do just fine, thank you.

Rave followed her lead, and a few minutes later they found a table in the far back corner that provided the privacy Rave wanted. The din of dozens of animated conversations still filled the space, but it was quieter here than at the more popular window tables. Hiding her impatience, Leesa squirted ketchup onto her fries and burger, and then offered the bottle to Rave, who shook his head.

At least he takes off his gloves to eat, she thought as she watched him pull them off and drop them onto the table. He picked up his burger in both hands and took a big bite, his dark eyes smiling at her over the top of the burger. It looked like she was going to have to wait a bit longer to hear what he had to say, so she went to work on her food. First some fries—underdone and soggy—then a bite of her burger. As usual, the meat was cooked to medium. Still, the burger wasn’t bad. Not great by any stretch, but not bad.

Leesa found herself eating more quickly than usual and forced herself to slow down. Rave would get to what he wanted to say when he was ready. He asked a couple of questions about her midterms, but for the most part they concentrated on their food. When Rave put his burger down to eat some fries, Leesa thought she saw char marks on the bun. How had he managed to get a toasted bun? Hers was cold and doughy.

Finally, they were finished. Leesa still had more than half her fries left, but she’d had enough.

Rave's plate was empty. She looked at him expectantly.

"Enjoying our date?" he asked playfully.

"Immensely. The cuisine was superb, the atmosphere enchanting, the service exceptional. Now, if I can get some delicious conversation for dessert, it'll be perfect."

Rave reached over and grabbed her plates, piling them atop his. He slid her empty tray beneath his and deposited them onto the adjacent table, clearing the space between them. He rested his forearms on the table.

"You wanted to know why I know so much about vampires," he began.

"Yeah," Leesa replied, surprised this was the subject he was so anxious to talk about.

"And you've probably been wondering why I kept my gloves on when I held your hand?"

"Um, yes, again." Leesa wondered at the juxtaposition of the two subjects. Please, please don't tell me you're a vampire, she thought. Her fingers began twirling in her hair.

Rave smiled. "I bet your friends gave you some grief about that."

"Yeah, they teased me some," she admitted, embarrassed that he'd guessed she had told her friends.

Rave leaned over the table until his face was mere inches from hers. "And you've probably wondered why I haven't kissed you yet, right?"

Leesa gulped, her heart racing. Her fingers twirled more vigorously. The whole room seemed to have gone quiet, but she knew that had to be her imagination. "Double yes. Triple yes."

Rave kept her fastened in his gaze for another moment before leaning back onto his chair. "The answer's complicated," he said finally. "And must remain a secret. But you deserve to know. Will you promise to tell no one?"

Leesa's brain was spinning. *Complicated. Secret. Tell no one.* Where on earth was he going with this? What did vampires have to do with holding hands and kissing? For some reason, her mother's wild story popped into her head. Not again, please, she prayed. She studied Rave's face. He didn't look crazy. He looked anxious, but determined. And damn handsome.

"Yeah, I promise."

Rave smiled. She could see some of the anxiety melt from his features.

"Do you believe in vampires, Leesa?"

Uh-oh, here we go, she thought. "Not completely. But more than when school started, that's for sure. Professor Clerval makes a compelling case. And you talk about them with such certainty."

"You're not alone. Most people don't believe they truly exist. But they do, I promise you. Have you ever heard of volkaanes?"

Leesa shook her head, frowning. "No, never. What's a volkaane?"

"Among other things, they are hunters of vampires."

Leesa thought back to Professor Clerval's discussion about why there weren't more vampires. Hunters. Helping keep the population in check. But he had never mentioned volkaanes. "What kind of creature can slay a vampire? They're supposed to be so strong, so fast, so dangerous."

"They are immensely strong, very fast, and very, very dangerous."

"And yet you say a volkaane can kill one." She tried to imagine what kind of creature could kill a vampire, and was suddenly struck by the thought that she was now accepting vampires as fact. "What do volkaanes look like?" she asked.

A wry smile played across Rave's lips. "They look a lot like me," he said.

It took a few seconds for his words to register. What was he saying? That he knew so much about vampires because he hunted them? Was he telling her he was a volkaane, whatever that meant? Was that why he was so sure Stefan was a vampire?

“Are you saying...?” Leesa’s fingers busied themselves in her hair again.

Rave nodded. “Yes. I’m a volkaane.”

“You kill vampires?” she asked, trying to wrap her head around all this. “How? Wooden stakes? Chopping off their heads? And what does that have to do with not holding my hand or kissing me?”

Rave put his hand out on the table, palm up. “Touch my hand, Leesa.”

She hesitated, still not sure what was going on, then pulled her hand from her hair and reached across the table, stopping when it was a few inches above Rave’s outstretched palm. Her fingers began to grow warm. She looked up at Rave’s face.

“Go ahead,” he said.

She lowered her hand slowly until her palm rested atop his. His skin was warm, almost hot. Rave let her control the moment, making no move to hold her hand.

She looked at him questioningly. “It’s so warm.”

Rave smiled. “That’s why the gloves. I wasn’t ready to explain the heat.”

Leesa closed her fingers around his hand. His heat flowed into her, making her hand and arm tingle pleasantly. “I get it...I think. You would’ve had to tell me about being a volkaane.” She grinned, remembering the charred marks on his bun. “I wish you’d told me before we ate. You could have toasted my bun.”

Rave laughed, glad she wasn’t freaking out about what he had just told her.

A sudden thought made Leesa blush. “Are your kisses as hot as your hands?” she asked.

Rave grinned. “Hotter.” His expression turned serious. “And much more dangerous. It’s how we slay vampires.”

A puzzled frown creased Leesa’s brow. “You kill them by kissing them?”

“In a way, yes.” Rave brought her hand to his lips and kissed it lightly. More heat surged through her, hotter this time. “Our fire draws the life breath from them—burns them from the inside out.”

Leesa remembered Cali’s story about the Mastons’ deadly kiss. What if some of the other stories were true as well? Get a grip, she chided herself. This was Rave. He would never hurt her. “I guess your kisses give a whole new meaning to ‘takes my breath away,’” she joked.

Rave laughed, and then turned serious. “This is the first time I ever wished that wasn’t the case.” He glanced around, making sure no one was looking, and then held his free hand close in front of his chest where only she could see it. “Watch.”

Leesa stared at Rave’s hand, not sure what she was supposed to see. Slowly, a pale blue glow began to envelop the ends of his fingers. She thought her eyes were playing tricks on her, but a moment later, tiny blue flames flickered from his fingertips. He let the flames dance for a few seconds before closing his fist. The flames disappeared.

“Our inner fire,” he explained. “Remember when your phone died? You were holding my hand. That’s why we don’t use anything electrical.”

“So if you kissed me...?”

“I’d have to be very, very careful. If I forgot myself for even a moment, it could kill you.” He looked deeply into her eyes. “And I have a feeling that kissing you would make it far too easy to lose control.”

Leesa's heart sank. What were they going to do? This was so not fair. She was so drawn to him, and knew now he felt the same way. How long could she go without kissing him, when all she wanted, even now, sitting here at the table holding his hand, was to lean across and press her lips to his? Damn his inner fire—what was she supposed to do, kiss him through an oven mitt? And if kissing was so dangerous, how would she ever be able to make love to him? She felt herself blushing at the thought.

“Isn't there any way?” she asked finally.

“There must be,” he said, kissing her hand one more time before returning it to the table. “I've already started looking, asking. It's very rare, but volkaane and human have mixed before. I'll find a way, I promise.”

“You'd better. I don't know how long I can last.”

“Believe me, I feel the same way.”

Leesa stood up, limped around the table and sat next to him. “What would happen if I kissed you quickly?” She scarcely believed the words were coming from her mouth. This was so not like her, to be this forward. But it was not like her to want to kiss someone this badly, either. “If I just brushed my lips against yours? Would that be safe?”

“Yeah. As long as I kept my mouth closed, you would be okay.”

Leesa leaned closer. “Then you'd better keep it closed.”

Rave swallowed hard. “Yes, ma'am,” he managed to say.

Leesa closed her eyes and pressed her lips lightly against Rave's, pulling away almost before touching him. Just that momentary contact sent waves of heat surging deliciously through her body. As lame as it sounded, she was sure she saw fireworks, too. She was glad she was sitting down—otherwise she felt certain her knees would have given way.

“Wow,” Rave said, smiling.

Leesa returned his smile. “Double wow.”

20. HALLOWEEN

“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,” Cali said to Leesa.

“Carpe diem,” added Caitlin.

“Life is short,” chimed in Stacie.

Leesa sat on her bed, her back propped comfortably against two pillows, while her friends took turns trying to persuade her to wear something sexy and sleazy to tomorrow night’s big Halloween bash. That she had even agreed to go to what was billed as the biggest and wildest party of the year was a big enough step for her. No way was she going to wear some slinky costume that would invite way more attention than she wanted or needed. Besides, there was only one guy whose attention she craved, and she already had Rave’s full interest.

Cali had pulled the desk chair close to the bed—the better to pressure her, Leesa knew—while Caitlin hovered behind Cali’s shoulder. At least Stacie had the consideration to sit across the room rather than loom over her, though that didn’t stop her from urging Leesa to choose a sexy costume.

“C’mon, Lees,” Cali continued. “This is the one night of the year even good girls get to dress slutty. What do you wanna wear, a gorilla suit or something?”

Caitlin and Stacie laughed, and Leesa found herself smiling. “Hmmm,” she said, “that’s not a bad idea. Know where I can get one cheap?”

Cali slapped at Leesa’s feet, grinning. “Stop it! You are not going as any kind of animal, you got me? Unless it’s a *very* sexy cat or something.”

Leesa laughed. Cali was going as a dominatrix and had wanted Leesa to go as her slave, in a costume that was little more than a chrome-studded black leather collar and belt. With a leash, yet! Even Caitlin had turned down that offer, and she was going dressed as a hooker.

“Stacie’s gonna be a nurse,” Leesa protested. “So how come I have to wear something slutty?”

“You haven’t seen her nurse’s uniform,” Caitlin said, smiling. “It’s cut down to here and up to here.” She pointed to a spot just above her naval and another just inches down her thigh.

Leesa looked across at Stacie, who shrugged and gave a “what the heck” expression.

“How about I go as a pirate?” Leesa said, knowing there would probably be lots of pirates to blend in with at the party.

“A pirate might be okay,” Cali said, “as long as I get to help with your costume. Just so I know there’ll be at least a bit of wench factor.”

“Okay—but I still get final say,” Leesa said, grinning. “I’m not going to let you push my boobs up to here.” She indicated the middle of her neck with the side of her hand.

“Good call, Leesa,” Stacie said, chuckling. “Cali’s idea of a pirate wench might not be all that far from the sex slave outfit.”

They all laughed.

“Oh, c’mon, you know I’m much more subtle than that,” Cali said, bringing another round of laughter.

“What’s Andy wearing?” Leesa asked.

“I’m not sure,” Cali deadpanned, “but it might involve a collar and a leash.”

The ensuing laughter was the loudest and longest yet. Caitlin plopped down on the bed beside Leesa, laughing too hard to stay standing.

“Is Rave going?” Stacie asked when they all stopped laughing.

Leesa smiled. “He said he’d see me there. I don’t know what he’s gonna be wearing, though.”

“Gloves, I bet,” Cali said, triggering yet another round of boisterous laughter.

Leesa felt herself blushing, but could not help joining in the laughter. She wondered how they would react if they knew why he had worn the gloves, but of course she couldn’t tell them. She hadn’t told them about the kiss, either, because that would lead to too many questions. “What do you think some of the most popular guy costumes will be?” she asked, diverting the subject away from Rave.

“Pirates again, like last year, probably,” Cali said. “You should have lots of company, Leesa.”

Which was exactly the plan, Leesa thought, but of course she didn’t say anything.

“Vampires, I bet,” Caitlin said. “And zombies. They’re definitely the thing this year.”

“Even with that girl getting killed on campus the other night?” Stacie asked. “I heard all the blood was drained from her body.”

Leesa stiffened. She hadn’t heard that part of it. Rave said vampires were real, and she believed him, especially after his little fire display. Was there a vampire on campus? Of course there was, she realized—Stefan. Rave was certain Stefan was a vampire, and if everything he had said was true, he would know. But Leesa could not believe Stefan could do such a thing. She was going to have to talk to Rave about this.

“I bet that’s just a story someone started cuz it happened so close to Halloween,” Cali said.

“Trying to make the whole thing scarier. The news said her throat was slashed, not bitten.”

“Either way, you know how guys are,” Caitlin said. “There’ll probably be *more* vampires now because of that.”

“And probably some girls with fake bite marks on their necks, too,” Stacie said, shaking her head.

“No doubt,” Cali agreed, getting up and moving toward Leesa’s closet. “C’mon, Leesa, let’s see what you’ve got in here that we can start turning into a pirate costume.”

“I’ve got some gold hoops and a red bandana that should help,” Caitlin offered. “I don’t think any of my push-up bras will fit, though.” She hefted her full breasts and laughed.

Leesa blushed, but joined the others in their laughter.

“Don’t worry, Lees, you’ve got plenty up there to make sexy,” Cali said. “And I think I have just the bra for it.”

“Oh, great,” Leesa said, grinning. “I can’t wait.”

There were a quite a few Halloween parties on campus, but the biggest by far was being held in the old facilities warehouse, which boasted the largest indoor space on campus. The Borderlines had joined with two other fraternities to host the bash. Andy had provided passes that allowed the girls to avoid the long line of costumed students at the front entrance and enter instead through a side door manned by a trio of Borderlines. One was a tall, muscular guy showing off his physique with a leopard skin loincloth; the other two were dressed as a pirate and a vampire, verifying Cali and Caitlin’s prediction about popular costumes. The guys checked the girls’ passes and marked their hands with a black skull and crossbones stamp without bothering to ask for any proof of age.

The doorway let them into a small meeting room open only to fraternity members and their guests. The room was cluttered with coats and sweatshirts piled atop tables and hanging from metal hooks. Music from the band in the main room filtered in through the cement walls. Leesa and her friends wasted no time peeling off the sweatshirts they wore over their skimpy costumes and hanging them on a

couple of empty hooks.

“Look out, guys,” Cali cooed. “The hotties have arrived.”

Leesa’s pirate outfit consisted of a white button shirt tied in a knot just below her breasts to bare her abs, a pair of black shorts, and loose, knee-high black suede boots Cali had found at the local Goodwill store. Caitlin’s gold hoop earring dangled from Leesa’s left ear and her red bandana covered the top of Leesa’s head. A curved plastic sword hung from a black sash around her waist. The two highlights of the costume were both Cali’s idea. The first was one of her bras, which as promised, pushed Leesa’s breasts up into an enticing amount of cleavage. The second was to cut a jagged slash into Leesa’s right boot and to cover the suede and Leesa’s leg with red nail polish, simulating a bloody wound to explain her limp. Leesa had been a good sport and gone along with only a minimum of protest, secretly hoping the bloody boot might draw some attention away from her pushed-up breasts.

Cali’s dominatrix outfit was far more provocative, which was fine with Leesa. The costume centered on a tight black leather corset covering so little of Cali’s breasts that the tops of her rouged areolas peeked out above it. Leesa was afraid to ask whether the corset had been purchased for the occasion or was part of her friend’s regular wardrobe. Dark red fishnet stockings extended from the bottom of the corset into a pair of ankle-high black boots with four-inch stiletto heels. Cali’s eyes were painted heavily with purple eye shadow, and her lips were covered with dark red lipstick matching her stockings. In her right hand, she carried a leather riding crop, which she suggestively tapped against her thigh every few minutes.

Caitlin made an especially slutty hooker in a tight gold lamé top worn with black leather hot pants. Gold lace garters held up black fishnets at mid thigh. Her black eye shadow—even thicker than Cali’s—was flecked with gold sparkles, and her lips were painted a bright, garish red. Stacie wore a white nurse’s shirt unbuttoned almost to her waist and white shorts hemmed so high they were barely wider than a belt. White tights covered her slender legs, and a pair of white sneakers and a small white cap pinned demurely atop her head completed the outfit. She looked virginal and dirty at the same time.

The girls used the privacy of the room to do some last minute primping and to make sure their costumes covered—and didn’t cover—their bodies exactly the way they wanted. When they all passed one another’s inspections, they left the room and crossed the hallway into the party.

Much time and effort had gone into decorating the place. Black and orange sheets covered most of the windows and the walls, and giant cobwebs festooned with skeletons, headless corpses and hairy black spiders dangled from the high ceiling. Huge orange pumpkins with scary faces were painted on the black sheets; black pumpkins with equally frightening expressions adorned the orange ones. A five-man rock band in the front of the huge room was pounding out Oingo Boingo’s “Dead Man’s Party” as the girls entered, the first of several times they would play the popular Halloween anthem. A couple hundred costumed students already filled the place, but there was room for many more. In front of the band, dozens of kids danced wildly to the raucous music. The back of the room, where four long tables served as a bar, was almost as crowded. The center was less packed, but there were still plenty of kids milling about.

The variety of costumes amazed Leesa. She saw at least a half-dozen vampires and pirates, a couple of cavemen, and assorted devils, hookers, black cats, French maids, princesses and serving wenches. One vampire, already surrounded by a cluster of fawning girls, looked amazingly like Eric from True Blood. Leesa was pretty sure he would not be going home alone tonight.

As Cali had promised, the majority of costumes flaunted the wearer’s body in one way or another.

The whole place oozed sexuality. *Carpe diem. If you got it, flaunt it.* Leesa felt her self-consciousness beginning to melt away. Her costume was pretty tame by comparison, yet she still looked darn good.

What she didn't see in the crowd was any sign of Rave, unless he was wearing a costume with a mask, which she doubted. He was much too cute for a mask—and way too careful and aware of his surroundings to let a mask blunt his perceptions. She wondered what he would be wearing. She hoped she'd find out soon.

Before the girls made it even ten feet into the room, they were stopped by a trio of guys—a vampire wearing a black cape and plastic fangs, a bearded pirate wielding a cutlass, and a guy in a powder blue tuxedo that looked like something from a very bad wedding. The guys made no attempt to hide their appreciative stares.

“Hello, gorgeous ladies,” the vampire drawled through his fangs. “Anyone up for a bite?”

Leesa stifled a groan. Anyone smart enough to get into Weston should be able to come up with a better line than that.

“If *you're* up for a spanking,” Cali countered, slapping her crop on her palm.

Tuxedo guy and the pirate laughed, while the vampire gave Cali an even closer look. “That might be fun,” he said, his eyes lingering on her leather-covered torso.

The pirate moved closer to Leesa. “Methinks you and me make a pretty good pair,” he said. “What say you we do a bit o' burning and pillaging together?”

“Don't get your hopes up, boys,” Caitlin interrupted. “They're both spoken for.” She thrust out her hip and rested her hand on it in a very suggestive posture. “But I'm not.”

Tuxedo guy swept forward. “How about a dance, then?”

“Sure,” Caitlin replied. She pulled her stilettos from her feet. “Let's go.” She strode toward the dance area, giving her butt an extra wiggle as she walked. Tuxedo guy hurried after her.

“What about you?” the pirate asked Stacie. “Wanna dance?”

“Why not? Catch you guys later,” she said to Leesa and Cali, then took the pirate's arm and followed Caitlin and tuxedo guy toward the front.

“Looks like you're odd man out,” Cali said to the vampire. “But don't worry. I'm sure there's a neck out there somewhere with your name on it.” She turned to Leesa. “I'm thirsty. Let's get a drink. Then we can try to find our men. Andy's definitely here somewhere. Who knows about Rave?”

“Okay.” Leesa replied. “Nice to meet you,” she said to the vampire. “Good hunting.”

She and Cali threaded their way toward the bar, drawing lots of looks, but managing to make it across the room without being stopped. One guy in a clown costume tried to engage them, moving smoothly into their path and pointing down at Leesa's foot.

“Hey, great wound,” he said. “Cut yourself shaving?” He doubled over, guffawing in exaggerated clown laughter at his joke.

While he was bent over, Leesa and Cali swerved around him and continued toward the bar. As they picked their way through the throngs of people, Leesa scanned the crowd for Rave, but there were too many people in too many costumes. She finally gave up. Rave had a knack for finding her—she was certain he would do so again.

The closer she and Cali got to the bar, the thicker the crowd grew. They inched their way to the far right end, which was reserved for guests with skull stamps, and had a line only a third as long as the others.

“It's definitely not what you know, but who you know,” Cali said with a grin as she and Leesa

moved to the shorter line and fell into place behind guy in a foam bodybuilder costume.

“Well, I’m sure glad I know you,” Leesa said. “The girl with connections.”

In just a few moments, they reached the front of the line. The bartender, who Cali had met once before at Andy’s fraternity, was dressed as a pirate. He wore a billowing white shirt, baggy black pants, and knee-high black leather boots. A black tri-cornered hat slanted rakishly above his unshaven face, and a stuffed green and yellow parrot perched on his shoulder. He nodded approvingly at Leesa’s outfit.

“Hi, Frank,” Cali said. “This is my friend Leesa.”

“Nice to meet you.” He took Leesa’s extended hand and brought it to his lips. “What can I get for you lovely lasses?”

Leesa asked for a Diet Pepsi and Cali ordered a rum and Coke, which Frank mixed quickly in a clear plastic cup.

“Arrrrrrrrgh,” he said in a pirate brogue as he dropped a wedge of lime into the drink. “A lass after me own heart.” He lifted the bottle of Captain Morgan in front of his lips and started singing in a gruff voice. “Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest, yo ho ho and a bottle of rum.”

“Don’t quit your day job, Frank,” Cali advised with a grin. “You seen Andy around?”

“That lucky devil was here a few minutes ago. He should be back soon—he doesn’t usually stray from the bar for long, even if he’s not bartending.” His eyes roamed slowly up and down Cali’s costume. “How come you didn’t make him dress as your slave?”

“I tried, believe me,” Cali laughed. “He wasn’t having it. Maybe after the party, in private,” she added with a wink.

“You should have seen the outfit she had ready,” Leesa said. “She tried to get me to wear it, but I wouldn’t wear that thing even if I was alone in my room.”

Frank gave Leesa the same appraisal he had given Cali. “Now *that* I would pay to see.”

Leesa felt herself beginning to blush and fought to keep her hand from her hair.

“Can a guy get a drink around here without all this chitchat?” a voice complained from behind them.

They turned to see Andy’s grinning face. The double meaning of Frank’s “lucky devil” comment was clear. Andy was dressed as a devil, complete with red face paint, rubber pitchfork and long red tail. The tight costume showed off his trim physique nicely.

“Wow, you look great,” he said to Cali, giving her a quick once-over before pulling her into his arms for a warm hug. “You, too, Leesa,” he added when he let go of Cali. “Very sexy.”

“Thanks, Andy,” Leesa said. “You don’t look so bad yourself.”

Andy took a sip of Cali’s drink. “Mmmm, rum and Coke. I’ll have what she’s having, Frank.”

Frank mixed another drink and then deftly topped off Cali’s with a splash of rum and some more Coke. “No sense leaving the bar without a full glass,” he said.

Armed with their drinks, Leesa, Cali and Andy edged away from the bar to give the people behind them a chance.

“Did you two hear that another girl is missing?” Andy asked.

Leesa and Cali looked at each other. This was news to them.

“No, we didn’t,” Cali said.

“When?” Leesa asked. “What happened?”

“It was part of the security briefing we get before every party,” Andy said. “Some sophomore from Shelley Hall didn’t come home last night. Her roommates haven’t heard from her.”

“Maybe she hooked up with somebody and decided to spend the day with him,” Cali offered.

Andy shook his head. “Her roommates said that wouldn’t be like her. And she was supposed to meet her mom for lunch today. Never showed, never called.”

Leesa mind began racing. Could there really be a vampire behind these things? Strange as it seemed, she found herself hoping it was just your everyday psycho killer. How weird was that? she thought.

“They’re gonna try to get the word out tonight and tomorrow for everyone to be extra careful,” Andy continued. “We’re gonna make an announcement here when the band takes its next break. Remind everyone not to walk home alone, to call for an escort if they don’t have someone to go with, that sort of thing. There’ll be extra security patrols out every night, too.”

“This is terrible,” Leesa said. “I hope she’s okay.” That didn’t seem likely, though.

“You have a boyfriend coming tonight, don’t you, Leesa?” Andy asked.

“I hope so,” Leesa said. “I haven’t seen him yet.”

“If he doesn’t show, Cali and I will walk you home.”

“He’s probably outside stuck in line with the unconnected masses,” Cali said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Should we go take a look?” Andy asked.

“No, no,” Leesa said, certain Rave wouldn’t want any extra attention drawn his way. “He’ll find his way in, don’t worry.”

21. SLOW DANCING

A surging, seething, murmuring crowd of beings human in name only filled the huge room. Rave shook his head as he scanned the jumble of costumed students, wondering what he had gotten himself into. He had mingled with groups of humans before, but never one so large or so boisterous. This was not his first new experience with humans since he'd met Leesa, he thought, smiling as he recalled their brief kiss. And he was pretty certain it wouldn't be his last.

More than a hundred students were dancing to the beat of the classic "Monster Mash," a song he had heard many times over the years. He liked the offbeat lyrics and rhythm, and found himself humming as he squeezed his way along the wall past the dance area. He had avoided the long lines out front by finding an unattended door in the back. The lock had provided little resistance—he simply ripped the door open and slipped inside, the noise covered by the pounding music. Once inside, he used his heat to weld the metal lock back together.

To blend in with the costumed students, he had borrowed one of Balin's buckskin outfits. His usual moccasin-style shoes, a pair of buckskin gloves cut off at the fingertips, and a long brown and white eagle feather stuck in a braided headband completed the look. His bronzed complexion only enhanced the effect.

He spotted Leesa near the bar, talking to a guy in a devil costume and a very skimpily dressed girl he recognized as her friend Cali. Leesa looked very sexy in her pirate costume. As always, his inner heat rose a couple of degrees at the sight of her.

Rave had yet to meet Cali, although he had seen her several times with Leesa when he'd been watching her. And Leesa had talked a lot about Cali on their walks. The time had come for him to cease being a phantom boyfriend—for tonight at least. He slowed his pace and approached the three humans. He wasn't surprised when Leesa was the first to look his way. Her face brightened with a broad smile when she saw him.

He looks amazing, Leesa thought as Rave glided toward her. And those buckskin clothes fit his muscular frame quite nicely, thank you. He even moved like a real Indian, or at least her image of how an Indian moved, formed by movies she and Bradley had watched on television when she was a kid.

As if he could read her thoughts, Rave raised his right palm and grunted, "How."

She laughed and put her hands on his waist, raising herself onto her toes to kiss his cheek. As soon as her lips touched his skin, the familiar warm tingling shot through her. She let her lips linger there a moment longer than she had intended, then grabbed his left arm in both hands, squeezing his forearm as she introduced him to her friends.

"Hi, Rave," Cali said, extending her hand. If she noticed his buckskin gloves, she didn't show it.

"Hi, Cali. I've heard a lot about you."

"Leesa's mentioned you once or twice, too," Cali replied with a grin. "At least, I think you're the guy she's always talking about."

Rave laughed and shook Andy's hand. "Nice to meet you, Andy."

"You, too," Andy said. He ran his fingers across the smooth buckskin covering Rave's arm. "Great outfit," he said. "Looks real."

"It's real buckskin, if that's what you mean," Rave said. "A friend of mine makes them, seldom

wears anything else. I borrowed it for the occasion.”

“Cali’s from your neighborhood, Rave,” Leesa said, still clinging to Rave’s arm. “East Hampton.”

“Uh-oh,” Rave said, smiling and turning toward Cali. “I bet you warned Leesa to keep away from me, huh?”

Cali returned his grin. “Only if you call telling her stories about strange noises, blue fires and human sacrifices warnings. Other than that, I said go for it.”

Everyone laughed.

“Now that your escort has arrived,” Cali said to Leesa, “I’m gonna take this little devil onto the dance floor.” She grabbed Andy’s arm. “You guys wanna come?”

Leesa looked to Rave and was glad to see him shake his head. With her leg, dancing had never been her thing. “We’ll pass,” she said. “You guys have fun.”

Cali was already swaying to the music. “We will. Catch you two later.”

“She’s pretty funny,” Rave said as Cali and Andy began weaving their way toward the dance area. “I can see why you like her.”

“I’m glad you like her. I was worried whether you two would get along.”

Rave laid his hand on top of hers. “For you, I’d try to get along with a vampire if you wanted me to. Not that I’m comparing Cali to a vampire,” he added quickly.

“Ha! Don’t worry. I know what you meant. But speaking of vampires, there’s a couple things I need to talk to you about.”

Rave raised his eyebrows. “Oh? I was thinking you’d want to talk about volkaanes or kissing.”

Leesa gave his arm a quick squeeze. “That too,” she said, smiling. “We have *lots* to talk about.”

“Do you mind that I’m not much into dancing?” Rave asked.

“Are you kidding? I’m glad.” She held her red-stained boot off the floor. “Kinda hard to be much of a dancer with this leg.”

The band began playing the first slow chords of Coldplay’s “Yellow,” a song Leesa really liked.

“Dancing to this might be fun, though,” Rave said, swaying gently to the rhythm and gazing into her eyes.

Leesa felt herself melting under his gaze. She had never liked a guy nearly enough to want to slow dance with him, but looking at Rave’s handsome face and the firm muscles outlined by his tight buckskin outfit, she suddenly couldn’t think of anything she wanted more.

“Are you asking me to dance, Mr. Maston?” she asked flirtatiously.

Rave held his arms open wide. “I believe I am, Miss Nyland.”

Leesa slipped into his embrace, resting her head on his shoulder and wrapping her arms around his waist. He leaned his head against hers and they began moving to the music.

Rave’s volkaane heat flowed into her, flooding her body with a delicious, almost indescribable warmth, as if someone had opened her veins and replaced her blood with sweet, warm syrup. She would not have been surprised one bit if her skin was glowing from the magical heat inside her. Cocooned in Rave’s embrace, she began to feel like she was floating, weightless, in some transcendent place, up among the stars, perhaps. Yet at the same time, she felt more solidly grounded and supported than ever in her life. She was certain she could feel Rave’s heart beating against her chest—or was that merely her own heart thumping?

This was not just dancing; this was a joining, a commingling of body and spirit. She had never

felt anything remotely like this, had never even imagined this kind of feeling. She thought it might be even better than their brief kiss, though it was hard to compare sensationally wonderful to exquisitely delicious. Except for the music, the room seemed to have gone silent, as if she and Rave were alone in their own little world, the music playing solely for them. The song seemed to last for hours, yet somehow ended all too soon. Evidently, Rave felt something similar, because he kept swaying with her after the music stopped.

“Wow,” Rave said when he finally eased his body away from hers. He kept his arms draped over her shoulders and stared down into her upturned face. “I think I’ve just become a big fan of dancing.”

“Mmmmm, me too,” Leesa sighed. “Slow dancing, at least.” Even the band’s launching into a pounding rendition of Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” couldn’t break the moment. “I hope they have another slow song in their repertoire.”

Rave kissed her lightly on the forehead, and his warmth tingled into her again. She wondered if she would ever tire of the feeling, but very much doubted it.

“If they don’t, we can always ask them to play that one again,” he said. “You said you had some things you wanted to talk about. Want to go outside for a few minutes?”

“Sure,” Leesa said. She dropped her arms from around his waist, but immediately grabbed his hand. “We can go out the side way. It’s a lot less crowded.”

Rave pulled her gently toward the rear of the building instead. “I’ve got an even better way. One reserved especially for volkaanes.”

As Rave led her through the narrow space between the dancers and the wall, Leesa spotted Cali and Andy gyrating enthusiastically to the music. She looked for Caitlin and Stacie, but there were too many people bouncing about. Wherever they were, she was pretty sure they were having a good time.

Rave guided her out into the hallway to the door he had come in through. Placing his palms flat against the metal door, he gave a quick thrust. The welded lock ripped open and the cold night air washed over them. He smiled at Leesa. “My private exit,” he said.

They stepped out into the night. The grounds behind the building were dark. A gauzy film of high clouds turned the full moon into a pale disk. A bit of light filtered through the sheet-covered windows, and a row of streetlights a hundred yards away added some meager illumination. Leesa could hear talking and laughter from the crowd in front of the building, as well as music from inside, but no kids had made it around to the back.

A cold breeze raised goose bumps on her arms. Sensing her discomfort, Rave took off his jacket and draped it across her shoulders. The buckskin, warmed by his volkaane heat, melted the chill from her body almost immediately.

She leaned against him and playfully squeezed his bicep. “I’m impressed,” she said, looking back at the broken lock. “You’re stronger than you look. Could a vampire do that?” she teased.

Rave’s expression turned serious. “With one hand,” he said. “Their strength is double mine.”

Leesa did not like hearing that. “But your inner fire is enough to overcome it?”

“That, and this.”

Leesa barely saw him move, but suddenly he was standing fifteen feet away on a patch of weed-dotted broken asphalt, grinning. In a flash, he was back beside her. She swore she felt the breeze from his movement on her cheek. All she could say was, “Wow!”

“Our fire and speed against their strength and fangs,” Rave said. “Surprise is usually the deciding factor. Quickness lends itself to surprise. But I never take a vampire lightly.”

“Did you hear about the girl who was killed a few days ago?” Leesa asked.

Rave nodded. “Yeah. I heard her throat was cut. Why?”

“The story’s going around that the blood was drained from her body.”

A grim look tightened Rave’s face. “I hadn’t heard that.”

“I don’t know if it’s true, or just a story some jerk started because it’s Halloween. But another girl went missing last night.”

Rave was surprised—and worried. If it was the work of vampires, this was bad. Vampires didn’t usually make two kills in the same place, so close together. Either the *Destiratu* was affecting them more powerfully than he thought, or there was a rogue in the area, driven by the bloodlust more strongly than its brethren.

“Do you think a vampire could be doing it?” Leesa asked.

“If the girl’s blood was drained, then almost certainly. Is there some way we can find out for sure?”

Leesa thought about it for a moment. “Maybe Andy can. He’s already met with the campus cops about security. He might be able to find out. You don’t think it’s Stefan, do you?”

A vampire as powerful as Stefan would not be so affected yet, Rave knew. Nor would he be so foolish. “No, I don’t,” he said. “But that doesn’t make him any less dangerous. Have you seen him recently?”

“Not since we talked about it.”

“Good. Try to keep it that way. After I get you home, I’ll do a little hunting and see what I can find.”

Leesa wasn’t certain she liked the idea of his hunting a killer vampire, but then chided herself over the oxymoron. Was there any other kind? Yes, she realized—the one-fanged kind.

“You’ll be careful?” she said, taking his hand.

Rave squeezed her hand. “Always.”

Now that one-fanged vampires had entered her mind, she decided to ask Rave about them. He knew so much about vampires, maybe he would know something about the one-fangs as well.

“Do you know anything about one-fanged vampires?”

“*Grafhym*? Sure.” He studied her face. “But I’m surprised *you* do. Where’d you hear about them?”

Leesa smiled wistfully. “It’s a long story.”

Rave grabbed her other hand. “I’ve got time,” he said. “Want to sit?” He nodded toward a low cinder block wall bordering the asphalt area behind the building.

“Yeah, let’s.” She limped across to the waist-high wall and sat down. Rave sat close beside her. The jacket plus his heat kept her plenty warm.

For the second time in little more than a week, Leesa told the story of her mom’s encounter with the one-fanged vampire and her gradual withdrawal from the outside world and from her family. She was surprised when Rave’s expression turned from curiosity to what looked like jealousy, before finally settling on concern and compassion.

“I never knew my mother,” Rave said. “So I can only imagine how sad and confusing that must have been for you.”

So it *had* been jealousy she’d seen on Rave’s face. It was hard to imagine anyone being jealous of her mom. “What happened to your mom?” she asked.

Rave swiveled around to face her, pulling his feet up onto the wall and balancing easily with his arms around his knees. He didn't look at all upset.

"My people do things differently from yours," he explained. "We don't have families. We don't have parents."

Leesa frowned. "I don't get it. How can you not have a mother and a father? What do you volkaanes do, spring full grown from a cocoon or something?"

Rave chuckled. "No, nothing quite so exotic. But we don't marry, and we don't live as couples. Children are raised communally. I'll tell you as much as you want to know about it later. But let's get back to your mom and the *grafhym*."

Leesa's head was filled with questions about Rave's childhood, and it took her a moment to remember where she had left off with her story. "Professor Clerval thinks there's a chance my mom's story might actually be true. In so many ways, I hope it is. That would be way better than believing my mom is mentally ill."

"Professor Clerval knows a lot about vampires," Rave mused. "More than I would have guessed."

"His office is filled with books and old manuscripts. He read to me from one that was two hundred years old, written in Italian, no less. Supposedly by a female vampire."

"What he told you fits with what I know about *grafhym*," Rave said. "They're rare, and my people don't hunt them, so I'm no expert. But it sounds like your mother's story could be true. Whether the other stuff is real, I can't say. Maybe the sun does hurt her skin, maybe not." He smiled. "I'm a little skeptical about the tomato juice, though."

"Yeah, I know. That always seemed the silliest part of the whole weird thing."

"Maybe some of her behavior is the result of being bitten by a *grafhym*, and some is simply her mind's reaction to it," Rave said. "I just don't know."

"But you think there could be a *grafhym* in Sleeping Giant Park?"

"Sure, why not? It's a big park. I'm sure a one-fang could find plenty of places to hide." Rave dropped his feet from wall and slid closer. "Want me to find it for you?"

Leesa's eyes flashed open wide. "Could you find it? Would you do that for me?"

Rave slipped off the wall and pulled Leesa into his arms. "I told you, there's very little I wouldn't do for you, Leesa."

Leesa sighed. She had never felt so loved, so protected. It was wonderful. She pressed her head against his shoulder, relishing his warmth and his strength.

"So, about that kissing stuff?" she said when she finally pulled her head off his shoulder and looked into his face.

Rave's face broke into a wide smile. "I was hoping you hadn't forgotten about that." He rested his forearms on her shoulders and clasped his hands behind her neck. "There's been a bit of progress on the kissing front."

Leesa was delighted to hear that. "Really? Tell me."

"Don't get too carried away. It's still dangerous, and we have to be careful. But..." his voice trailed off, teasing her.

Leesa playfully pounded her fists against his chest. "What? What?"

"I've been doing some special breathing exercises my friend Balin showed me. So we should be good for five seconds or so."

Five seconds sounded disappointingly quick to Leesa, until she realized it was more than five

times as long as their first kiss. And she certainly remembered how amazing *that* was. “Well, what are you waiting for?”

“Patience, sweetheart. I said we have to be careful. Balin suggested we’d be safest if we kissed with someone there to pull us apart, in case we both lost control.”

Leesa frowned. She wanted to kiss him right now—and she didn’t want anyone watching! “I guess we could get Cali. I’m sure she would *love* to watch. But she might let us go longer than we told her to, just cuz she’s Cali. Stacie would be a safer choice, I think.”

“I’m not sure how we’d explain it, anyway,” Rave said. “We can’t tell them my kiss could kill you.” His face brightened. “Do you have your phone with you?”

Leesa patted the pocket of her shorts. “Yeah. Why?”

“Does it have an alarm?”

“Yeah...”

She smiled as Rave explained his idea, finishing by reminding her not to be touching him when she switched her phone on. Just to be safe, she moved another step back before setting the cell’s alarm to go off in one minute and placing the phone atop the wall. She waited while the seconds ticked off. It seemed to take forever, but finally there were only five seconds left. She moved into his arms and pressed her mouth to his.

The feeling of warmth that exploded into her as their tongues connected was beyond imagining. She felt like she was flying, like a thousand tiny mouths were kissing every inch of her body, like her skin was wrapped in the most delicious chocolate and every pore could taste it. Way, way, way too soon, her phone’s alarm beeped, and she felt Rave’s lips pulling away from hers. Sighing, she collapsed into his arms.

They held their silent embrace for several long moments before Rave spoke. “Triple wow,” he said.

Unable to speak, Leesa replied with a long “mmmmm” as she remained nestled against his chest. Finally, she pulled her head back and looked up at him.

“Did you have much trouble controlling it?” she asked, still a bit breathless.

Rave smiled. “A little,” he admitted. “I’m glad we had the alarm. I’m going to keep working on those control exercises, that’s for sure.”

Leesa grinned wickedly. “You’d better, mister. I’m not sure I want you spending your time doing *anything* else.”

Rave laughed. “What about the *grafhym*?”

Leesa pursed her lips. “Oh yeah, that too.” Her face brightened. “You can practice the exercises while you’re looking for it,” she joked. She grabbed his hand and led him back toward the building. “Let’s get back to the party. Maybe they’ll play another slow song.”

22. RING AROUND THE MOON

“Once upon a midnight dreary...while I pondered...weak and weary,” intoned the tall young man standing behind the lead singer’s microphone. He was wearing a Friday the 13th Jason mask and carrying a bloodstained machete that looked awfully real. His voice was deep and dramatic, and the room grew steadily quieter as he boomed out his lines, reading from a piece of paper. “While I nodded...nearly napping...suddenly, there came a tapping...as of someone gently rapping...rapping at my chamber door.”

He certainly knows how to get a room’s attention, Leesa thought as she held Rave’s hand and listened along with almost everyone else in the place as he introduced himself as Butch Morrison, president of the BPDs.

“That rapping is not Snoop Dog or Lil’ Wayne, either,” he continued, pausing while a ripple of laughter flowed through the room. “Campus Security has asked me to share a few words with you.” He looked back at his notes and read a few sentences about the unfortunate girl who was killed and the one who was missing, emphasizing the importance of everyone being as safe as they could—not walking alone at night, not letting strangers into the dorms, not opening their room doors until they were sure who was there. He reminded them of the escort service available for anyone who needed someone to walk them home simply by calling Security, whose number he provided.

“So remember,” he said, dropping his voice into a melodramatic tone once more, “if you hear a tapping...a gentle rapping at your chamber door, use the peephole to make sure you know who’s there before you open it.”

The room filled with the buzz of conversation as he walked away from the microphone. Most of the kids had already known about the murder, but the second missing girl was news to many of them. Even the ones who had known about both were impressed by the seriousness of his tone.

“That won’t be enough,” Rave said. “Not even if the killer is human, but especially if there’s a thirsty vampire out there. There’s always someone foolish enough to ignore such warnings.” He squeezed Leesa’s hand. “But I know one girl who’s definitely getting home safely tonight.”

A warm feeling that had nothing to do with Rave’s fire flowed through Leesa’s body. With Rave by her side, she felt totally secure and protected, no matter what was out there, and she was certain nothing bad would ever happen to her as long as he was around. But the thought of a vampire preying on her schoolmates was terrifying.

“Can you do anything about this?” she asked. “Scare it away or something?” She knew it was foolish, but she preferred to think of Rave chasing the vampire away rather than fighting it.

“I can try. But it’s a big campus. If I had known before I came, I would have brought a few of my brethren along.” He grinned. “For one of the very few times, I wish my people used phones.”

Leesa returned his smile, but didn’t say anything. Instead, she studied his face for a few moments. She was pretty sure she knew what he was thinking. “You won’t hunt him as long as I’m here at the party, will you?” she said at last. “Even if I promise to stay inside with my friends?”

Rave shook his head. “I’d rather know you’re home safe in your room. Too many things can happen here. I can’t be distracted worrying about you when I hunt.”

“Then take me home so you can get started. I’ve had enough partying anyhow.” She grinned and pecked him on the cheek. “I already slow danced and got kissed. What more could a girl want?”

Rave pulled her into his arms. “Or a guy,” he said softly into her ear.

They threaded their way through the costumed crowd until they found each of Leesa's friends. Cali and Andy were hanging near the bar—no surprise there, Leesa thought. Caitlin and Stacie were talking with pirate and tuxedo man—Danny and Jeremy were their names, she learned—near the front of the room. She told her friends she wasn't feeling well so Rave was taking her home, admonishing them to be careful and not go anywhere alone. Andy assured her he would get Cali home, along with Caitlin and Stacie if they wanted to leave at the same time. Caitlin and Stacie promised they would either have Danny and Jeremy bring them home, producing wide grins on both boys' faces, or they'd get an escort.

Satisfied her friends would be okay, Leesa led Rave toward the back of the building. "Let's use your private exit," she said. "We can cut across the grounds to my dorm."

Outside, the temperature had dropped another few degrees and the wind had stiffened, making it feel even colder. Rave gave her his jacket again and put his arm around her as they crossed the broken asphalt toward the cinder block wall they'd sat on earlier.

Leesa glanced up into the sky and suddenly stopped walking. "Wow, look at the moon."

The high clouds that had shrouded the moon earlier had dissipated, leaving a golden moon surrounded by a glowing halo four times its size. Leesa had seen halos around the moon before and knew they had something to do with ice crystals high in the atmosphere, but she had never seen one like this. It seemed twice as big as any she could remember, and brighter too, striped with faint rainbow colors. The whole thing seemed almost to pulse with energy.

"It's beautiful," Rave said. "Someday, I'll take you far enough north for you to see the aurora borealis. You'll love it."

Leesa had seen pictures of the phenomenon and knew it was spectacular. But it wasn't the thought of seeing the amazing display of lights in person that set her heart beating faster—it was the word "someday." She loved that Rave was thinking of them being together far into the future.

"I know I will. Of course, I'll love anywhere I get to go with you."

They resumed walking, stepping easily over the low cinder block wall onto a gently sloping hillside. The bright moon bathed them in a pale yellow glow as they strolled hand in hand across the wide lawn, the music from the party just a low hum behind them now. The farther they got from the facilities building, the quieter the night became. As usual, Rave's steps made no sound at all. Leesa was happy that even her awkward limp produced only the faintest brushing noise on the soft grass. She loved how Rave never seemed to notice her limp.

The top of the hillside was crowned by a stand of leafy maples. In the moonlight, the red leaves appeared dark purple. Leesa knew there were wooden benches spread among the trees—beautiful places to sit and relax in the shade on a warm day, but cold and uninviting on a chill night like this. Despite the bright moon, the area under the trees was shrouded in black shadows. Leesa suspected Rave could easily navigate the darkness of the copse, but the twisted roots would present a hazard for her. Without a word, Rave steered her around the edge of the grove.

Leesa's heart jumped when a dark figure detached itself from the shadows and stepped into their path. She squeezed Rave's hand, but relaxed when the moonlight revealed it was only a kid, fifteen at most, exceedingly slim with a boyish face and long blond hair. He flashed them a toothy grin, and she relaxed still further. The boy seemed clueless about how dangerous it was to be out here alone, and she wondered what he was doing. After a moment, she realized she sensed no similar relaxation in Rave. She turned her head toward him, but his eyes remained fastened on the boy.

Rave let go of her hand and edged forward, positioning himself between her and the boy.

Confused, Leesa stepped to the side so she could see the kid's face. He hadn't done anything threatening—why was Rave being so protective?

"I only want the girl," the boy said to Rave. "Leave now and you can keep your life."

Leesa was dumbfounded to hear such words issue from such a boyish face. What was he talking about? Did he think he could somehow overpower Rave, who was half again his size? She looked more closely and saw no weapon in either of the boy's hands. She doubted he could overpower even her, let alone Rave.

She got her answer when the boy's smile twisted into a leering grin and a pair of pointed fangs dropped from his upper jaw. Leesa barely had a chance to register the fangs and what they meant before Rave sprang forward, crossing the gap and wrapping his arms around the boy in a movement almost too quick for her to follow. One moment he was standing beside her, the next he had enveloped the boy and pressed his mouth over the leering grin. A blue glow began to envelop both of them. She could feel the heat on her face and hands.

In less than thirty seconds, it was over. Rave dropped the boy's lifeless body to the grass. Blue flames danced from Rave's fingertips. Leesa watched as the boy's pale face seemed to grow lighter, almost translucent, and she wondered if she was going to be able to see inside his skin. She was about to turn away when she heard a crackling sound like wood burning. A few seconds later, the boy's body dissolved into a pile of gray and white ash.

She looked up at Rave and found him watching her. "Vampire?" she asked, remembering the last time she had seen such a pile of ash, back in the woods of Meriden. It seemed Rave had been protecting her for longer than she knew.

He nodded. "A young and stupid one. Like I said, surprise is almost always the difference. And this one was much too easy to surprise. That close, he should have sensed I was volkaane." Rave poked the ashes with his toe. "Maybe the bloodlust dulled his senses. He seemed awfully fixated on you." He smiled. "I certainly know how easy it is to become fixated on you, Leesa."

Leesa felt herself blush. "Do you think he's the one who killed the girl?"

"Probably. As I drew out his life breath, I could sense he had fed recently."

"You weren't kidding when you warned me your kisses were dangerous." Leesa suddenly began to shiver. Rave moved forward and wrapped her in a tight embrace, but despite his warmth, she continued to shake. Her reaction had nothing to do with the cold, and both of them knew it.

"I wish you didn't have to witness that," Rave said.

Leesa wished she hadn't seen it, either. She couldn't rid herself of the image of Rave dropping the boy's lifeless body to the ground. He had looked so young, so harmless, lying there before his body dissolved into a pile of ash. Was that what awaited her if Rave lost control during one of their kisses? Would she be burned to a crisp, reduced to a lump of gray and white ash? Everyone had been warning her not to get involved with Rave, telling her she and Rave were too different. She could only imagine what they would say if they had seen what she'd just seen. Maybe they were right. Rave was not only different—he was dangerous.

Stop it! she told herself. This was Rave. He would never hurt her. How had she gone from feeling so loved and protected to feeling so threatened? The boy was a vampire, and he'd been ready to attack. She forced herself to picture his gleaming fangs and the hungry way he had looked at her. He had meant to kill her—or worse—she had no doubt. He had already killed one girl, and possibly two. Rave had saved her life, and probably others as well. Of course Rave was dangerous—what did she expect? She

was dating a guy who hunted vampires, for chrissakes! He was more dangerous than anyone she'd ever known. But not to her. No, never to her.

Unless he lost control. He had already admitted the possibility, but she had brushed it off, lost in the pleasures of their brief kiss. But that was before she had'd witnessed what could happen. She wondered if she would ever be able to forget the image of that pile of ash—and whether she should even try. Maybe it was best if she remembered it, kept it as a graphic warning about what could happen should she and Rave go too far.

It was all too complicated. And too scary. She didn't even have any real experience with normal guys—how was she supposed to decide about something like this? She pressed herself more tightly against him, trying to think of nothing but the strength in his arms and the warmth of his embrace. Slowly, her shaking began to diminish. Yes, this whole thing was dangerous, but she wasn't sure she could ever give up the way she felt when she was with him, the way she felt in his arms. Maybe they could be happy together without kissing....

But then the memory of their wonderful kiss rose unbidden in her mind, and she knew she was kidding herself.

23. AN UNUSUAL SKULL

“Who’s there?”

The thick wooden door muffled Professor Clerval’s voice, but Leesa was glad he was in his office. She had arrived early for her appointment, and with no yellow glow seeping from beneath the door, she’d been afraid he might not be here yet.

“It’s Leesa Nyland, Professor,” she called loudly.

A moment later, she heard the click of the old lock and the door swung open. The office was dark, lit only by two flickering candles atop the professor’s desk. No wonder she hadn’t seen any light under the door.

“Come in, come in,” Dr. Clerval invited as he stepped back from the doorway. As soon as Leesa was inside, he pushed the door closed and turned the lock.

Leesa wondered why he was keeping the door locked. “I’m sorry I’m early,” she said, standing in the center of the small office and letting her eyes adjust to the dimness. The air was thick with the fruity scent of his pipe tobacco, and she saw the pipe smoldering in the brass ashtray on the corner of his desk. A thin ribbon of smoke twisted up from the bowl in the candlelight, dissipating in the dimness above. “It was easier for the escort guy this way.”

Even though Rave had destroyed the vampire four nights ago, she was still using the campus escort service if she had to go anywhere at night. Rave had impressed upon her that the burgeoning *Destiratu* could rouse other vampires at any time, and she should remain careful. Security was still high on campus, because the second girl had not yet been found, and no one but she and Rave knew the killer was dead.

“Don’t worry about it,” Professor Clerval said. He moved to his desk and sat down. “As a matter of fact, I’m glad you’re early. I have something here I think you’ll find quite interesting. Pull your chair up close.”

Leesa lifted the old cushioned chair she’d sat on the last time she was here and set it in front of the desk, next to the professor’s. Sitting down, she was astonished to see what looked to be a very real skull resting on a velvet cloth in the middle of the desk. The skull glowed a dull yellow in the candlelight, like a leftover Halloween decoration.

“Is that thing real?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. Very real. And very special. I call him Yorick.” He chuckled, looking embarrassed. “A poor joke, I know.”

He carefully lifted the skull in both hands and turned it so it faced Leesa. “Take a look,” he said as he gently set it back down on the cloth.

It took a few seconds before Leesa realized what she was looking at. The skull appeared normal in all respects except one, but that one was enough to pull a sharp gasp from her throat. Jutting down from the upper teeth were two sharp, curved fangs!

“Oh my god!” she exclaimed, her eyes fixed on the pointed teeth. “Is that what I think it is?”

Professor Clerval smiled. “Yes, it is. I believe this is a genuine vampire skull.”

“How did you... Where did you...?”

“A few years ago I found an old manuscript describing the beheading of a supposed vampire here

in Connecticut back in the 1700s. As is customary, the body and head were buried separately, a good distance from each other.” Professor Clerval ran his hand over the top of the skull. “They did that to make sure the head and body could never join together and reanimate. Of course, most of the time, the person who was beheaded was just that—an ordinary person accused of being a vampire. But something about this account rang true to me. The author gave a surprisingly detailed description of where the head was buried, so I decided to see if I could locate the place. I was delighted to find what I thought was the exact spot. I went back at night and dug this up. I was astonished at what good condition it was in.” He carefully prodded one of the fangs with his fingertip. “I’ve checked very thoroughly. The fangs are real. This is not a hoax.”

“Why haven’t you put this on display somewhere?” Leesa asked, her eyes wide. “This proves vampires really exist. Or at least that they once did.”

Professor Clerval picked up his pipe and took a long puff. Leesa noticed he held the pipe well away from the skull.

“I’m not certain that would be wise,” he said. “I’ve been thinking about the possible repercussions of doing just that. I’m not sure people need to know that vampires are real, especially with all the misinformation out there. Besides, it turns out vampire bone is even more sensitive to light than vampire skin. That’s the reason for the candles. Daylight would disintegrate the skull. Even normal room lighting damages it.” He smiled. “It’s a good thing grave robbing needs to be done at night, or this could have dissolved in my hands.”

He pointed to a small, darkened area on the right side of the skull’s dome. “That came from sitting too close to my little table lamp here. So now I only study this by candlelight. I’m writing a paper about it.” He took another puff from his pipe. “Whether I ever publish the paper remains to be decided.”

Leesa stared at the skull, fascinated. It looked so solid. She found it hard to believe it could disintegrate just from light. “Can I touch it?” she asked.

The professor nodded. “Sure. Go ahead.”

She gently placed her palm atop the skull. The smooth bone felt strangely cool. She couldn’t believe it—she was actually touching a vampire skull. “It’s amazing,” she said, rubbing the top of the skull. “Is this why you wanted to see me? To show me the skull?” Reluctantly, she pulled her hand away, and the professor wrapped the skull back inside the velvet cloth.

“Actually, no,” he said, fastening a metal clip to the top to hold the cloth in place. “If you hadn’t been early, I wouldn’t have shown it to you at all. You’re only the second person to see this. The other is an old colleague of mine who studies vampires for a private foundation. But since it was out when you arrived, I decided to let you see it. With your family’s connection to the creatures, I’m certain I can trust you to keep my secret.”

“I won’t tell a soul,” Leesa promised. She wondered what Rave knew about vampire bones, remembering what she had witnessed a few nights ago. She pictured the small pile of white and gray ash—the bones certainly disintegrated under the heat of his fire. “But if it wasn’t about the skull,” she asked, “why did you want to see me?”

“It’s about your mother,” the professor said. “Just a moment.” He lifted the wrapped skull and carried it across the room, placing it gently inside an old-fashioned metal safe. He pushed the heavy door closed and spun the combination lock. When he sat back down, he switched on the desk lamp and blew out the candles.

“I found something very interesting,” he said, picking up a thick leather-bound manuscript from

the far corner of his desk. “In here.” He opened the book and thumbed through the pages. “This is one of the most comprehensive volumes about vampires I’ve ever found. It has a large chapter on *grafhym*.”

Leesa watched him anxiously, wondering what he had found that concerned her mom. They had already decided her mom might actually have encountered a one-fanged vampire—perhaps Professor Clerval had discovered something that proved it. But what she heard next was even better.

“There may be a way to help your mother,” the professor said when he stopped flipping through the pages. “At least, if what’s written here is true.”

Leesa leaned forward, scarcely believing her ears. A way to help her mom? Wow. “What does it say?”

“It’s an account from a farmer in Mexico back in the late 1800s, about his wife. He writes that soon after suffering a strange puncture wound in her neck, which his wife said came from a man who bit her, she began behaving strangely.”

Leesa thought of all her mom’s strange behaviors. “Strangely how?”

“The biggest thing was that whenever she killed a chicken to cook for dinner, she drank its blood.”

Leesa cringed at the image—thank god her mom had settled for tomato juice. “What does that have to do with my mom?”

The professor looked up from the manuscript and smiled. “It’s the next part I think you’ll find interesting.” He ran his finger across the page, finding the lines he wanted. “The farmer tried getting help from the local shaman and even from the church, but nothing helped. Then a few years later, he and his wife came across the man she said had bitten her. The farmer killed him with a machete, and then watched in horror as she threw herself upon the body and began drinking his blood. The farmer pulled her off as quickly as he could and took her home.” Professor Clerval looked up and met Leesa’s eyes. “She never drank blood again.”

Leesa took a moment to digest what the professor had just said. “You mean...?”

Professor Clerval smiled. “Yes. Apparently, the woman became her old self again. There’s a similar account from Eastern Europe in here as well. If these accounts are true—and the fact that they’re from two places so far apart makes it more likely they are—we may have found a way to cure your mother.”

“Cure her?”

“According to this, reverse all the effects of the original bite.”

Leesa’s head was spinning. The professor was saying there was a chance she could have a normal mom, after all these years. She could scarcely imagine what that would be like. It was almost too much to believe or to comprehend. But *drinking* blood? She grimaced at the thought, but then remembered her mom’s appetite for tomato juice. Maybe blood wouldn’t be too much of a stretch for her.

Reading her expression, the professor responded to her unspoken concern. “It’s an old book. I think we can probably get away with injecting the blood.”

Leesa smiled. “Whew. I’m glad to hear that.”

“I don’t want to get your hopes up too much,” Professor Clerval said. “First, we’d have to find the *grafhym* that bit her. If we’re lucky and it’s still in Sleeping Giant Park, we’d still have to catch it somehow. And the blood could be dangerous. Like I said, it’s an old book—we don’t really know what effect the blood might have on your mother. But this book has proven correct on a number of other issues, so I have no reason to doubt it.” He lifted his pipe from the ashtray and took a puff. “So if by some

miracle we did catch the *grafhym*, and if what the book says is true, the creature's blood should make your mother's symptoms disappear. There's one catch, though—the blood must be fresh, which means you have to get your mother to Connecticut.”

Leesa focused on the word “dangerous.” Why was everything in her life so dangerous all of a sudden? Did she have the right to ask her mom to try such a thing, when she couldn't even figure out what to do about her own situation with Rave? Was she being selfish, by even thinking of trying something so risky just for the chance to have a normal mother? She pictured her mom's habitually unhappy face. Perhaps her mom would welcome the chance. She had to at least ask.

Her thoughts turned to Rave, who had spent the last two days at Sleeping Giant searching for the *grafhym*. She hadn't heard anything from him, but knew he was still looking. If he did locate it, she had little doubt he'd be able catch the *grafhym* when she told him about this. Indeed, that would probably be the easy part. Getting her mom to Connecticut might prove far more difficult.

“I already have someone looking for the *grafhym*,” she said. “After our last talk, I wanted at least to find out if there really was a one-fanged vampire there.”

Professor Clerval closed the book, surprised but pleased. “Really? Who? Some kind of detective or something?”

Leesa smiled, picturing the silent way Rave moved and how quickly he covered ground. She imagined what he would be like in the forest. If the *grafhym* was there, Rave would find it. “Not exactly,” she said. “More like a hunter. A very skilled hunter.”

Twenty miles to the south and east, on the outskirts of the coastal town of Old Saybrook, three other hunters waited in plain sight. Vampires—two male, one female—hanging out in a small park next to a mini-mart grocery store. The park was dimly lit by pale yellow illumination from the store's parking lot lights, and the trio appeared natural and unthreatening, just some friends talking in a neighborhood park. They had been there for about twenty minutes, sitting at a wooden picnic table and seemingly paying no attention to their surroundings. A few cars had come and gone from the lot while they watched, but none had carried what they were seeking—a lone woman. They were in no hurry. The night was dark and chill, exactly the way they liked it.

They had been sent out by the Council to find a feeder for the youngest of the three, a short, stocky male whose bald head was covered by the hood of his dark sweatshirt. His name was Paul, and he'd been a vampire for little more than a century. The growing hunger gnawing at him was becoming increasingly difficult to control. Having already lost two of their coven, the Council decided he needed a feeder to slake his thirst and prevent him from going rogue. They sent him out with two of his elders to keep him out of trouble. The female was Tess, a petite blonde who had been a vampire for almost five centuries, and whose power had earned her a seat on the Council. Now that Robert had vanished and was presumed destroyed, Tess was the most harmless looking member of the coven. In her jeans and bright blue coat, she looked like a young mother, which was why she had been chosen for this hunt. The second male was Rafael, tall and white-haired, dressed in a long brown coat. Rafael looked like he could be Tess's father, or even her grandfather. But he was younger than Tess, by more than a hundred years.

Gail Bettancourt was tired. She had been on her feet for most of the last ten hours, working the register. One hundred seventy pounds was a lot of weight for her poor feet. But finally, her shift was over. All she wanted to do now was go home, give her babies a hug and a kiss and put them to bed, then soak in a long,

hot bath. Maybe have a glass of wine and some cheese while she soaked. She smiled as she pulled the elastic scrunchy from her black hair and let it fall loose over her shoulders. That picture was sounding better and better.

She said goodnight to Henry, who would man the store alone until its midnight closing, and headed out the door toward her old Tercel, parked in the corner of the lot. The night was cold, so she grabbed the sides of her jacket together in front of her. No need to waste the energy to zip it closed—she would be inside her car in a moment.

As she bent to put the key into the lock, she sensed someone approaching. Her muscles tensed in alarm, but she relaxed when she saw the slight blonde drawing near.

“May I ask you a question, please?” the woman asked.

Gail straightened and turned toward the woman. “Sure. What do you need?”

The woman smiled. “I was wondering...”

Gail never heard the rest of the question. Somehow, impossibly, there was now a man standing beside her. Where had he come from? And how had he gotten there so quickly? Before she could even begin to formulate an answer, a pair of fangs sank into her throat and she collapsed into his arms.

24. DISCOVERIES

A column of smoke rose straight and thin from the short stone chimney atop the old log cabin—Leesa wished the thoughts in her head could be so simple. No chance of that, though, not with all she had learned in the past few days and all she now had to figure out and make decisions about. And that didn't even count the amazing trip that had carried her here. "Carried" was exactly the word, too.

Rave set her down gently on the narrow dirt road in front of the old cabin, more a wide path than a road, really. She still didn't quite believe the trip she had just experienced—maybe she was dreaming. If it was a dream, it was one of the best she'd ever had, Rave effortlessly carrying her cradled in his arms from Weston to Moodus, moving easily through the trees, following old game paths where he could, at speeds that should have been impossible. The fifteen-mile jaunt had taken little more than an hour—a wondrous hour Leesa spent pressed against his chest, soaking in his delicious heat as he raced through the woods. All her worries about the dangers of being with him were forgotten, lost in the pleasures of the journey. She looked over at him, marveling as always at how gorgeous he was. This had to be a dream—he wasn't even breathing hard. But if it was a dream, she didn't ever want to wake up.

One of the things churning in her mind was the news he had shared when he unexpectedly showed up at her dorm this morning. He had found the *grafhym*, in an isolated section of Sleeping Giant Park, and when she told him about Professor Clerval's discovery, Rave assured her he could find and capture the *grafhym* whenever necessary. Now all she needed to do was decide whether she could ask her mom to risk taking the blood, and then figure out how to get her to Connecticut. That was going to be difficult at best, but the only alternative seemed even more unlikely—getting the *grafhym* to San Diego.

She returned her attention to the cabin. She could tell it was old—the rough-hewn logs were cracked and weathered, the mud between them black with age. Tall oak trees surrounded the dwelling, their thick limbs overhanging the roof to form a natural canopy. The trees looked as though they had grown up around the structure, which meant it had been built a very long time ago, when the trees were young. To the left of the cabin she saw a small cleared field, bare and fallow this time of year, but she could imagine it brimming with herbs and vegetables in spring and summer. The place was wonderfully quiet, with only the gay whistling of unseen birds breaking the silence.

Farther up the road, before it curved into the woods, she spied another cabin and a couple of crude wooden houses, more of the isolated Maston settlement. Each home had a small field cleared beside it. On the opposite side of the road, an apple orchard covered a low hillside, the familiar short, gnarled trees growing in long orderly lines. Even from where she stood, Leesa could see plump red fruit hanging from the branches. The Mastons were clearly very self-sufficient.

She brought her gaze back to the cabin in front of her, which belonged to Rave's friend and mentor Balin. This was another topic whirling in her brain: Rave said Balin wanted to meet her, that he had come across some information important to her and Rave. Balin had apparently hinted that it concerned kissing, but he had revealed no more. She hoped it would be good news.

"I see now why you Mastons don't need cars," Leesa said. She fluffed her windblown hair with her fingers. "That was quite a ride. I don't think we could have made it much faster by car. And you don't look the least bit tired."

Rave smiled. "I've been making that trip quite a bit recently, so I'm in pretty good shape." He winked. "First time I've done it with a passenger, though."

“Well, this passenger is very impressed, let me tell you. Next time I need a taxi, I’ll call you instead—the ride’s a whole lot more fun.” It took a moment before Leesa realized what she’d said. “Scratch that ‘call you’ idea. I’ll send up smoke signals instead.”

Rave laughed. “I’ll be sure to keep an eye on the sky, then.” He grabbed her hand. “Come on, let’s see what Balin has to say.”

He led her up to the cabin and knocked on the door. When the door swung open, Leesa found herself looking at a tall thin man dressed in a worn buckskin shirt and breeches identical to the ones Rave had worn to the Halloween party. His dark gray hair was longer than Rave’s and fell loosely down his back. A few narrow streaks of copper brightened the gray. His lined face bore a broad grin.

“Young Rave,” he said, before his eyes moved to Leesa. “And you would be Leesa.” He studied her for a moment, nodding approvingly. “Now I see the reason for young Rave’s dilemma.” He stepped back from the doorway and waved them in. “Welcome to my humble home. I’m Balin. Come in, please.”

Once inside, Leesa felt as if she had stepped back in time. The place was one big room, illuminated by a couple of candles and a small fire in a stone fireplace. The furniture was simple and well crafted, obviously handmade. A buckskin sleeping mat stuffed with straw lay upon the plank floor at one end of the room, while a dark brown bearskin rug covered the center section. She was pretty sure the rug was the real thing, and she wondered if Balin had killed the bear himself. In places, the fur had worn away down to the skin, attesting to the rug’s age. Near the other end of the room, a pair of shelves held six large bottles filled with golden liquid. Their irregular shape and the tiny bubbles visible within the glass told her the bottles, like the furniture, were almost certainly handmade. Naturally, there was no television, radio, or refrigerator.

“Please, have a seat,” Balin said, waving his hand toward four wooden chairs in front of the fire. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“I know you’re not much of a drinker,” Rave said, “but you’ve got to try Balin’s mead. He’s famous for it.”

Leesa settled into one of the middle chairs, stretching her feet out in front of the fire. She didn’t have a clue what this mead stuff was, but if Rave said she should try it, then try it she would. “I’ll have a small glass, please.”

Balin grabbed three pewter mugs and set them on the table. “I don’t have any small glasses,” he laughed. “Only partially filled big ones.” He deftly filled two mugs from one of the handmade bottles, then poured about a third as much into the last mug, which he gave to Leesa before sitting down beside her.

She could feel the heat emanating from his body. It wasn’t as strong as Rave’s, but noticeable if you were looking for it. With Rave and Balin flanking her and the fire in front of her, Leesa felt pleasantly warm. She wondered why volkaanes bothered with fireplaces. She guessed it was more for the light than the heat, and maybe for cooking.

The bubbling gold liquid in her mug looked a little like beer, but with a much thinner, almost nonexistent head, more like champagne. As she lifted it to her lips, she smelled a faint, sweet fragrance that somehow seemed familiar, yet different. She tried to place the scent, but the answer eluded her. Here’s to another new experience, she thought as she took a small sip. The brew tasted sweet and refreshing. She followed the sip with a much bigger swallow. “This stuff is pretty good,” she said, smiling. “What’s it made of?”

“Honey,” Balin replied.

“*Fermented* honey,” Rave warned. “Be careful. Balin’s mead is stronger than it tastes.”

Leesa rested the mug on the wooden arm of her chair. Honey—that was the scent she’d sensed but couldn’t name. She could already feel a slight buzz from the mead. Rave was right. The stuff was way stronger than it tasted.

“This cabin is amazing,” she said. “How long have you lived here, Mr. Balin?”

“Just Balin, please,” he said, smiling. “I’ve lived here since I built it.”

A puzzled expression lined Leesa’s face “You built this place?”

“Well, a couple of friends helped me, but I did most of the work.”

“But it seems so old. How could you possibly have built it?”

Balin looked at Rave. “You haven’t told her?”

Rave shook his head. “It hasn’t come up.”

Leesa turned toward Rave. She thought he looked a bit uncomfortable. She was thoroughly perplexed now. “What hasn’t come up?”

“Young Rave’s a bit older than you,” Balin said, grinning now at Rave’s discomfort.

Leesa studied Rave’s face. His skin was smooth and tight, his eyes bright and alive—though they looked a bit sheepish at the moment. She had assumed he was older, maybe in his early twenties. Nothing she saw altered her opinion. And Balin kept calling him “young Rave,” so how old could he be?

“How much older than me?” she asked Rave.

“Oh, not much,” he said quietly. “A hundred and fifty years or so. Give or take a decade.”

It took a few seconds for the words to register in her brain. A hundred and fifty years? How could that be? He looked like he could be a senior at Weston, or a recent graduate at worst. “You’re teasing me, right?”

“My kind are very long-lived,” Rave explained. “Not immortal, like vampires, but most of us reach five hundred, at least. Barring an accident or coming out on the short end of a fight with a vampire, of course.”

Leesa took another sip of mead while she digested what Rave had told her. She turned to Balin. “I guess that explains how it is that you built this place,” she said, looking more closely at the aged walls. “How long ago?”

“A couple hundred years, more or less,” Balin said. “And I was older than Rave is now when I built it.”

Leesa shook her head. This is just what she needed—another incomprehensible thing to wrap her already overflowing brain around. She took a bigger swallow of mead. Maybe she should have asked for a full mug after all.

“How is it that you’ve suddenly taken interest in a human—in me—after all these years?” she asked Rave. “I know I must be the first, or we wouldn’t be going through everything we are.”

“I’m not sure,” Rave said. “But I was drawn to you the first time I saw you.” He grinned. “Maybe it’s the vampire blood in you. That always gets my attention.”

Vampire blood? What the heck was he talking about? Her brain did another few flip-flops. If this kept up, she was going to end up in a padded cell somewhere. If she did, she hoped they served mead.

Rave recognized the confusion on her face. “Didn’t you say your mother was pregnant when she was bitten by the *grafhym*?”

“Yes, but...” Leesa’s mouth opened wider as the pieces clicked into place. Her mother’s blood was her blood. But if that were true, why didn’t she have any of her mom’s symptoms? “But I’m not

sensitive to sunlight or anything like that,” she said. “Heck, I don’t even like tomato juice. How come?”

Rave shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe the placenta filtered your mother’s blood enough to keep you from being affected in the same way she was,” Balin said. “I think young Rave was kidding when he said he was drawn by your vampire blood, but perhaps he’s right. Maybe you ended up with just a hint of vampire in your blood. Enough to trip Rave’s volkaane senses, but not enough to affect you.”

She looked at Rave, her lips pursed into a playful pout. “So, you only love me for my blood, huh?”

Rave wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close to him. “I love everything about you, Leesa. Maybe your blood drew me to you, but it’s not what keeps me there, I promise.”

Leesa rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. “I know. I was teasing. And I love you for more than your ability to toast my hamburger buns.”

Rave laughed. “Well, that’s a relief.” He gave the top of Leesa’s head a quick kiss. As always, she thrilled to the touch of his lips, no matter how brief. She wondered if it would ever be safe to do more.

“This brings us to why I asked you two here in the first place,” Balin said. He edged his chair forward and twisted it slightly, to more easily see both Leesa and Rave. His face was very serious now.

“You said it had something to do with our being together,” Rave said.

“Yes, it does. I found something in the histories I had long forgotten. That’s one of the prices of longevity, I’m afraid. One sees and hears so many things, some of them just seem to fade from the memory.”

“Is it about volkaanes and humans getting together?” Leesa asked hopefully. She didn’t like that Balin’s face remained so serious. Good news should have produced a happier expression.

“Not directly,” Balin said. “But it could have a bearing on you two.”

Rave finished his mead with a big swallow and set the mug down on the floor. “I know you, Balin. Something about what you found is bothering you. Tell us.”

“You’re right. There is something. But let me start at the beginning.” He set his mug down on the chair beside him, then steepled his fingertips in front of his lips, deciding how to begin.

“There’s an ancient technique, rarely practiced among our people, called *Rammugul*. I witnessed it when I was very young, younger even than you are now, young Rave. So long ago, I’d forgotten it existed. It hasn’t been used since, at least not here. Searching the histories brought it back to me.” His eyes moved from Rave to Leesa and back to Rave. “*Rammugul* is a way to turn off our inner fire. To extinguish it.”

Rave’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Is that possible?” he asked.

“I witnessed it myself,” Balin replied.

Leesa’s heart was racing. This could be the answer they needed, the answer to her prayers. If Rave could turn off his fire, they could kiss for as long as they wanted, without risk. For the first time since he had shared his secret with her, she could picture kissing him as long and deeply as she wanted. She could imagine kissing him for hours.

“Why was it used?” Rave asked. “Why does such a thing even exist?” That a volkaane would want to extinguish his fire would have been incomprehensible to him before he met Leesa.

“Who first developed *Rammugul*, and why, is lost to history. I saw it used during a childbirth. The birth was going badly. There was danger of losing the baby.”

Balin closed his eyes, remembering. He heard the screams, saw the look of anguish twisting the

mother's face, saw the blue flames flickering from her fingertips, which should not have happened during the birthing process. Such a thing was rare among the volkaanes, and because they reproduced so seldom, losing even one child was a major loss. Old Kerchak, wisest among them and chieftain at the time, said her fire was killing the baby. He grabbed the mother's hands and guided her through a series of movements and special breathing. Balin could still remember watching the heat fade from the mother. First the flames disappeared from her fingers, and then her skin seemed to darken. Finally, he saw in her eyes that her fire was gone. It was not at all a pleasant look, but he kept that to himself.

He repeated the details to Leesa and Rave. "The baby was born strong and healthy," he finished.

Leesa had been following Balin's story closely, trying to make sense of things she didn't understand. But the fire going out and the healthy baby sounded hopeful. Her fingers closed around Rave's hand.

"Are you saying if Rave learned to do this, we could be together without danger?"

"Theoretically, yes."

"Hold on a moment," Rave said, squeezing Leesa's hand but looking at Balin. "I can see in your face that this story didn't have a happy ending. What happened?"

Balin picked up his mug and drained the remaining mead in one long swallow. "The mother never got her fire back," he said solemnly, resting the empty mug on his thigh. "Kerchak didn't know why. He said it should have come back, but it never did."

It took a moment for Leesa to fully comprehend what Balin was saying. "You mean, if Rave did this...?" She stopped, unable to voice the words.

Balin nodded. "Yes. If Rave extinguishes his fire, he risks never getting it back."

Rave jumped in before Leesa could reply. "But Kerchak said she should have gotten her fire back, right?"

"Yes."

"So maybe it was something about the situation, the emergency, the birth. Or that she had never practiced the technique, never learned to control it."

Balin shrugged. "Perhaps. You are certainly more powerful than she was, young Rave, and so perhaps more able to master the skill. But the risk remains."

"Wait a minute," Leesa said, getting to her feet and facing them both. "This is crazy. I'm not letting Rave risk his fire." She stared at Rave, thinking she had never seen the heat inside him so clearly. "Your fire is who you are, what you are. I'd never ask you to give that up."

Rave stood and kissed her forehead. "I told you there's very little I wouldn't do for you, Leesa. That includes risking my fire."

Leesa took both his hands in hers, reveling in the warmth of his skin. "And I love that you would even consider it. Believe me, I do. But I will *not* let you do it. No way." She grinned and tilted her head coquettishly. "Besides, I might not like kissing you without your fire."

Rave laughed and drew her into his arms, hugging her tightly.

"Fortunately, you two are a long way from having to make that decision," Balin said. "I need to do more research, and Rave will need to spend much time practicing it." He stood up and smiled. "But for right now, I have a suggestion I think you'll both like."

Leesa and Rave broke their embrace and looked expectantly at Balin.

"I told young Rave he should kiss you only with someone there to intervene if something went wrong, and that even then he must keep it brief." He put a wrinkled hand on each of their shoulders. "No

one can judge young Rave's heat better than me. So if you two don't mind an old volkaane watching, I don't think there's too much danger in risking a longer kiss here."

No danger—that was all Leesa needed to hear. She looked at Rave and raised her chin expectantly. "Well, volkaane, what are you waiting for?"

Rave grinned. Leesa's heart fluttered as he laid his hands softly on her shoulders and leaned his head toward her with tantalizing slowness, his beautiful eyes locked onto hers. She could smell his warm breath as his mouth inched closer. Just before their lips met, she closed her eyes and parted her lips.

He kissed her gently, in no hurry now that Balin was watching, keeping them safe. When the tips of their tongues met, Leesa felt the familiar current surge through her. It was all she could do to keep from pressing her mouth tightly against his, but there was no rush here, no need to get as much of him as she could in a few brief seconds, so she forced herself to hold back, to enjoy the building passion, the growing heat. When he pushed his tongue more firmly against hers, she pushed back, matching his intensity as the heat inside her climbed another notch. His soft tongue began to dance inside her mouth, and she let hers dance with it. The heat continued to build, filling every inch of her body. She was floating, flying, falling, spinning, tumbling, twirling... She felt his hands move into her hair, pulling her head against his, locking their mouths together, melting, molding, binding, joining. The fire exploded inside her, claiming her completely, body, mind and soul.

How long it lasted, she had no idea—minutes, hours, days perhaps—but when Rave finally pulled his mouth away she felt drained yet energized, lost but found, sated but wanting. And desperately, irrevocably, and joyously in love.

25. CONFRONTATION

Rain fell that night, a slow, soundless rain, and Leesa loved it. But even if she hadn't, it would not have mattered—not with the memory of that amazing kiss still lingering in her brain and warming her heart.

She was sitting on the lawn in front of her dorm, her back propped comfortably against the smooth trunk of a stout maple, protected from the wet grass by a black plastic trash bag. Rave had dropped her off a few hours earlier, following another dreamlike journey cradled in his arms. After eating a tasteless dinner of mac and cheese—in her euphoric mood, it could have been cardboard and she wouldn't have minded—she had tried to study, but found herself too restless and excited to stay cooped up in her room. Every time she thought about that wonderful kiss—which was anytime she didn't force her thoughts elsewhere—her pulse quickened, her skin grew flush, and she couldn't keep from smiling. So she had donned her bright blue waterproof Windbreaker over a sweatshirt and jeans, grabbed her umbrella and the plastic bag to sit on, and headed out the door with no goal in mind other than to escape the confines of her room.

She had expected to walk for a while, but hadn't gotten far. The soft grass under the maple, covered with a blanket of fallen leaves, seemed to beckon her as soon as she stepped outside. Enough leaves still clung stubbornly to the limbs above to shield her from the light rain, so she had closed her umbrella and rested against the tree, enjoying the cool, wet night. A slight breeze rustled the maple's leaves, and the pleasant smell of new rain still infused the air.

She closed her eyes and drifted back to the kiss. Once again, she could almost feel Rave's warm lips on hers. Had any girl ever experienced such a kiss? She'd read about plenty of kisses between people in love, and had thought all the rapid breathing, racing hearts and heaving bosoms were nothing more than corny flourishes meant to add excitement and passion to a book. And she'd seen countless passionate kisses in movies and on television, but they were make-believe, performed by trained actors playing their roles. Nothing like that happened in real life, she'd always thought, certainly not in her meager experience with guys.

But now she knew better. Love really did make kisses magical—and a little inner fire didn't hurt, either. She couldn't believe that just a few days ago she had been wondering whether she could be happy without ever kissing Rave again. As if! At least Balin had given them a glimmer of hope with that *Rammugul* thing. She sure hoped it worked—without any danger of Rave losing his fire, of course. Otherwise, Balin was going to have to chaperone them whenever they wanted to kiss, and Leesa was afraid that might get old fast. But maybe not, she thought, recalling how completely lost she had been during their kiss. Maybe not. Her cheeks grew warm, despite the chill night.

The rain began to fall harder, splattering more loudly on the leaves and the street. The heavier drops started to penetrate the leafy canopy and onto her uncovered head, so she popped open her umbrella. Safe again from the rain, she leaned back against the tree and watched the raindrops dance upon the asphalt.

She breathed out a long sigh. How she wished that kissing Rave and worrying about *Rammugul* was her only problem. But she also had to decide whether to tell her mom about the *grafhym* blood, and if she did, figure out a way to convince her to come to Connecticut. She hoped the chance for a cure would be enough to get her mom on a plane—if there was a way to cure her that didn't involve leaving the house, Leesa was pretty sure her mom would go for it. Determined to call tomorrow, she rehearsed what

she might say, and guessed someone was going to have to go to California to help her mom prepare for the trip. She knew it would probably be her, but perhaps Aunt Janet might do it, or at least come with her.

The rain began to fall even harder, peppering the street furiously now, the drops splashing upward in a parade of tiny white fountains. Leesa's umbrella popped with a staccato pounding as heavy drops streamed off the saturated leaves above. The chemical smell in the air was gone now, washed away by the torrent, replaced by the musty odor of wet, decaying leaves. Leesa drew her legs more tightly against her body. Perhaps a forecast of rainy days would help persuade her mom to come to Connecticut.

As complicated as getting her mom here was going to be, and as irritating as the need for restraint with Rave was, neither was as frustrating as the third issue bedeviling her—finding Bradley. Unsure what her next step should be, she had allowed the problem to slip into the background, focusing her efforts and thoughts on Rave and her mom. But as she sat here in the rain, having hashed and rehashed both problems more than enough, her thoughts turned to her brother and her talk with Professor Clerval.

If Edwina was indeed a vampire, there was a chance she was holding Bradley as a feeder. Leesa refused even to entertain the idea that Edwina had turned him vampire—that would mean he was lost to her forever. Step one was to learn everything she could about feeders. Between Rave, Balin and Dr. Clerval, she had plenty of vampire experts to turn to. And in addition to the knowledge stored in their heads, the professor and Balin had access to lots of other sources of information. She began making a mental list of the things she needed to learn. *If* Bradley was a feeder, where might he be being held? Would there be a way for her to reach him? And most importantly, was the process reversible, or would simply putting an end to his misery be the best she could hope to do for him? She prayed that was not the case, but if it was, she was determined to do it, one way or another.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice the dark figure approaching in the rain until he stood only a few feet in front of her. Startled, she sucked in a quick breath, relaxing slightly when she saw it was Stefan. But only slightly. She remembered Rave's warning not to be alone with him.

Standing there in the rain and smiling down at her, he didn't look very threatening. He was wearing a long black wool overcoat and black leather boots. The rain had plastered his long hair tight against his head and heavy drops dripped from the hem of his saturated coat, but he didn't seem to notice the rain at all.

"Hi, Leesa. Sorry if I startled you. Beautiful night, huh?"

Leesa detected no hint of sarcasm in his voice. She guessed vampires must like rainy nights as much as rainy days. *If* Stefan really was a vampire, she reminded herself. But Rave should know.

"Hi, Stefan," she said evenly, pushing the vampire thought from her mind for the moment. "It wasn't raining this hard when I came outside, but to someone from San Diego, this is kinda fun."

Stefan grinned. "A girl after my own heart. I love this weather." He looked around at the deserted street and sidewalk. "It doesn't look like anyone else shares our love for the rain, though."

There was nothing threatening in his voice, nothing to hint he was doing anything more than making conversation, but Leesa was suddenly aware of her vulnerability. She felt her heartbeat quicken, and hoped her alarm didn't show on her face.

"So, what brings you out on a night like this?" she asked. The question seemed stupid the moment she asked it—he had just said how much he liked the rain—but Stefan didn't seem to notice.

"I like walking in the rain. It's so quiet and peaceful, especially at night." Stefan looked at the building behind her, as if noticing it for the first time. "Is that your dorm?"

His question seemed genuine. Leesa was glad to know he hadn't been stalking her, and she hoped

he'd come this way purely by chance. "Yeah. I thought I was gonna take a walk, but this spot seemed so inviting I just plopped down here."

Stefan glanced at the ground beside her. "Mind if I join you for a bit?" he asked. "Or would you rather be alone?"

Leesa was torn between the danger of letting him get closer and the chance to ask him some of the things she'd been wondering about. She decided to hedge her bet. "I've gotta go back inside in a couple of minutes, but you can join me until then." She lifted herself a few inches off the ground and stretched the bag out beside her. "I'm not sure if there's enough room on this, but give it a try."

Stefan eased himself down, sitting half on the bag and half off, unfazed by the wet grass and leaves. He wrapped his rosy arms around his shins, looking comfortable and relaxed. Leesa knew he could have used the bag as an excuse to squeeze closer and took it as a good sign he hadn't.

"Looks like it's letting up a bit," he said.

Leesa hadn't noticed, but the rain had indeed lightened, coming down with perhaps half the force of earlier, the drops barely bouncing off the street at all now. And the breeze had died completely.

"Yeah, too bad," she said. "I liked it better when it was pouring."

"So did I."

She felt his eyes on her face and turned toward him for a moment before looking back out toward the street, reminded of the mesmerizing power of those bottomless pools that were his eyes. "It was really bouncing off the street a little while ago," she said. "Like a thousand miniature fountains."

Stefan looked up at her umbrella and grinned. "You should have felt it bouncing off my head."

Leesa laughed. "Umbrellas aren't all that expensive, you know. Or hats, for that matter."

He smiled. "Yeah, but that wouldn't be nearly as much fun, would it?"

Leesa couldn't believe she was having this conversation with a guy who was probably a vampire. She wondered if Rave could have been wrong about Stefan. What the heck, she thought. Might as well ask. If Stefan meant her harm, she couldn't stop him in any case.

"Stefan, are you a vampire?"

A look of surprise flashed across his pallid face. He adjusted his position, swinging his legs around so he was facing her. "That's a strange question to ask someone," he said. "What makes you think that?"

Leesa kept her eyes on his face, focusing on his mouth to avoid his eyes. "Just something someone said."

"Really? I'm surprised—not many people believe in vampires nowadays. Do *you* believe in them, Leesa?"

Leesa thought about how to answer that. "Let's say I'm keeping a very open mind on the subject," she said. "But you haven't answered my question."

"If I said yes, would you be frightened of me?"

Leesa shifted her gaze to his eyes. They were black mirrors now. "Should I be?"

Stefan smiled, and his eyes became inviting pools once again. "No. I would never hurt you, Leesa, nor do anything against your will. I seek more from you than that."

Leesa's brain raced. He still hadn't admitted he was a vampire, but he hadn't denied it, either. She struggled to put it all together. What did he mean he sought more from her than that? More than what? If he was indeed a vampire, she realized, she now had a fourth vampire expert at hand—one who would know far more than the others. Could she use whatever he wanted from her to get the answers she sought?

“Do you know Edwina?” she asked.

Stefan blinked, obviously surprised by her question. Before he could answer, another voice broke the silence.

“Get away from her, vampire.”

Leesa could not believe her ears—and eyes. Of all the times for Rave to show up! She silently cursed herself for staying out here in the open with Stefan. What had she been thinking? She hadn't been, of course. Thinking, that is. She had been too engrossed in prying information from Stefan. Now what was she supposed to do?

Rave loomed above them, no more than ten feet from where they sat, his eyes fixed on Stefan. He wore a dark blue raincoat that covered him down over his hips. He'd come upon them silently, while they were distracted by the dance of their conversation. She could see the tension in his limbs, as if he were ready to spring. Tiny blue flames flickered from his fingertips. Beside her, Stefan uncoiled slowly to his feet. Two wicked-looking fangs dropped from his upper teeth and a menacing growl rumbled from his throat. Leesa sat paralyzed, unable to will her muscles to make her stand up.

“I said get away from her, Stefan.”

Stefan's face was a mask. “Do I know you, volkaane?” He began unbuttoning his long coat, using only one hand.

Rave followed suit, unzipping his raincoat with equal care. Each kept his eyes cemented on the other, knowing any distraction, no matter how small, could be fatal.

Leesa felt as if she'd become invisible. Her eyes darted back and forth between Rave and Stefan. With his pointed fangs and ominous growl, Stefan seemed by far the more dangerous. But she had seen Rave in action and had witnessed the effect of his fire on the young vampire just a week before.

She suddenly realized the rain had stopped, as if nature itself had paused to watch the impending confrontation. It seemed she could hear every drop falling from the tree and splattering onto the soggy leaves below. But the rain's end was not why Rave and Stefan were taking off their coats. She knew she was watching two warriors gird for battle—a battle that would not end until one of them was dead. And that was something she could not allow. Only her nearness to Stefan had prevented Rave from attacking already, but if she didn't do something quickly, that would not last. Surprise, Rave had said. That's what usually made the difference in these contests. With Stefan distracted by their conversation, Rave could have had all the surprise he needed, but obviously had not wanted to risk any harm to her.

She could not let this continue, could not take the chance of Rave getting hurt. Hunting vampires was what he did, but he had already given up his advantage and would be distracted by her presence as well. She remembered him saying how powerful Stefan was. No way could she let Rave fight him under these conditions. Nor did she want Stefan destroyed, for he might have the answers she needed. No, this was a fight she *had* to stop. But how was a mere girl supposed to keep these mortal enemies from doing what centuries of enmity was urging them to do?

She forced herself to her feet. Sucking in a deep breath, she stepped between them.

26. CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

“If I am out of my mind, so be it,” Leesa said, struggling to keep the fear out of her voice as she stood between Rave and Stefan. “But I’m not going to let you two hurt each other.”

Her eyes shifted back and forth from one to the other, trying to perform the impossible task of watching both at once. Rave and Stefan cocked their heads to the side, unwilling to break eye contact even with her in the way. She knew if she moved back a step or two she would be better able to see them both, but then she wouldn’t be between them, and it was only her presence there that was keeping them apart. Now, if she could just figure out a way to keep them that way.

In the blink of an eye, Rave flashed to his left, trying to create an opening, but she countered by quickly moving closer to Stefan. With the tree behind Stefan, Rave couldn’t get to him without endangering her, and she knew he’d never risk that. And Stefan had sworn he would never hurt her, and somehow she believed him, despite the sharp fangs now curving down from his mouth and the low growl rumbling from his throat. Still, it took every bit of courage she had to turn her back on the vampire and face Rave. She thought she could feel Stefan’s cold breath on the back of her neck and wondered if she was imagining it. Or was his breath as cold as Rave’s was warm?

“Get out of the way, Leesa,” Rave said. “Please.”

“Yes, Leesa, get out of the way,” Stefan echoed. “I don’t need you to protect me from this volkaane.”

Leesa folded her arms across her chest. “I’m not going anywhere,” she said determinedly. “I forbid you two to fight.” She thought how foolish she must sound—as if she could really stop these two supernatural creatures from doing what they wanted—but she tried not to let it show. Her only weapon was the concern they both felt for her, and she was determined to use it to the fullest.

Rave flashed back to his right, looking for some way to get past her. She felt Stefan’s hands clamp around her waist, barely noticing the cold that penetrated through her jacket as he lifted her as easily as he would a child and deposited her to the side. His growling grew louder, but she jumped back between them.

“Even if you two get past me, I’ll just throw myself into your fight. I know neither of you wants me to get hurt, so you may as well forget about fighting.” She took a deep breath. “Do I make myself clear?”

She watched Rave closely and saw his eyes begin to soften. The blue flames on his fingers began to glow less brightly and the tension in his limbs seemed to ease a bit. She stole a glance at Stefan and saw his fangs retract into his jaw. The growling ceased as well. She had done it!

“It seems this is your lucky day, volkaane,” Stefan said. “You’ll not die tonight.”

“I could say the same to you,” Rave replied, “were you not already dead.”

Stefan began to edge away, and Leesa moved closer to Rave to make sure neither changed his mind about fighting.

“Another time, another place, volkaane,” Stefan promised, his eyes never leaving Rave’s as he backed away.

“I look forward to it, vampire.”

Leesa wrapped her arms around Rave’s arm as Stefan moved off. She could feel his heat through his sleeve, much warmer than usual.

“Leesa, I do know Edwina,” Stefan called back to her right before he disappeared into the blackness. “She’s one of us.”

Leesa gasped. Her grip tightened on Rave’s forearm as the full import of Stefan’s words hit home. Edwina *was* a vampire. Which meant Bradley was probably being held as a feeder—or worse. She shuddered and threw herself into Rave’s arms.

“Don’t ever try anything like that again,” Rave said softly, holding her tightly. “If the *Destiratu* gets much stronger, neither volkaane nor vampire will be able to hold back. You could be killed.”

“I’m sorry,” Leesa sobbed, her cheek pressed against his warm chest. “But I just couldn’t let you two fight.”

Rave tenderly stroked her hair. “It’s okay,” he said. “It’s over.” He continued stroking her hair until he felt the tension begin to drain out of her.

“What was Stefan talking about there at the end?” he asked. “Who’s Edwina?”

Leesa realized she hadn’t told Rave anything about Bradley. “Edwina was my brother’s girlfriend,” she said sadly.

“Uh-oh,” Rave said. “This can’t be good. Tell me everything.”

Leesa eased out of his arms. “Can we go inside? I’ll tell you about it up in my room.”

Rave nodded. “Sure. Let’s go.”

She led him into the dorm, still shaken from everything that had transpired. Without thinking, she headed for the elevator, but Rave grabbed her wrist before she could press the call button.

“Not a good idea,” he said with a grin. “Remember your cell phone.”

Leesa smiled sheepishly. “Oh yeah. I forgot.” The last thing she needed was to get stuck in the elevator. She turned toward the stairwell instead. “The stairs it is.”

Once inside her room, she opted for the softer light of her desk lamp rather than the harsh brightness of the overhead light. She fluffed two pillows and leaned them against the wall atop her bed, then sat down and patted the mattress next to her.

“Sit here with me, please.”

Rave hopped onto the bed and put his arm around her shoulders.

Leesa snuggled close, enjoying his warmth. “Did you hear another woman is missing?” she asked. “Down in Old Saybrook. I saw it on the news. She just disappeared. No clues or anything.”

Destiratu, Rave thought. His fears were coming true. The vampires were increasing their hunting. Was that why Stefan was on campus? And what was he doing with Leesa?

“Are you certain the vampire you destroyed is the one who killed the girls here?” Leesa asked.

Rave nodded. “Yeah, pretty sure. He’d fed recently—I could taste it. If the Saybrook woman was taken by a vampire, it’s a different one.”

“Just how many vampires *are* there around here, anyway?” Leesa asked.

“Scores, at least, just in this half of Connecticut.”

Leesa’s eyes widened. “That many? Wow. I never dreamed.” She realized how silly that sounded. A few months ago, she didn’t even believe vampires existed. Now she was accepting that there were scores of them here.

“And they’re becoming increasingly hungry.” Rave’s eyes locked onto hers. “Leesa, you and your friends need to be very careful, please.”

“We will, I promise.” She put her head on his shoulder and snuggled even tighter against him.

“Okay, now tell me about your brother,” Rave said.

Leesa told him everything, going all the way back to their walks to strengthen her leg, and how Bradley had protected her when the other kids teased her. She showed Rave Bradley's final email, and told him the reason she came to Weston was to find Bradley. Tears were streaming down her cheeks by the time she finished.

"I've never been that close to anybody," Rave said. "It must have been wonderful. And terrible when he disappeared." He kissed the top of her head. "And now to learn that Edwina was a vampire. My poor sweetheart." He kissed her hair again.

His soft voice and tender kisses helped Leesa regain her composure. "If Bradley did go away with Edwina, she's either turned him into a vampire—and I refuse to allow myself to think about that—or she's keeping him as a feeder." She lifted her head from Rave's shoulder. "Do you know anything about feeders?"

Rave nodded. "A captive kept as a blood source, yeah." He was not about to tell her what a ghastly existence it was.

"Do you know if it can be reversed?"

"I don't know. I've never heard that it can—but that doesn't mean it can't be."

Leesa rubbed a tear from the corner of her eye. "I have to believe it can. I just have to." She laid her head back on Rave's shoulder. "Do you know where the vampires live?" she asked. She felt his body stiffen at the question.

"Not exactly, no," he said after a moment. "They live underground, somewhere south of here and east of the river. By unspoken agreement, my people do not seek their lair, nor do they approach our settlement. The costs of such actions would be far too great to both."

Leesa eased herself out of his grasp and turned to face him. "That's why I can't let you kill Stefan. He's my best chance to find Bradley."

Rave didn't like where this was heading. "Leesa, you can't go hunting vampires in their lair. Promise me, if you learn anything, you'll come to me first."

She grabbed both his hands. "I can't promise that, Rave. I don't know what might happen." She squeezed his hands as another tear ran down her cheek. "But I'll come to you if I can, I promise."

Rave wondered if the best thing he could do for Leesa would be to hunt Stefan down and slay him, before the vampire could tell her anything that might lead her into trouble. He knew destroying Stefan would probably cost him Leesa forever, but at least she would be safe. "Please do that," he said. "You can't help your brother by getting killed...or worse."

Leesa shuddered. She knew exactly what he meant by "or worse."

27. GRAFHYM

Mother died today—she just didn't know it yet. Leesa hoped she would soon be reborn into an easier, happier, more normal life. At least that was the plan. *If* Professor Clerval's manuscript was correct about the *grafhym* blood's reversing the effects of the one-fang's bite. And *if* Rave could find the *grafhym* again and capture it alive. And *if* the injection did not produce any unexpected side effects. Then everything would be perfect. *If...*

Getting her mom to Connecticut had been easier than Leesa expected. Not easy, mind you, not by a long shot, but easier nonetheless. It started with a two-hour phone call, followed by an early-morning cross-country flight with Aunt Janet, then a red-eye return flight to New York City the same night. Uncle Roger picked them up at the airport and drove them back to Meriden, where they arrived well before dawn. It had been an exhausting twenty-four hours, but at least her mom was here, ensconced in the spare bedroom. The room had one window, and Uncle Roger had installed thick black curtains to keep it dark, which made her mom very happy. She had scarcely left the room since her arrival yesterday morning.

But she would be leaving it soon. They were waiting for Dr. Clerval, and then they would be off to Sleeping Giant Park, where Rave had promised to meet them at sunset. Not that there would be an actual sunset today, Leesa thought as she watched the rain stream down the front window. It had been raining all day, which was fine with her, and the afternoon was getting darker by the minute. Already, she could barely see the street through the gloom and the rain. The chill rain might cause them some discomfort, but was much preferable to sunshine as far as her mom was concerned. Leesa didn't think they'd have any trouble getting her into the car when it was time to leave. And that was all that counted.

A wide swath of yellow light knifed across the front yard as a VW van made a U-turn in front of the house and pulled to a stop. Leesa watched as the driver's side door swung open and a dark umbrella ballooned through the opening, followed by the white-haired figure of Professor Clerval, clad in a yellow rain slicker. He kept the umbrella low over his head as he trudged up the driveway.

Leesa opened the door before the professor could ring the bell. He stepped inside, holding the umbrella out the door and shaking the water off before pulling it closed and depositing it in a black and gold ceramic umbrella holder. Another thing most people didn't have in San Diego, Leesa thought—umbrella holders. They were pretty handy here in New England, though.

She introduced Professor Clerval to her aunt and uncle, and they all shook hands.

"Beautiful night to take in the park, eh, Professor?" Uncle Roger said, smiling.

"Just the kind they'd use in a horror movie," the professor agreed. "Though I bet the director would want to mix in some fog as well."

"Let's hope we can keep any horror to a minimum tonight," Aunt Janet said.

Leesa moved toward the bedrooms. "I'll go get Mom."

She knocked softly on her mom's door, entering without waiting for a reply. Her mom was sitting on the bed, waiting. She was wearing black pants and a heavy black and white knit sweater borrowed from Aunt Janet. The clothes were slightly big, giving her a disheveled look, but they would keep her warm. One of Aunt Janet's old raincoats lay on the bed next to her.

"Time to go, Mom," Leesa said cheerfully. "It's nice and gloomy out, just the way you like it."

Her mom smiled weakly and stood up from the bed, reaching out to Leesa with her hand. Leesa took it gently, touched by the gesture, and guided her out of the room.

Aunt Janet and Uncle Roger had insisted on accompanying them, so they had donned matching yellow rain slickers similar to the professor's and were waiting by the front door. That L.L Bean guy, whoever he was, must be selling a million of those things, Leesa mused as she slipped into her dark purple raincoat. Aunt Janet gave everyone an umbrella, and they headed outside to pile into Uncle Roger's Expedition. Aunt Janet sat beside him, while Leesa's mom sat between Leesa and Professor Clerval in the back. When Uncle Roger switched on the ignition, Mick Jagger bellowed "You Can't Always Get What You Want" from the car stereo. Maybe not, Leesa thought as Uncle Roger turned the volume down, but she hoped this time they'd get what they needed.

Uncle Roger drove cautiously on the rain-slicked roads, and it took almost half an hour to reach the eastern edge of Sleeping Giant Park, where they pulled onto a narrow dirt area at the edge of the road. Her mom had been silent the entire trip, gazing vacantly out the front window, but Leesa didn't care. At least she was here.

There were no streetlights on this stretch of road, and it was impossible to see anything beyond the Expedition's headlights other than the black outlines of the woods only a few feet away. Within moments of their arrival, a dark figure appeared at the edge of the trees and glided toward the car. Leesa instantly recognized Rave's graceful gait.

He was wearing the same blue raincoat as the other night. He stopped beside Leesa's window and smiled in at her. The rain streaming down his face didn't seem to bother him at all. She lowered the window and he leaned his head close, resting his hands on the edge of the door.

Leesa introduced him to her mom, Professor Clerval and her aunt and uncle. Rave nodded and said hello to each of them. Leesa noticed his gaze lingered on her mom a bit longer than on the others, but his expression didn't change.

"Glad to see you all made it," he said through the window. He held out his right hand, palm up to the rain. "No need for anyone to get wet, at least not until I get back. I've already made sure the *grafhym*'s still in the area. Now that you're here, I'll go round him up." He flashed a confident smile. "If he hasn't wandered far, I'll be back in half an hour, at most."

Leesa rested her hand atop Rave's. Even in the cold and wet, his skin was pleasantly warm. She almost expected to see steam rising from it, but was glad not to, since she didn't know how she would have explained it to the others. "Don't worry, Rave, we'll wait as long as it takes."

"Are you sure you don't need any help, young man?" Professor Clerval asked.

Rave shook his head. "Thanks, but it would just slow me down."

Leesa forced down a grin. If they only knew how fast Rave could move. He kissed her on the forehead before turning and vanishing into the trees.

"He's very handsome," Aunt Janet said. "And he likes you a lot, I can tell."

Leesa smiled. She could still feel the warmth of his lips on her forehead. "I know. I like him a lot, too."

"Are you sure he can do this by himself?" Uncle Roger asked. "It's awfully dark out there."

"He can do it," Leesa assured him. "He's had special training."

"You mean like Special Forces or something?"

Leesa stifled another grin. "Uh, yeah, something like that."

As Rave glided silently through the trees, he thought back to his brief look at Leesa's mom. If you looked hard enough, you could see the resemblance between Leesa and her mom—the blond hair, the deep blue

eyes, the thin nose—but in truth, the two really looked nothing alike. There was none of the joyful sparkle that filled Leesa’s eyes in her mom’s vacant stare, and no hint of happiness to curve her mouth into the bright smile he so loved on Leesa lips. More than ever, he hoped Professor Clerval was right, that the *grafhym*’s blood would pull Leesa’s mom from the prison in which she had locked herself for so many years. He knew what it would mean to Leesa to have a normal mom, someone to hug and hold, to share with and confide in, to laugh and cry with. And anything that would make Leesa happy, he was going to do everything in his power to make happen.

Finding the *grafhym* would be no problem. Though his people didn’t hunt *grafhym*—there was no pleasure to be found in draining the essence of such a crippled creature—he knew killing it would be easy. *Grafhym* had only a fraction of the power of even the youngest and weakest vampire. But he was not here to kill the creature. The professor said the *grafhym* must be taken alive, its blood drawn while it still breathed. Capturing the creature would be a bit trickier—volkaane were trained to kill, not capture—but he was confident his strength and speed would be enough. Ironically, there were also his breath control exercises, which were about to prove useful for something besides kissing Leesa. He grinned in the darkness.

Ignoring the pelting rain, he leaped easily across a rushing creek swollen by the storm to a width of nearly ten feet. The darkness didn’t bother him—you could not hunt vampires without the keenest of night vision. His pace hardly slowed as he raced up a steep ridge on the opposite side of the stream, zigzagging between the trees. His speed actually helped him climb the slippery slope, for his feet did not stay in contact with the wet leaves and grass long enough to slip. At the top of the ridge he turned west, finally slowing when he reached a gigantic granite outcrop he had marked on his earlier trip here.

He moved more stealthily now, easing his way down the far side of the ridge. He wasn’t worried the *grafhym* would hear his approach—no creature moved as silently as a volkaane—but he was unsure how sharp the *grafhym*’s vision might be, or how keenly it might sense motion in the darkness. He hoped it was asleep in the rocky den where he’d sensed its presence earlier, but wherever it was, its fate was sealed. He would not return to Leesa without it.

He stopped suddenly, his instincts telling him the *grafhym* was near. He sensed the one-fang moving slowly through the blackness, presumably alert. A wet twig snapped off to Rave’s right. Scanning the darkness, he spotted a black form heading toward him, moving with an awkward gait. Every other step seemed a bit shorter than the other, but there was nothing in the *grafhym*’s manner to indicate it was aware of Rave’s presence. Rave melted behind a thick ash tree, a looped leather thong ready in his hands. The creature was making straight for him. All he had to do was wait.

When the *grafhym* came abreast of his hiding place, Rave flashed forward, dropping the loop over the creature’s head and tightening the thong around its body in one swift motion, pinning its arms. Rave’s fingers glowed blue as he gripped the *grafhym*’s head and pressed his mouth over the creature’s lips. He unleashed his inner fire in a tightly controlled manner, sending only enough into the one-fang to render it unconscious. There was no pleasure in the creature’s life breath—the pleasure would come from watching Leesa’s face when he presented her with the *grafhym*. He hoisted the inert body effortlessly over his shoulder and sped back through the forest.

Leesa sucked in a quick breath, her heart thumping in her chest as a jolt of adrenaline shot through her. One minute there was nothing outside her window but blackness, and then Rave had suddenly materialized out of nowhere with a limp form draped over his shoulder, his bronze face flashing eerily in

the darkness, lit by the yellow glow of the Expedition's emergency flashers. If she didn't know how fast he could move, she would have sworn he had teleported himself there. She took a deep breath to quiet her nerves and smiled up at him.

"Rave's back," she told the others.

Uncle Roger switched on the headlights, and enough light spilled back alongside the car to illuminate Rave. Everyone twisted around to get a look at the burden he bore on his shoulder—everyone but her mom, Leesa noticed. Her mom seemed completely uninterested in what was happening and didn't so much as turn her head.

Professor Clerval was first out of the car, followed by Uncle Roger. Leesa had to wait for Rave to step back before she could open her door and climb out. The air was thick with the smell of wet leaves and dirt. Rave carried the *grafhym* into the bright glare of the headlights in front of the car and deposited the creature onto the muddy grass. Leesa followed close behind him.

The rain had slackened, floating down from the dark sky now in a misty drizzle. She moved forward for a better look at the creature that had caused her family so much misery. The *grafhym* would not have been attractive even if dry and conscious, but lying limp and soaking wet on the ground it was decidedly less so. Stringy dark brown hair was plastered across its pale cheeks in twisted strands that reminded her of seaweed washed up on a San Diego beach. Blotchy red rings circled its deep-set eyes, and its lips were thick and cracked. It wore a black cloak held tight against its thin body by Rave's leather thong. She was tempted to reach down and pry its mouth open, to get a look at the single fang that had so dominated her life, but she resisted the urge.

Uncle Roger held his umbrella over Dr. Clerval as he bent over the *grafhym*. The professor carried a small black leather kit in his right hand. "It's not dead, is it?" he asked, looking up at Rave.

"Just unconscious," Rave replied. "I didn't want any trouble on the way back here. It should remain that way for a while."

Leesa watched Professor Clerval roll up the *grafhym*'s sleeve and loop a rubber tube around its arm, tightening it above the elbow. Ready now to take its blood, he unzipped his kit and pulled out a plastic syringe and a long needle, which he fitted onto the syringe. Feeling the creature's forearm with his fingers, the professor located a vein and slid the needle into the pale skin. He pulled up slowly on the plunger, and the syringe began to fill with blood.

Professor Clerval looked up at Leesa. "Go get your mother."

Leesa limped back to the rear door, but hesitated after grabbing the handle. Through the window, she could see her mom staring forward, seemingly unconcerned by what was going on in front of the car. She wondered what her mom was thinking, and whether she was doing the right thing by asking her to do this. What if something went wrong? What if the *grafhym*'s blood was poisonous? Did she have the right to ask her mom to risk this?

She inhaled deeply. She wasn't doing this just for herself. This was her mom's only chance at a normal life, her only chance to be able to go places, to do the things normal women did, to feel the warmth of the sun on her face. Leesa pulled the door open. She would have to trust the professor.

"C'mon, Mom. It's time." She took her mother's hand and helped her out of the car, holding her umbrella so it shielded them both.

Aunt Janet patted her sister on the shoulder. "It's going to be fine, Judy," she said reassuringly.

Professor Clerval was standing now. Drops of water glistened in his white hair like tiny jewels. "Bring her here, Leesa, into the light."

Her mom offered no resistance as Leesa led her by the elbow toward the professor. His eyes met Leesa's and held them, as if asking one final time if she was sure she wanted to go ahead with this. She glanced at her mom and saw her eyes were fixated on the vial of blood in Professor Clerval's hand. A thin smile seemed to flicker on her lips. Was it anticipation Leesa saw there? She made up her mind and nodded to the professor.

Dr. Clerval squeezed Leesa's shoulder reassuringly, then rolled up Judy's sleeve and wrapped the rubber tubing around her elbow. He swabbed her forearm with an alcohol wipe and gently pushed the needle into her skin. Leesa cringed as he slowly pushed the plunger, sending the *grafhym*'s blood streaming into her mother's arm. There could be no turning back now.

After what seemed like an eternity, the professor pulled the needle out and pressed a small round adhesive bandage over the wound. Leesa rolled her mom's sleeve back down. Her mom seemed to have barely noticed the experience.

"What should I do with the *grafhym*?" Rave asked. "Shall I destroy it?"

Leesa wasn't sure how to answer and was glad to be saved by Professor Clerval from making any further decision.

"Let it live," he said. "Who knows, we might have use of it again."

Rave looked to Leesa, who nodded. He hoisted the *grafhym* over his shoulder. "I'll take it back where I found it. Don't wait for me." He kissed her hair. "I'll see you soon."

Leesa watched Rave disappear into the trees. God, how she loved him.

"How will he get home?" Aunt Janet asked.

Leesa smiled, remembering her wonderful rides through the woods in Rave's arms. "The same way he got here, I guess."

"Let's get your mother out of the rain," Professor Clerval said.

Leesa studied her mom. The thin smile of a few moments before was gone from her lips, replaced by the familiar vacant stare. So far, Leesa saw no sign the *grafhym*'s blood was having any effect. She told herself to be patient, to give it time. Taking her mom by the elbow, she led her toward the rear door of the Expedition. Suddenly, her mom's arm began to shake violently, and her whole body grew heavy in Leesa's grip as her mom's legs began to give way. Only Uncle Roger's quick reactions and strong hands kept her mom from collapsing into the mud.

28. JUST A WALK

“My memories, like some people’s dreams, are mostly without color,” Judy said quietly, absently stirring her bowl of homemade oatmeal. “More like snapshots than videos, too.”

Leesa had been watching her mom closely since she sat down at the table, looking for any sign the *graphym* blood was having the effect they all hoped for. Mom was talking a little strangely—as usual—but Leesa thought she detected something different than what she was used to in the strangeness. And it was wonderful Mom was talking at all, with the scare she’d given them last night, collapsing and passing out after being injected with the blood. She had remained unconscious all the way home and after Leesa and Aunt Janet tucked her into bed. But her pulse seemed strong and her breathing even, so they had let her sleep, hoping she would be better in the morning.

Leesa had never been happier than when she peeked in on her mom this morning and was greeted by a weak smile and a soft “Hi dear.” She had invited Mom to join them for breakfast whenever she felt ready, and now here she was, sitting across the table stirring, although not yet eating, her oatmeal. At least she hadn’t made any move for the jar of tomato juice Aunt Janet had discreetly placed at the end of the table.

Leesa picked up a few dried cranberries from the tiny serving dish in the center of the table and dropped them into her oatmeal. Aunt Janet’s recipe was thick and delicious, enhanced with banana, raisins, dried cranberries and brown sugar. Leesa had never eaten oatmeal at home—who knew it could be so yummy? She swallowed another spoonful, hoping her mom might mimic her. But Mom just kept on slowly stirring.

“What do you remember, Mom?”

Judy’s spoon stopped. She looked at Leesa as if surprised by the question, even though she had been the one who brought up the topic. “I remember lots of things,” she said. A confused look tightened her brow. “But not a lot of details. It’s all kind of hazy. Black-and-white, too,” she repeated. She glanced toward the jar of tomato juice. “Except the tomato juice. Strange, but that was always red.” Her spoon resumed circling in her oatmeal. “And blood, too. I remember when you cut your thumb slicing bread in the kitchen. How very red the blood was.”

“Try some oatmeal, Mom,” Leesa said, taking another spoonful herself. She wanted to talk about anything but blood. “It’s delicious.”

She watched her mom eye the tomato juice again. Leesa was afraid her mom might grab it and pour some into her oatmeal, but to Leesa’s relief, she did not.

A few seconds later, Judy finally spooned some oatmeal into her mouth. She smiled. “It is good.” She took another spoonful. Her movements were still somewhat robotic, Leesa thought, but at least a bit more natural than the vacant stirring.

“Do you remember anything about last night?” Aunt Janet asked matter-of-factly.

“I remember some horrid-looking man lying on the ground in the rain,” Judy said, grimacing at the recollection. A moment later, her face brightened, and the transformation was startling. “I remember a very handsome young man brought him there.”

Leesa smiled. “That was my boyfriend, Mom.”

“You have a boyfriend? Why didn’t I know that?”

Leesa thought of all the things her mom didn’t know about her—hadn’t known throughout her

entire life—but said nothing. That was not a road worth going down, especially not now. She was determined to stay in the present, to think only about the future.

“Anyhow, he’s quite handsome, even in black-and-white,” Judy said, smiling. “I bet he’s a good kisser.”

Leesa almost dropped her spoon into her oatmeal. Where on earth did *that* come from? She felt herself beginning to blush and lifted her napkin to her mouth to hide her face.

“You never had much use for boys in high school, did you?” Judy continued. “I only remember that one boy. He was very tall. What was his name again?”

“Will,” Leesa said. She would never in a million years have guessed she would rather talk about Will than Rave, but Will was a much safer subject. “He was on the basketball team, Mom.”

Sensing Leesa’s discomfort, Aunt Janet changed the subject. “Do you remember anything else about last night, Judy?”

Judy closed her eyes. When she opened them, she shook her head. “No, sorry. Is there something I’m supposed to remember?”

“No, nothing, dear,” Aunt Janet said. “I was just wondering, that’s all.”

For a few moments, they ate in silence, the only sounds the clicking of spoons against their bowls. Leesa was glad her mom didn’t remember being injected with blood; she didn’t want to have to explain it. She still wasn’t sure the blood had produced any real effect, but the fact that her mom hadn’t touched the tomato juice gave her hope.

“That really was very good, Janet,” Judy said, putting her spoon down into her empty bowl. “You’ll have to give me the recipe.”

Whoa! A recipe? Leesa couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen her mom eat anything for breakfast but a bowl of cereal and tomato juice. Maybe it *was* working. Don’t get too excited, she chastised herself. It’s just oatmeal. It’s not like Mom said, “Let’s go out and soak up some rays.” But maybe it was a start. Leesa looked down and saw she had unconsciously crossed her fingers on her right hand. She smiled. Couldn’t hurt, she thought, dropping her hand into her lap before anyone noticed.

Her mom rose stiffly from the table and shuffled toward the wide picture window, stopping about two feet from the glass. Leesa watched her closely. This was one of the iconic images from her childhood—her mom standing by the window, staring out at a world she had mostly abandoned. Many times, Leesa had been outside looking in at her mom, wishing desperately her mom would come outside with her.

“It’s so pretty out there,” Judy said, her voice so soft Leesa wondered whether she was speaking to the rest of them or to herself. “So many colors. Green and gold and red. There’s even some blue in the sky today.”

Leesa got up and limped over beside her mom. Max took this as his signal to get up from his perch in front of the fireplace and join her. He stood next to her, his body pressed against her leg. Leesa stroked the top of his soft head. It *was* pretty out there, she thought. And her mom was right—though still mostly a heavy gray, the clouds had broken a little, revealing small patches of blue. She silently cursed the weatherman, who had promised another day of gray and rain—the kind of day her mom much preferred.

Judy turned toward Leesa. “Would you like to go for a walk, honey?”

Leesa thought she felt her heart stop. Had she heard what she thought she had heard? A walk? Outside? She tried to speak, to scream “Yes!” but nothing came out. Her voice was suffocated by years of

things missed, of activities left undone. She felt her mouth hanging open, had to force herself to breathe. She threw her arms around her mother.

“Yeah, I’d love to, Mom,” she managed to say at last.

Her mom wrapped her arms around Leesa’s back. “It’s just a walk, honey.”

Just a walk? Sure, Leesa thought. And Harry Potter was just some wizard, Frodo Baggins just another hobbit, Moby Dick just another whale. Heck, by that notion, even Rave was just another guy. This was so not just a walk. This was the answer to a young girl’s ceaseless prayers, the realization of years of hopes and dreams, the start of a whole new and better life.

Leesa forced her excitement down, in no way wanting to put any pressure on her mom. “I know, Mom. But I *really* like to walk.”

Leesa was in heaven.

Earlier, she and her mom had enjoyed an hour-long walk, strolling leisurely with Max padding beside them, not talking much, content to take in the lovely foliage and breathe the crisp, cool air. The colors were a bit past their peak, but beautiful nonetheless. What Leesa liked best was that they simply walked, not worrying at all about shadows and sunlight. Sure, it had been a mostly gray morning and the tall trees had provided lots of shade, but her mom never flinched when they came upon an open patch of sunshine. The *grafhym* blood seemed to have done its work.

They had even held hands for part of the walk—something Leesa was certain many eighteen-year-olds would have found very uncool. But she didn’t care. Six-year-old and ten-year-old Leesa had a lot of making up to do, and she was determined to make up as much of it as she could.

Which was why she was now at the mall with her mom and Cali. They had borrowed Aunt Janet’s car and picked Cali up at school. Her mom was going to stay in Connecticut indefinitely, living with Aunt Janet and Uncle Roger, and she needed winter clothes. She also wanted to learn more about Leesa’s life at Weston, and Leesa figured meeting her best friend would be a great way to start. Missing a couple classes was not that big a deal, and Cali—not surprisingly—had wholeheartedly agreed to ditch her classes as well. Shopping was one of her favorite activities.

The mall was not very crowded, and they moved easily from store to store, trying on outfits and making their purchases without much waiting. Two hours flew by, and each of them was now lugging at least one bag filled mostly with stuff for Leesa’s mom.

“Let’s take a little break,” Leesa suggested. “I could use a soda.”

“Good idea,” Judy said. She looked outside through the mall’s wide glass entranceway. “It’s getting nice outside. I’d love to sit out in the sun.”

Leesa couldn’t hold back her smile. She had never in a million years expected to hear those words from her mom and would have agreed to sit outside even if the temperature had been below freezing. “Sounds great. I think there’s some benches right outside.”

“You girls go sit,” Judy said. “I’ll get the drinks. What would you like?”

Leesa asked for Diet Pepsi; Cali opted for lemonade.

Leesa grabbed her mom’s bag. “See you outside.” She turned and limped toward the doors. Her mom went back the way they’d just come, heading for the snack area.

Outside, Leesa and Cali set their bags down on the cement plaza and sat beside each other on a black metal bench. Leesa could feel the cold metal through her jeans, but she didn’t mind. She leaned back and lifted her face toward the sky. Half the sky was filled with puffy gray and white clouds; the rest

was a beautiful, rain-scrubbed blue. The air was cool but not uncomfortably so, and the sun felt wonderful on her face.

“Your mom’s nice,” Cali said, pulling her multicolored crochet Rasta tam from her head. She ran her fingers through her scrunched hair, fluffing it. “You never talk about her, so I thought she must be weird or something.”

“She was sick for a long time,” Leesa said, unzipping her red Weston hoodie halfway. “But she’s much better now.”

“You must be really glad about that.”

Leesa smiled. “I am. You have no idea.”

One of the glass doors swung open and her mom appeared, holding three tall white cups in both hands.

“Here you go,” she said, handing a cup first to Cali, then to Leesa. She gave them each a plastic straw and sat down next to Leesa.

Leesa saw her mom had gotten a Diet Pepsi for herself and grinned, thinking how ironic it was that diet soda could be considered a healthier choice than tomato juice. But in her mom’s case, it certainly was. And it was one more indication that the effects of the one-fanged vampire were disappearing from their lives.

“It’ll be nice to have some clothes that fit,” Judy said, pulling the checked green and white sweater she’d borrowed from Aunt Janet away from her ribs to show how much extra room there was. “And thanks to you two, a few more stylish things.”

“No problem, Mrs. Nyland,” Cali said. “I just wish I could have talked you into that pink and gray zigzag hoodie.”

Judy laughed. “I think I’m a tad too old, Cali. But I appreciate the thought.”

Her mom’s laughter warmed Leesa almost as much as one of Rave’s kisses. She could not even remember the last time she had heard her mom laugh before today.

A thick cloud drifted in front of the sun, and the temperature seemed to drop ten degrees. Leesa set her soda down between her legs and zipped up her sweatshirt. “Do you think you got everything you need, Mom?”

“I think so.” She lifted the collar of a mocha-colored wool overcoat part way out of one of the bags. “If I had scissors, I’d wear this right now.”

Cali rummaged through her rainbow-hued embroidered handbag and took out a small black penknife. “Will this do?”

Judy took the knife and carefully sliced the tags off the coat, dropping them into the bag. “Thank you, Cali.” She pulled Aunt Janet’s sweater over her head and quickly donned the overcoat. She buttoned it up against the chill and then showed it off with a slow pirouette. “How do I look?”

“You look great, Mom,” Leesa said, smiling broadly. “Really great.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.” She sat back down. “This has been wonderful. It’s been ages since I’ve done anything like this.”

Leesa searched her mom’s face for any sign of distress, any sign she remembered *why* it had been ages since she had done anything like this, but she seemed to be making the same kind of matter-of-fact comment anyone might make. Leesa smiled again. She wanted her mom looking forward, not back—wanted her to enjoy the future free from bad memories, guilt or shame. It seemed now there was a good chance that could happen.

“You know what would make all this even more wonderful?” Judy asked. “If Bradley were here. Where is your brother, anyway?”

Leesa fought hard to keep her smile. With all her mom had gone through, there was no way she was going to burden her with her concerns about Bradley. A one-fanged vampire had already wreaked too great a toll on her family—she was not about to tell her mom that Bradley might have been taken away by a two-fanged one. If only she could find a way to somehow bring him back. She needed to talk to Rave about it again.

“Bradley’s been away for a while, Mom,” she said evenly. “I’m not sure when he’ll be back.”

Judy looked disappointed, but thankfully, not worried.

“That’s too bad. I hope I get to see him soon.”

“So do I, Mom. So do I.”

29. OVERCOAT WEATHER

Though brilliantly sunny, Saturday morning was overcoat weather in Connecticut. As soon as Leesa stepped outside, her cheeks began to tingle from the cold and her breath floated from her mouth in a small misty cloud. She quickly pulled her hands up into her sleeves and pressed her arms against her body.

Such a strange word to pop into her head, she thought. “Overcoat”—a word she would never have used in a million years if her mom hadn’t spent the last three days telling everyone how much she liked her new overcoat. But Leesa didn’t mind it in the least. Wearing the coat meant her mom was venturing outside, and that was all that mattered. So overcoat weather it was, and overcoat weather it would remain, no matter how unhip it might sound. Besides, her friends were used to her being a little less hip than everyone else, and Rave was a Maston, so he was even less hip than she was, if that were possible. What the weather really was, though, was sweatshirt and an extra T-shirt weather—her heavy red Weston sweatshirt over two T-shirts and a pair of tight black leggings. The bottom of the white T-shirt extended below the hem of her sweatshirt, hugging her hips the way she had noticed on other girls. She smiled, deciding she could be unhip and stylish at the same time.

She had walked with her mom in Meriden the previous two afternoons, but walks with her mom were more like strolls and didn’t do much to work her leg or keep up her stamina. Not that she was complaining—she loved spending the time with her mom—but she was looking forward to raising her heart rate a bit more this morning.

Her heart rate rose sooner than she expected, and in a most pleasant way, when she spotted Rave leaning against a lamppost a short distance up the sidewalk. He was wearing a green long-sleeve shirt and jeans—and no gloves. A wide smile popped onto her face. She hadn’t seen him since the night he captured the *grafhym*.

“You waiting for a bus?” she joked when she reached him.

“Ha!” Rave said, mimicking Leesa’s favorite exclamation. “A horse and carriage, maybe.” He grinned. “Or a beautiful girl, whichever comes along first.”

Leesa made a show of searching up and down the sidewalk. The closest people were far up the road. “Looks like you’re out of luck.”

“Not from where I’m standing.” Rave leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

Despite the cold breeze, her forehead tingled warmly from the touch of his lips. Even after he pulled away, she could still fill their imprint on her skin. She wondered if these little pecks would ever stop thrilling her. Not so far, that was for sure.

“Care for some company?” Rave asked.

“You bet.”

Rave took her hand and they headed down the sidewalk. “How’s your mom doing?”

“Great. She’s eating like a normal person and getting more energy every day. And best of all, she loves being outside in the sun. We went to the mall Wednesday, and we walked the last two afternoons around Meriden. So far, there don’t seem to be any side effects at all.”

“That’s great. You must be really happy.”

Leesa beamed. “I’ve never been happier.” She squeezed his hand. “You’re a big part of that, you know.” She stopped walking and lifted his hand up close to her face. “Am I imagining it, or is your hand warmer than usual?”

“It’s always warmer when I’m touching you,” Rave said, grinning.

“Ha!” She let go of his hand and punched him playfully on the arm. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. And you’re right. It is.”

“How come?”

Rave took her hand and they resumed their walk. “The energies that form *Destiratu* are growing,” he said. “As our hunger and restlessness rise, so does the strength of our fire. If the energies keep increasing, the weaker among us will soon have no choice but to hunt. It’s already affecting some of the vampires—you saw that after the Halloween party.”

Leesa pictured the vampire’s youthful face, still finding it hard to believe someone so young could be a vampire. “So the stronger *Destiratu* gets, the less control you all have?”

“Technically, it’s not *Destiratu* yet, not until the energies reach a certain strength,” Rave explained. “But yes, the stronger the energies become, the less control volkaanes and vampires have. If we do reach a true *Destiratu*, which is seeming more and more likely, things will get much worse.”

Leesa remained quiet for a few moments, trying to digest everything Rave was saying and wondering what “much worse” would be like. She didn’t really want to know, not now, not while she was enjoying her mom’s rebirth and her wonderful relationship with Rave, but she was unable to push the thoughts from her mind.

At the main gate, they swung right, down the hill toward downtown Middletown. The wind blew directly into their faces now, gusting unchecked up the long road and sending a stream of dead leaves skittering around their feet. But she scarcely felt the wind’s chill. Not with Rave holding her hand.

“Are you worried?” she asked finally. “Afraid of what the *Destiratu* will bring?”

“Not afraid, no, but concerned. More so than before I met you.” He squeezed her hand. “I have more to lose now.”

Leesa stopped and threw her arms around him, hugging him close, her cheek pressed against his chest. She could feel his heart beating against her ear and thought hers must be pounding twice as fast. Such a simple statement—*I have more to lose now*—yet so full of meaning. She felt tears brimming in her eyes. Tears of joy. Tears of love.

She let herself remain cocooned in his strong arms for a few moments before stepping back from his embrace. She took hold of his hands and looked up into his dark brown eyes.

“I love you, Rave.” A warm thrill not unlike what she felt when Rave kissed her shot through her as she voiced the words.

He smiled. “I love you, too.”

Leesa rose onto her toes and kissed his cheek, letting her lips linger on his smooth, warm skin. He sighed, and she teased him with a flick of her tongue before dropping back down from her toes. Her lips remained warm, as if they were being bathed in a tropical breeze rather than a late autumn wind. She still found it hard to believe such a simple touch could feel so wonderful. She wanted to kiss him for real, to feel his lips pressed against hers, to taste his tongue inside her mouth. But that would be much too dangerous without Balin here to keep them safe.

She let go of his left hand and began walking again, keeping hold of his right. “How’s the kissing thing coming? Have you been practicing with Balin?”

He laughed, and she realized how her question sounded.

“Practicing the breathing stuff, I mean. Not kissing him.”

“I know. And yes, I’ve been practicing.”

“I hope you’ll do some practicing with me later,” Leesa said, trying to run her tongue provocatively over her lips like she had seen nasty women do in the movies.

Rave grinned. “I have every intention of doing just that.”

Leesa stepped up her pace, tugging on his hand. “Let’s get this walk going, then,” she laughed. “Time’s a wasting.”

They strode rapidly down the hill, turning south onto Main Street into a bustle of people making their way to brunch at a couple of popular eateries. Leesa and Rave were forced to slow as they threaded their way along the crowded sidewalk, but slowing slightly for a couple of blocks wasn’t a big deal, until Leesa saw something in a line outside one of the restaurants that brought her to an abrupt halt.

The woman was wearing an overcoat similar to her mom’s. Clinging to her hands were two towheaded children—a girl of about four or five and a boy a few years older. Leesa’s mind flashed back to images of herself and Bradley with their mom.

Bradley...

The floodgates opened. Questions and emotions surged through her brain. Where was he? What was he doing? More importantly, what was being done to him? She wiped her sleeve across her moistening eyes. Rave stared at her questioningly, his face filled with concern.

“My mom asked about Bradley the other day,” she explained, her voice nearly breaking.

“Uh-oh. What did you tell her?”

Leesa tried to compose herself. “Just that he’d been gone for a little while, and I wasn’t sure when he was coming back. I didn’t want her worrying.”

Rave put his arm around her and guided her to a metal bench at the edge of the sidewalk. “That’s probably best...for now, anyhow.”

Leesa snuggled against Rave’s side, wishing there was some way to stop from worrying about Bradley. But she couldn’t, not with all this stuff about *Destiratu* and hunger and loss of control. She wondered what effect it was having on her brother. She flashed back to the young vampire Rave had destroyed, how Rave said it was new and weak. If Bradley were a vampire, he would be very new and very weak. She shuddered at the thought of some volkaane killing him, his body disintegrating into a pile of ash, but then realized death would be a far better fate than an eternity as a vampire. This was not a road she wanted to go down, so she forced the thought down. Better to think about saving him. Which meant she had to keep thinking of him as a feeder.

“I have to find a way to bring Bradley back. For Mom, and for me.” She inched away from Rave and turned to face him, her eyes looking beseechingly into his. “Isn’t there anything you can do? You have power over vampires.”

Staring down into Leesa’s anguished face, Rave would have given anything to be able to tell her yes, to say he could steal his way into the vampire lair and spirit her brother safely away. But he knew he couldn’t. It just wasn’t possible.

“I wish I could,” he said, his voice heavy with regret. “But nothing short of a full volkaane assault or a battalion of human troops could breach the vampire cavern. Many would perish, with no guarantee of your brother’s safety. I wish I could tell you differently.”

Leesa sighed. “So do I. I was just hoping.”

“If the *Destiratu* reaches full strength, you may get your wish. Enough vampires may be drawn out to hunt, enough of them destroyed to make it possible. Or perhaps our volkaane hunger will burn so strongly we’ll have no choice but to hunt them in their lair.”

Leesa didn't know what to say. The thought of dozens of Rave's fellows dying was not a pleasant one. And what if something should happen to him? How could she live with that? She had to find another way. She needed to talk to Stefan again, see what he could do. But she couldn't tell Rave that.

"I'd never wish for that," she said. "It's too horrible to imagine."

"Don't worry. If it happens, it won't be due to any wish of yours. It will be *Destiratu*."

Staring up at the ceiling, Leesa lay stretched out on her bed, thinking and drifting, her hands clasped behind her head. She was still in the clothes she'd walked in, having removed only her sweatshirt and shoes. Warm sunlight slanted in through the window and fell across the bottom half of the bed, covering her feet like a cozy blanket. Her mood alternated between blissful joy and troubled anxiety. The joy came when she relived the kiss she and Rave shared before he left. A kiss as warm and tender and passionate and explosive and loving as the previous three—but a kiss again cut short by her alarm. She wondered dreamily if there would ever come a time when they would be free to kiss so often she could stop counting their kisses. And no longer need the alarm, either. How wonderful that would be...if it ever came to be.

The anxiety arose when her thoughts turned to Bradley. She had to find a way to help him. She just had to. He'd done so much for her, had always been there when she needed him, and even when she didn't. Now it was her turn to do something for him. But how? She knew Rave would help if he could. He would risk his life if she asked him, but he had been very clear there was nothing he could do. Which left Stefan. He wanted something from her—she had no idea what—but whatever it was, she hoped she could use it to help her brother. But she had no way of reaching Stefan, no idea where to look for him, no idea when he might show up. When you counted your existence in centuries, a day or a week must be little more than the blink of an eye. She remembered the "time is not a line" thing from her physics class. Who knew what time was like for a vampire? And how many blinks it might be before Stefan came around again.

She hated this feeling of helplessness, but there was nothing she could do except to wait. And to hope. Hope it wouldn't be too long before Stefan came back. Hope that whatever he wanted from her would be enough to get him to help Bradley. And hope Rave was not around when Stefan did show up.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, hoping Cali was down in her room to provide some distraction. At least that was a hope with some chance of coming true right now.

30. SHARING SECRETS

“All this happened, more or less,” Leesa said to Cali over a deliciously greasy sausage and pepperoni pizza in a popular pizza joint a block off campus. “Pretty hard to believe, I know.”

They sat opposite each other in a booth in the back corner of the restaurant. The burgundy vinyl benches were worn and lumpy, but neither of them cared. Cali’s dark gray Abercrombie hoodie was unzipped, and the stylish purple, gray and white Burberry scarf she had contrarily paired with the casual sweatshirt rested on the end of the table. The varnished wood bore the scratched markings of decades of young revelers, the modern-day equivalent of ancient cave paintings. Leesa had taken off her fleece-lined beige suede jacket, leaving her in a dark brown cotton turtleneck.

The place was jammed with Weston students. Their raucous chatter provided plenty of privacy for the two best friends, and Leesa had spent the last twenty minutes recounting her entire strange story, from her mom being bitten by the *grafhym* to her fears about Bradley. What started out as a casual jaunt for lunch and distraction had turned into full-blown disclosure. Leesa hadn’t planned to unload on Cali—it just seemed to happen. She held back only about Rave’s being a volkaane, for it was not her place to reveal his secret. She felt better having let it all out, but now that she had finished, she worried how Cali would react. Cali probably thought she was crazy. Leesa shifted her gaze away from Cali’s face and stared instead into the flickering red glass candle jar on the table.

“Wow,” Cali said, putting down a half-eaten slice of pizza and leaning back against the cushioned booth. “And here I thought I was the strange one in this relationship. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me sooner. Rule ten: share your problems with your best friend.”

Leesa took a bite of her pizza. It was barely warm, but still tasted great—confession worked up an appetite. “I was afraid you’d think I was crazy. ‘My mom was bitten by a one-fanged vampire’ or ‘by the way, I think I met a vampire at the frat party tonight’ isn’t the best way to start off a friendship.”

Cali laughed. “Are you kidding? I would have been *so* into that. It’s the coolest story I ever heard.” Her expression turned serious. “Except for the part about your brother. What are you going to do?”

Leesa was so relieved Cali was taking her story seriously. “I don’t know. I need to talk to Stefan, but I don’t know how to find him.”

“Kinda like Rave, huh? Vampires probably don’t use cell phones, either.” Cali sipped her soda, then looked back at Leesa. “So this Stefan guy is really a vampire, huh?”

Leesa nodded. “He all but admitted it. And there’s other stuff that points to it, too.” She couldn’t tell Cali that Rave had told her Stefan was a vampire without revealing more than she wanted to about Rave. And she couldn’t tell her she had seen his fangs without telling her about the fight she had stopped, which she was most definitely not about to do.

“And he hasn’t tried to, you know, bite your neck or anything?”

“Ha! No, he’s always been nice. A bit strange, for sure, but nice.”

Cali grinned. “Of course he’s a bit strange—he’s a freaking vampire!” She toyed with a thick piece of crust she’d left on her plate. “Who would have thought my shy little friend from California would be dating a Maston *and* have a vampire hitting on her? Andy can get a little crazy, for sure, but he’s seeming kinda boring right about now. I think I need to reevaluate my love life. Maybe find a vampire of my own.”

Leesa almost choked on her soda. “Yeah, sure. Maybe next time I see Stefan, I’ll ask if he has a friend for you.”

“Cool,” Cali said, laughing. “We could double-date in a graveyard or something.”

They both laughed. Leesa was so glad she’d gone out with Cali. She hadn’t planned on talking about all this and certainly couldn’t have imagined laughing about it. But she was. And she felt so much better. Cali was the best. She was so lucky to have her as a friend. Now if Rave would just get complete control of his fire, and if Stefan would agree to help Bradley and want nothing in return, and what the heck, as long as she was dreaming, if physics would come a bit easier...

“I wish I could tell somebody about all this,” Cali said. “You are the coolest best friend ever, Leesa. But don’t worry, I won’t tell a soul.” She swallowed the last bite of crust and wiped her hands and mouth with her napkin. “How can I help?”

Leesa grabbed another slice of pizza. The more she talked about this, the hungrier she seemed to get. “You already are,” she said between bites. “Just by listening—and believing me.”

“Hey, no problem. How could I not believe you? Nobody could make this kinda stuff up.”

Leesa smiled and took another bite, thinking how much more amazed Cali would be if she knew Rave was more than a hundred years old and possessed an inner fire that could burn Leesa to a pile of ash if he lost control during a simple kiss. Knowing Cali, she would think that was the coolest thing of all—and would probably want to try a kiss herself.

“Seriously,” Cali repeated, “is there anything I can do?”

“Yeah. You can keep an eye out around the dorm, in case Stefan comes by when I’m not there.”

“Great. Does he look more like Lestat or Edward?” Cali asked. She flashed Leesa a wink. “I’m hoping for something a bit edgier than Edward. He’s too pretty.”

Leesa laughed. “Definitely not Edward. More mature, less clean-cut. Good-looking, though, and pretty sexy. Black hair, pale skin. Always wears black.”

“Sexy works for me,” Cali said, grinning. “I’m always happy to keep an eye out for sexy.”

“If you do see him, tell him I need to talk to him as soon as possible. If you know where I am, tell him.” Leesa swallowed the last bite of her pizza and chased it with a drink of soda. “But do *not* go anywhere alone with him.”

Cali feigned a frown. “Killjoy.”

Leesa smiled. “I’m serious, Cali. Stefan is very dangerous. He’s a vampire, remember? Promise me.”

Cali sighed. “Fine. I’ll try to keep my amorous side in check.”

“Don’t look now,” Cali said as she and Leesa strolled up the sidewalk toward their dorm, “but there’s a guy over there who looks a lot like a vampire.”

Leesa followed Cali’s gaze and saw Stefan leaning casually against the side of the building, protected from the sunlight by the shadow of the wall. As usual, he was dressed in black—black boots, black jeans, and a black hooded sweatshirt. The hood was thrown back over his shoulders now, but Leesa was pretty sure on a day as bright as today he would use the hood to protect his face when he was not in the shadows. Even so, she was surprised to see him on such a sunny afternoon.

“That’s Stefan,” she said.

“Really?” Cali checked him out more closely. “I thought vampires came out only at night. Don’t they burn up in the daylight?”

“That’s just stuff some writer made up,” Leesa said. She waved to Stefan, who acknowledged her with a slight nod of his head. “But they don’t like the sun—it hurts their skin. So I’m gonna go talk to him over there.”

“And I’m guessing you don’t want me tagging along, right?” Cali feigned a pout. “You have all the fun.” She put her hand on Leesa’s forearm. “Be careful, Lees.”

“I will. I’ll see you inside, okay?”

Cali nodded and continued up the sidewalk, while Leesa angled across the grass toward Stefan. She walked slowly, trying to think about what she wanted to say to him.

Stefan detached himself from the wall and glided a few steps toward her, careful to remain in the shadow. “Hi, Leesa.”

Leesa stopped a few feet away, and then chided herself for her caution. If Stefan meant to harm her, five feet or ten would provide no safety. She moved another step closer, hoping he wouldn’t notice her hesitation.

“Hi, Stefan. I’m glad to see you.”

Stefan smiled. “I’m certainly happy to hear that.”

“I was hoping you’d come around. I need to talk to you.”

“Me, too. We didn’t get a chance to finish our conversation the other night.”

“No, we didn’t.” Leesa glanced up at the blue sky. “I’m surprised to see you out on a day like this, though.”

Stefan followed her gaze upward and smiled. “Normally, I wouldn’t be. But it’s getting more difficult for me to come out alone. The Council has already forbidden most of our coven to do so. Soon I won’t be allowed to, either.”

Leesa had never considered there might be someone telling a vampire what it could and couldn’t do. “Why not?”

“As our hunger grows, our control lessens. My kind prefer to remain in the shadows, figuratively as well as literally. Taking too many victims draws unwanted attention.”

Leesa remembered Rave saying something similar about hunger and control. She glanced around, suddenly afraid he might show up and interrupt them again. They needed to go somewhere he would be less likely to find them, just in case. The bright sunshine argued against anywhere outside or too far away, which left her dorm. Not her room, though. Rave could show up there. “Let’s go inside,” she said. “It’ll be easier to talk there.”

A half smile appeared on Stefan’s lips. Leesa thought he had probably guessed why she wanted to go somewhere else, but he didn’t say anything about it, for which she was grateful. She didn’t want to talk about Rave, and she certainly didn’t want to have to explain her relationship with him.

Stefan pulled his hood up and donned dark sunglasses. Now he looked like a dozen other guys Leesa had seen around campus today. She led him through her dorm to a small lounge at the far end of the building. Sunlight streamed in through a large west-facing window, so she circled away from the light, passing up a pair of leather couches and sitting instead at a small wooden table near the opposite wall. Nothing wrong with keeping a table between her and a vampire, she reasoned as Stefan slipped into the chair opposite her.

The lounge was quiet, empty except for a dark-haired girl wearing earphones who was pecking away at her laptop at another table. Obviously engrossed in whatever she was doing, she didn’t even glance up at their arrival.

Leesa looked at Stefan, unsure how to begin. He sat comfortably against the back of his chair, waiting, his eyes locked onto her face. As she'd told Cali, he was definitely sexy, both in looks and the way he carried himself. It was his eyes more than anything, she thought. They were impossibly dark and deep, inviting you in, yet full of mysterious depths. His mouth was pretty sexy as well, his full lips accentuated by the paleness of his smooth skin. If it weren't for the minor problem that he was a vampire, he would be just Cali's type. And she would have been more than happy to fix her up with him.

"I'm curious," Stefan said. "How is it you know about Edwina?"

Leesa relaxed a smidgen. Stefan had just produced the opening she needed to talk to him about Bradley and Edwina, so she decided to get right to the point. "Edwina was my brother's girlfriend."

Stefan raised his dark eyebrows. "His girlfriend, huh?" The smallest of smiles played upon his sensuous lips. "Edwina always did like to play with her humans."

Leesa suddenly felt very cold. She didn't like the way that sounded. "What do you mean 'play with'?" she asked tremulously.

"Vampires don't usually take human boyfriends or girlfriends. We kill them, or turn them vampire, sometimes make one a feeder." Stefan leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table. His black eyes bored into Leesa's. "If there's a human we are especially drawn to, we turn them and make them our consort."

Leesa's chill deepened. Edwina had spent a lot of time with Bradley before he disappeared. Did that mean she liked her brother enough to turn him? That was what Leesa feared most, for it meant there would be no rescue for Bradley, no hope of ever bringing him back. She prayed it wasn't true, that Edwina was only, as Stefan had said, playing with him.

She was almost afraid to ask, but what choice did she have? She forced the words from her throat. "Do you know if Bradley is with Edwina?"

Stefan leaned back, his face blank. "I know no one by that name."

For a moment, Leesa's hopes soared. Stefan had never heard of Bradley! Maybe Edwina had nothing to do with her brother's going away. Maybe he left for some other reason, one having nothing to do with vampires. Maybe he got hooked on drugs and didn't want Leesa to know, or joined a cult, or ran away with a married woman. There were all kinds of possibilities. She didn't care what the reason was, as long as it didn't involve vampires.

But reality closed its grip on her quickly. She was fooling herself. Grasping at straws, trying to deny the probable truth. Stefan did not know Bradley. More accurately, he had simply said he didn't know anyone by that name. Did feeders even have names? Did vampires choose a new name when they were turned? She needed better answers, which meant she had to ask better questions.

She edged forward on her chair. "Does Edwina have a partner? What did you call it...a consort?"

Stefan shook his head. "No, she doesn't. Taking a consort is a very rare thing."

Something in the way he said it struck her. "Do you?" she asked, not really certain where the question came from.

Stefan hesitated for an instant before replying. "No. Not yet."

Leesa didn't notice his hesitation. She was too busy building up the courage to ask the question she knew she must ask next. "Does Edwina have a feeder?"

Once again, surprise lifted Stefan's eyebrows. "What do you know about feeders?"

Leesa sighed. She didn't want to spend time talking about the details of this stuff. She just wanted to know about Bradley—and whether Stefan could do anything to help him. "Not much," she admitted.

“I’ve heard vampires sometimes keep people captive just for their blood. That’s all.” She met Stefan’s eyes again. “Does Edwina have one?”

Stefan nodded. “Yes, she does.”

Leesa’s heart sank. This was the answer she had dreaded hearing. She reached into her bag, fumbling for her wallet. “For how long?” she asked, hoping Stefan would say something like “years and years,” which would mean it couldn’t be Bradley.

“Not long,” Stefan replied. “But we experience time differently than humans. I’m not sure I can give an answer that will be meaningful to you.”

Leesa at last managed to get her wallet out of her purse. She took out a picture of her and Bradley, taken by one of Bradley’s friends shortly before Bradley left for college. They were standing with their arms around each other in front of a bright red bougainvillea. Both wore happy smiles. Leesa’s eyes began to mist and she wiped them with the back of her hand before handing the photo to Stefan. “Is this Edwina’s feeder?”

Stefan studied the picture. Leesa watched for any sign of recognition, but Stefan’s face revealed nothing. Finally, he handed the picture back to her. His eyes were impossible to read, but she thought she saw a faint hint of sadness in them.

“It’s him, yes,” he said softly.

Leesa crumpled forward, her face coming to rest atop her forearms on the table. She sobbed into her arms, unable to stop her tears this time. She thought she had steeled herself for this moment. She had told herself to expect it, making herself think of it as the better alternative to Bradley’s being a vampire. She had even fantasized vague plans of rescue. But she was not prepared for the reality, for the actual words that made her deepest fears come true. Her beloved brother was being held somewhere, little more than a human blood bank, suffering what she imagined to be a living hell.

She forced herself to pull it together. Crying would do Bradley no good. She had been waiting for Stefan, not just to confirm her fears, but also to find out whether he could help her. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and lifted her head. She was not a little girl anymore. Bradley needed her, and she was going to do everything she could to help him.

Reaching across the table, she clasped her hands around Stefan’s right hand, scarcely noticing how cool his skin was. “Is there any way you can help him?”

Stefan stared at her silently. She wished she could read his eyes, but they remained bottomless black pools.

“It’s very unusual for one vampire to interfere with another in something like this,” he said at last, “but yes, I believe I have the power to do so.”

Leesa could hardly believe her ears. Stefan could help her brother! Maybe her dream of reuniting her family was not just a dream after all. Her mom was already doing so much better, and now there was hope for Bradley. She forced herself to rein in her excitement. Nothing had happened yet. And there was something in what Stefan had said—or maybe in the way he said it—that gave her pause. So much of what he said always seemed to have hidden meanings. She needed a clearer answer.

“Can you set Bradley free?” she asked.

Stefan eased his hand from hers and stood up. The girl on the laptop looked up from her computer, distracted by the movement, and then returned to her work. Leesa’s eyes remained glued upon Stefan as he paced a few steps from the table, turned around and came back.

“It could cause a great deal of friction,” he said, standing over her. “Perhaps even land me in

trouble with the Council. If I were to chance it, I'd need something from you in return.”

“Anything,” Leesa said. “If you’ll free my brother, I’ll do anything you ask.”

Stefan sat down. Once again, his eyes bored into hers. “Don’t be so quick to agree, Leesa. You haven’t yet heard what I want from you.”

Leesa had known all along Stefan wanted something from her—she had been counting on it to get him to help her. But her blood froze when he told her what it was.

31. WALKING THE HALLS

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day—at least not outside, where a fast-moving front had swept through overnight and deposited almost an inch of rain in less than two hours. Following the rain, the temperature plummeted, leaving a sheath of ice coating the sidewalks, streets, trees and power lines. The television was filled with news of jackknifed trucks, chain reaction collisions and downed electrical lines. Luckily, it was Sunday, so traffic was light and schools and many businesses were closed, but people were being warned to stay home and avoid the dangerous roads and walkways.

It was a warning Leesa hated to hear. She desperately needed a walk, after suffering a sleepless night tossing and turning while replaying her talk with Stefan and stewing over the deal he'd offered her. She had bundled up and gotten as far as the front door, but one look at the deserted, ice-coated sidewalks had been enough to send her back to her room. But she still needed to walk, because in addition to helping her think, walking was the only way she knew to burn off the nervous anxiety gnawing at her stomach and tightening the muscles in her neck and back. This was why she was now trudging up and down the hallways and stairs of her dorm, drawing curious glances from her neighbors as she limped by their open doors for the third, fifth or seventh time.

She had settled into a pattern: walk the length of a hallway, go down a flight of stairs, walk back the length of the new hallway, go down another flight of stairs. When she reached the ground floor, she repeated the same pattern going up, until she got to the fourth floor and started back down again. She had been “hiking” the halls for almost an hour now and was beginning to feel pleasantly exhausted and at least a bit less anxious. Cali had joined her for a couple of laps, Stacie for a few others, but Leesa was too focused on her thoughts to be very good company, so her friends voiced their support for whatever was troubling her and melted away when they passed their rooms. They both invited her to come visit when she finished, either to talk about what was bothering her or for some distraction.

She wished she could have shared her burden with her friends, but there was no way she could talk about it to anyone except maybe Rave. And with the horrid conditions outside, there was no chance she'd be seeing him today, which was probably a good thing, since she wasn't sure what she would say to him anyway. She thought briefly of confiding in her mom, but decided it wouldn't be fair to burden her with the decision.

Reaching the end of the third-floor hallway, she headed back into the dim stairwell and climbed back up the stairs one more time, emerging on the fourth floor. Like all the other floors, this one was noisy with music, conversation and the sound of televisions blaring from almost every room. Unable to go out, the students were entertaining themselves as best they could. One of the few closed and silent doors was her own, which she passed yet again, heading for the stairs at the other end of the corridor.

Her thoughts returned to her talk with Stefan. He said he knew it was a big decision and told her to take as much time as she needed to think about it. She promised to have an answer for him within a week, and he told her where he would be waiting at sunset every evening. If her decision was no, she could simply tell him and leave; if it was yes, he would be ready to release Bradley. It was so easy, so simple.

All she had to do was decide whether she could go through with what he was asking of her.

Monday morning broke bright and sunny, with little wind and temperatures soaring all the way up to a

balmy forty degrees. It was still plenty cold, but warm enough to begin melting the ice from the streets. Early classes had been canceled—saving Leesa from math, at least—but once it became clear the ice would quickly melt, all classes from eleven o'clock on were being held as scheduled. So Leesa was now sitting in English lit, trying to pay attention to what the professor was saying, but without much success. She kept replaying her talk with Stefan, kept imagining Bradley chained in some dark cavern. For as much as she was getting out of class, it could have been Greek rather than English.

She had yet to reach a final decision, but she was pretty sure what it would be. And that meant she was wasting her time sitting here, even if she had been able to concentrate. There was no good reason to be here and lots of other things she'd rather be doing—like spending time with her mom, or maybe going to Moodus and looking for Rave.

She closed her notebook. No more classes today, she decided. Not even the rest of this one. She got up and quietly made her way to the door. As soon as she was outside, she flipped open her cell and called Aunt Janet, arranging for her mom and aunt to come take her to lunch. Then they would all go for a walk somewhere. She smiled as she headed back toward her dorm. This was a much better use of the time she had left.

She stopped by Cali's room to see if she wanted to join them for lunch, but she was at class. Leesa tucked a short note into the crack of the door, in case Cali returned before her mom and aunt arrived, and then went up to her room to change clothes and put on a more comfortable pair of walking shoes.

The forecast called for the temperature to top out around fifty, so she chose a powder blue turtleneck and a dark gray Hollister sweatshirt, leaving the same jeans on but switching to a pair of worn gray Nike athletic shoes. She grabbed a nylon jacket in case it got colder than she expected and headed back downstairs. Today would be family day. Tomorrow she'd see if she could find Rave. And after that, well, she would just have to see.

Aunt Janet pulled up in front of the dorm a few minutes later. As Leesa limped down the walk, her mom got out of the car, smiling and opening her arms wide. Leesa slipped into her arms, holding the embrace longer than usual, relishing the comfort of her mom's hug before finally letting go and climbing into the backseat.

Aunt Janet suggested they go to the Harbor Park Restaurant, which occupied the Old Yacht Club building on the west bank of the Connecticut River. Leesa had passed by the restaurant a couple of times, but had never eaten there. She thought lunch on the edge of the river sounded perfect.

The three-story wooden building was nearly one hundred years old, painted white with brown trim. The place wasn't very crowded, and they were able to get a table next to the window. From where they sat, Leesa looked out across a broad wooden deck, closed this time of year, to a panoramic view of the half-mile-wide river. To the north, she could see the two latticed steel arches of the Arrigoni Bridge shining like giant spider webs in the sunlight. Ninety feet below the bridge, the river rushed southward, its sun-dappled waters sparkling like a string of floating diamonds. Across the river, the barren hills retained only the last vestiges of the fall foliage.

Leesa ordered a hamburger and fries. Her mom chose a grilled fish sandwich and Aunt Janet decided to be a bit more adventurous and ordered a chicken fajita wrap.

"So, why aren't you in class today?" Judy asked after the young waitress scampered away with their order. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you, about the chance to spend some extra time with my beautiful daughter."

“A lot of classes were cancelled because of the ice,” Leesa said. It was not exactly a truthful answer, but it wasn’t a lie, either. And it kept her from having to explain why she had been unable to concentrate in class.

“How lucky for us,” Judy said. “I’m glad you decided to spend your bonus time with a pair of old fogies, instead of your girlfriends.”

“Ha! Neither of you are fogies.” Leesa grinned. “Old, maybe. But not fogies.”

The two older women chuckled.

“Thank you for that, Leesa,” Aunt Janet said.

They spent a couple of minutes talking about the storm and the damage it had caused in Meriden—thankfully none of it in Aunt Janet’s neighborhood—until their food arrived. Leesa doused her fries with ketchup and added a few squirts to her burger. The fries were crisp, and her burger tasted juicy and delicious. Only about fifty times better than dorm food, she thought happily.

Everything was perfect—the food, the view and the company. She couldn’t have asked for anything better. As much as she enjoyed her food, she was even more pleased with how animated her mom was—smiling, laughing, chatting enthusiastically. Leesa couldn’t believe it had been less than a week since her mom had received the *grafhym* blood.

After lunch, they took a stroll along the river. Somewhere during the walk, Leesa reached one decision, at least. While she still wasn’t sure what to do about Stefan’s offer, she was definitely not going to endanger her mom’s recovery by discussing it with her. She had been making decisions without her mom’s help for most of her life, and she would continue to do so now.

32. HEARTS BREAK

Chill winds still blew, and yesterday's sunshine had given way to a high layer of gray clouds. Above the eastern horizon, a narrow strip of blue accented the gray like the painted trim on an old house. The cold, dim day mirrored Leesa's mood as she limped along the dirt road toward Balin's cabin—"road" being a kind description, she thought, of the rutted pathway. The musty odor of damp, dead leaves filled the air, and the farther she got from the lightly traveled highway where she'd parked her aunt's car, the quieter it became. Eventually, only the strident, irregular call of some kind of bird that hadn't headed south for the winter broke the silence, and she wasn't happy with the quiet. The last song she'd heard on the radio before leaving the car had been "Meet Me on the Equinox" by Death Cab for Cutie, and its plaintive, drawn out chorus—"everything, everything ends...everything, everything ends"—kept replaying in her head. She tried to shoo it from her mind, but the refrain refused to leave.

She had finally settled on her decision, and the weight of it hung upon her like a backpack full of textbooks. Telling Rave was not going to be easy. She had thought about going ahead and meeting Stefan without telling him, but he deserved to know. Besides, she needed a favor from him. A very big favor.

She hadn't noticed it when Rave carried her here a few weeks earlier—probably because of how swiftly he moved—but the air seemed to be growing steadily warmer the closer she got to the volkaane settlement. She wondered if it had something to do with the volkaanes themselves, or perhaps resulted from whatever was going on underground that produced the famous Moodus Noises. Or maybe it was just the long walk warming her blood.

She was hoping to find Rave at Balin's, since he seemed to spend a lot of time with the old volkaane, but even if she didn't, Balin would probably know where he was. Rave would be around somewhere, because she had asked him to stay close to home so she could find him in case she needed him.

Rounding a bend in the road, she spotted Balin's old cabin. A thin stream of white smoke drifted up from the chimney and disappeared into the gray sky. The charcoal smell of burning wood reminded Leesa of the fireplace in her aunt's house. She had limped a few steps onto the path leading to the cabin when the door swung open and Rave stepped out, dressed in a simple dark gray T-shirt and jeans. His face bore a broad smile and showed no sign of surprise, as if he had expected to see her when he opened the door.

She smiled back. He was so handsome, and so clearly overjoyed to see her it almost hurt to look at him—especially given the news she was bringing. Almost before she could finish the thought, Rave was in front of her. She still hadn't gotten used to how swiftly he could move. He swept her into his arms, lifting her feet completely off the ground.

"How'd you know I was here?" she asked.

"I'm not sure." Leesa felt his mouth stretch into a grin against her hair. "Maybe I smelled that vampire blood of yours."

Her mouth tightened. He shouldn't be joking about vampire blood. Not now. But he didn't know what she had come to tell him, she reminded herself. She pressed her cheek against his soft hair and squeezed him even more tightly. How she wished this moment would never end, that time could be frozen right here, right now. But that was not to be. She forced a smile onto her face and gently disengaged from his embrace.

“Very funny,” she said.

Rave hooked his arm around her waist and led her back toward the cabin.

“Anyhow, I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “I’ve got something to tell you.”

“I need to talk to you, too,” she said just before they crossed through the doorway.

Inside, Balin greeted her warmly and ushered her to a chair in front of the fire. The heat felt good, and Leesa took her jacket off and draped it over the back of the chair before sitting. A black iron pot hung over the fire, and she smelled the savory aroma of some kind of soup or stew. She could hear it bubbling inside the uncovered pot.

“Smells good,” she said as Rave sat beside her.

“It should,” Balin said, smiling. “I’ve had a couple hundred years to perfect the recipe.” He grabbed a wooden spoon from a hook beside the fireplace and stirred the contents of the pot. When he finished, he ran his finger over the end of spoon and put his finger to his mouth. “Should be ready in an hour or so. There’s plenty for three if you two want to join me. Can I get you something to drink, Leesa?”

She saw two pewter mugs on a shelf above the fireplace and guessed that Rave and Balin had probably been drinking mead when she arrived. She was tempted to ask for some of the tasty brew, but decided she had better keep a clear head, so she asked for water instead. A moment later, Balin handed her a heavy mug.

“I figured you could handle a full glass of this stuff,” he said, grinning.

Leesa smiled back and took the mug in both hands. Her hike to the cabin had built her thirst, so she took several long swallows. The cool water tasted delicious. Looking around the cabin, she saw no evidence of any plumbing. She guessed that Balin must get his water straight from a nearby stream or spring.

“What did you want to talk about?” Rave asked when she finally lowered the mug, now only half full, from her lips.

She rested the mug on her thigh and twisted around to face him. “No, you go first,” she insisted, knowing that once she told him her decision, there was little chance they would be talking about anything else.

“Okay.” Rave reached out and held her hand. “Feel this.”

Leesa looked at him quizzically and saw deep concentration on his face. His hand felt warm, as usual. What was she supposed to be feeling?

Rave recognized her puzzlement and smiled. “Just wait.”

She squeezed his hand a bit more tightly and watched him closely. He seemed to be doing something with his breathing, slowing the rhythm, inhaling more deeply. His eyelids drifted closed. She noticed Balin hovering above them, watching Rave intently. A minute ticked by, then another. She looked down at Rave’s hand. At first she thought she was imagining it, but in another moment knew she was not. The heat from his hand was slowly diminishing. She watched him, wide-eyed, as his hand continued to cool, until it was only a little warmer than her own.

Balin placed his fingers against Rave’s cheek. “That’s enough, young Rave. Bring it back.”

Rave opened his eyes and began breathing normally. Leesa felt the heat returning to his hand.

“*Rammugul*,” Rave said. “I’ve got pretty good control of my fire now. But Balin won’t let me extinguish it completely. He’s still afraid I won’t be able to restart it.”

“It’s too risky,” Balin said.

Rave took Leesa’s hand between both of his and squeezed gently. “I think I can do it.” His eyes

locked onto hers. “I’m willing to chance it, Leesa.”

Leesa stared deep into his beautiful dark eyes and saw the unmistakable love glowing there. This was everything she had been hoping for, longing for. For him to have complete control of his fire, so they could be together fully, without danger, without worry. But not now. Especially not now. *Everything, everything ends.* The words echoed in her head again. She couldn’t let this sway her from her decision, a decision she’d spent days agonizing over. And she was going to need his fire. More than she had ever needed anything. And then, in a way, they would be together forever.

Her eyes began to tear, but she made no move to wipe the tears away. Soon she felt them running down her cheeks.

Rave tenderly wiped the tears from her face with his thumb. “What’s wrong, sweetheart? Even if I lost my fire—and I won’t, I promise you—we’d still be together.”

Leesa felt the heat from his thumb dry her cheek almost instantly. But though her tears might be drying, her heart was still breaking. She moved onto his lap and snuggled against him, burying her face against his neck. *Everything ends.*

“It’s not that, Rave,” she said when she regained control. “It’s not that at all.” She pulled her head back and looked at him intently. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

She hated the look of pained concern that crossed Rave’s face, and hated what she knew she was doing to him. And it was only going to get worse. She hoped he loved her enough to go along with what she would be asking.

“Is there somewhere nearby that’s special to you?” she asked. “Some place you love to go, to sit or walk, that you could take me to right now?”

Rave stood up, lifting her effortlessly from his lap and holding her in his arms. He kissed her forehead. “There is, yes.”

“Then take me there. Please.”

Balin watched as Rave carried Leesa out the door. The old volkaane was not sure what was going on, but his heart ached for them both.

Cradled in Rave’s arms, Leesa kept her cheek pressed against his warm chest as he whisked her along the roadway, deeper into the volkaane settlement. The orchard she had seen her first day here flew by in a blur, as did a few cabins and several small houses more visible from the road now that the trees had discarded their leaves. After a few minutes, Rave turned off into the woods, following an almost invisible trail up a sloping hillside and down the other side. He carried her along the bottom of a small ravine, then back up another ridge, steeper than the first. No matter what the terrain, his footing was sure, his gait effortless. Even with her in his arms, he made no sound. She felt almost as if she were floating.

She wished she could remain like this forever, her body held tight against his, speeding through the countryside, across the state, across the country, around the world, even. She was certain Rave could do it. She sighed. If only.

If only it wasn’t for her mom, and Bradley, and Stefan.

Finally, Rave stopped and put her down on a stone outcropping halfway up the slope of a tall ridge. Stringy weeds and tall grasses, brown now as autumn edged toward winter, sprouted from small cracks in the gray shale, but the expanse of rock held the surrounding woods at bay. She heard water splashing behind her, and turned to see a wide stream cascading over the uneven rocks into a slow-moving river far below. From where they stood, she could follow the river almost a quarter of a mile

downstream before it curved out of sight. Even with the trees mostly bare of leaves, the place was beautiful. And very peaceful. The only sound was the gurgling of the stream as it tumbled down the rocky slope.

Rave took her hand. "Over here," he said, leading her closer to the stream, to a rock shelf that thrust out from the outcropping and formed a natural bench just above the water.

They sat side by side. Snuggled against him, Leesa could see why he liked this place so much. The view was starkly beautiful, mostly shades of gray and brown, especially with the overcast sky. Only a few hints of color broke the desolation—some stubborn red and yellow leaves still clinging tenuously to their perches and scattered mountain laurels with their perpetually green leaves. She knew it would be even more beautiful at other times of the year.

The recent storm had swollen the stream. In some places it bounced furiously down the rock, sending small splashes of white into the air; in others it gathered into clear pools, where the eddying currents carried dead leaves and other detritus around in spiraling dances. It should have been cold sitting here exposed to the chill breeze, but not with Rave beside her. His heat seemed to seep into the rock, warming her seat almost as if she was sitting on a heated pad.

"That's the Moodus River down there," Rave said. "A mile or so downstream, it flows into the Salmon River. We're not too far from the infamous noises that had your friends so worried about me."

Leesa smiled. "Well, you have to admit, Cali was right about the danger of kissing a Maston."

"Yeah, she was. But I'm working on that. I've almost got it figured out."

A week ago, those words would have sent waves of joy surging through her, but now they brought sadness, longing and regret. She threw her arms around Rave and buried her face against his chest one more time. Rave stroked her hair. His fingers felt like warm streams of water flowing down her head.

"I think you'd better tell me what's bothering you," Rave said. "What you came to talk about."

Leesa kept her face pressed against him. How was she supposed to begin? What could she say? There was no way to tell him without breaking both their hearts. Was she sure about what she was doing? Why couldn't she just remain here, happy and safe with Rave? Nothing could ever hurt her as long as she was with him. She knew the answer before the question was even fully formed in her brain: because Bradley needed her. And because she was her big brother's only hope.

She lifted her head and eased her arms from around him. She couldn't put this off any longer. It wasn't fair to either of them. "I saw Stefan again the other day," she began.

The pained expression on his face mirrored the pain she felt in her heart.

"He told me Bradley is being kept as a feeder. Stefan said he can free him."

For a long moment, Rave didn't say anything. "Vampires don't do anything for nothing," he said finally, struggling to keep his tone neutral. "And they don't usually meddle in the affairs of their fellows. What does Stefan want from you in return?"

Leesa drew in a deep breath. Rave had just made it easy for her to get right to the point. Silently, she both thanked him and cursed him for doing so.

"He wants to make me his consort." She saw the fear flash in his eyes, but forced herself to continue. "I'm going to tell him yes."

Leesa knew she would never see anything more horrible than the look that twisted Rave's beautiful face. She would have given anything not to tell him, to spare both of them this terrible pain, but that would have been cowardly. He loved her. He deserved to know what she was going to do. And she

needed something from him, too.

Rave stood up, taking a few steps away and staring out over the water before turning and coming back. His expression was still filled with pain. "You can't do this, Leesa. You don't know what you're saying. You have no idea what you will become, no idea how horrible it will be."

Leesa stood up and took his hands in hers. "I have to save my brother. I have to." Her voice was soft, her speech broken. "He did everything for me... while I was growing up. I can't leave him... not the way he is now... knowing what he's going through. I just can't. I wish there was some other way, but you told me yourself there isn't."

Rave drew her into his embrace. For several long moments they just stood there, hugging and saying nothing. Tears streamed down both their faces.

"I've never been as close to anyone as you are to your brother," Rave said at last. "Not until now, at least. It's not how we volkaanes are. Balin is the closest thing to family I have, so it's hard for me to understand how you could make such a sacrifice, how you could do what you're planning to do." He looked down at Leesa, his pained expression softening. "But I think I do understand. Because I know I would do anything for you, Leesa. Anything."

Leesa squeezed him even more tightly. She knew he meant it, and she was glad to hear him say it, because it would make it easier to ask what she still had to ask.

Rave gently disengaged from their embrace and guided her back to the rock bench. "Before you do this, let me try to get your brother out."

She looked at him longingly. If only there was some way he could. But she knew he was grasping at straws.

"How?" she asked. "You told me there's nothing you can do."

Rave sighed. "I don't know," he admitted. "Maybe I *can* sneak into their lair and get your brother. At least let me try."

Leesa shook her head. "You'll just get yourself killed. And I'll still have to do what Stefan wants to save Bradley."

Unless I manage to destroy Stefan before I die, Rave thought. At least then Leesa would be safe. But he knew that wouldn't be fair, to ruin her only chance to save her brother. And he knew Leesa wouldn't give up even if Stefan were gone. "Perhaps I will die trying," he said. "But I'd rather try and die than lose you forever."

Leesa took his hand and squeezed it. "No, Rave, I can't let you do that. Because there's something I'll still need from you."

Rave's brow furrowed. "What could you need from me, once you become...?" His voice trailed off, unable to complete the question.

She stared hard into his eyes. "I'll need you to kiss me, Rave. With the full force of your volkaane fire." She hated the agonized comprehension she saw in his eyes.

"You mean...?"

"Yes," she said. "I want you to destroy me. I don't want to spend eternity as a vampire, hunting humans for their blood. If I can, I'll come to you—make it easy for you. But if I can't get away, I want you to promise you'll never stop hunting me. Until you find me and destroy me."

"Oh, Leesa," Rave moaned. He pulled his hand free and stood up, walking in tight, aimless circles in front of her. "How can I do that?" he said. "How can I kill the girl I love?"

"I won't be the girl you loved, Rave. I'll be something much different. You said you would do

anything for me. So do this, please, for the girl I know you do love. Let me at least know that the last thing I'll ever feel will be the heat of your burning kiss."

Rave leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead, letting his lips linger against her skin. "I promise," he whispered. "It will be the hardest thing I'll ever do, but I will do as you ask."

Leesa hugged him with all her strength, her cheek pressed against his chest. "Thank you," she said. "At least then, in some small way, we'll be together forever."

33. BITTEN

It was a dark and stormy night. Not long past sunset, but it might as well have been midnight for all Leesa could see outside the windows of Professor Clerval's old VW van. Lightning crackled to the west, sending twisting yellow forks ripping through the umber sky, followed by rumbling explosions of thunder that seemed ready to shake the van apart. Every time the lightning flashed, Leesa's muscles tensed in preparation for the next fusillade of thunder. The rain was intermittent, at times pelting down in gust-driven torrents that rattled against the van, then subsiding to a light drizzle that floated quietly down, enveloping them in an eerie silence until the next peal of thunder. No screenwriter could have scripted a more fitting night for what she was about to do.

She was alone with the professor, parked beside the road just outside the closed parking lot for the Hadlyme Ferry. She had considered asking her uncle to drive her, but decided Dr. Clerval was the better choice for dealing with Stefan and for taking care of Bradley afterward. While the professor was distraught about the reason they were here, Leesa could tell he was looking forward to seeing an actual vampire.

When lightning illuminated the sky, she could see the macabre outline of Gillette Castle looming above them on a wooded hillside a quarter mile away. The odd looking structure, full of angles and asymmetrical towers, was built mostly of rough gray fieldstone collected from the surrounding area. She had googled the castle after Stefan selected this spot for their meeting and learned it had once been the home of an eccentric stage actor who gained fame playing Sherlock Holmes in the early 1900s. He had designed the place himself, and since his death, the castle had become the centerpiece of a sprawling state park. The structure would have looked strange even in the daylight, but at night, with the rain and lightning, it appeared foreboding and sinister. If the castle hadn't been part of a popular park, she would have thought it a perfect home for vampires. She wondered if Stefan was displaying a dark sense of humor by choosing this spot, but thought this was not a matter he would treat lightly. More likely, they were simply somewhere near the vampire lair.

The rain began to fall more heavily again, pounding upon the roof of the VW and streaming down over the windows, turning them opaque.

"You certainly picked a miserable night for this," Professor Clerval said.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Leesa said. "But if I don't do it now, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to."

"Are you absolutely certain about this? It's not something that can be undone. Ever." Dr. Clerval rested his bony hand atop Leesa's. He knew her mind was made up, but felt he had to make one last attempt to persuade her to change her mind. "We can still drive away. No one would blame you."

Leesa shook her head. "Believe me, I'd rather be anywhere but here. But I don't have a choice. I have to do it. For Bradley. He'd do the same for me, I know he would." And probably wouldn't have agonized over the decision nearly as much, she thought.

She had explained her bargain with Stefan to Professor Clerval the day before to prepare him for what was going to happen. He had tried hard to talk her out of it, but she'd been resolute, and finally he had given in and agreed to help. Once her plans were made, she spent most of yesterday and all of today with her mom, cherishing every moment. She had hung out with Cali, Caitlin and Stacie for a couple of hours last night, drinking wine and trying to have fun. At the end of the evening, she told Cali she was going to meet Stefan tonight about helping Bradley. But she didn't tell her what that really meant.

So her unsaid goodbyes were done. She hadn't trusted herself to see Rave again, instead letting their time beside the stream be their final farewell. All that remained now was to wait for Stefan.

She didn't have long to wait.

A flash of lightning revealed three dark silhouettes by a trailhead in the closed-up park, maybe fifty yards from the van. So brief was the illumination, Leesa wasn't even sure she had actually seen them, but if she had, it had to be Stefan—nobody else would be out on a night like this. But was one of the figures Bradley? Desperate to see, she squinted hard into the darkness, but it was impossible to pierce the blackness.

"Did you see someone?" she asked the professor, pointing anxiously through the front window. "Over there, a little way up the trail?"

"I think so." Professor Clerval leaned forward, trying like Leesa to see where seeing was impossible. "Three of them?"

Before Leesa could answer, Stefan glided into the pale glow thrown by the van's parking lights. He was alone. As usual, he was dressed in black—jacket, jeans and boots. He seemed oblivious to the rain streaming down his uncovered head and dripping from his long hair and his chin. He smiled at Leesa through the window.

Leesa grabbed her umbrella and climbed out of the van, snapping the umbrella open as soon as she was out the door. She heard the driver's side door thunk closed, and a moment later, Professor Clerval was standing beside her, also shielded by an umbrella.

Stefan turned to the professor. "Professor Clerval. We've not met, but I've sat in on your class several times over the years. I assume Leesa has told you who I am?"

Dr. Clerval swallowed hard, scarcely able to believe he was talking to a vampire. He almost forgot why he was here. "She has, yes," he said evenly.

"Then this must be quite a moment for you. To actually stand before the object of your lifelong obsession." He let his fangs drop slowly down from his jaw. "To know now without a doubt that we do exist."

Leesa faltered back a step at the sight of Stefan's fangs. Even though she knew he was a vampire, the sight of the pointed teeth startled her. An image of those yellow fangs piercing her throat rose unbidden into her mind. She shivered.

Professor Clerval was similarly distracted, but for a different reason. He stared at Stefan's fangs, studying them. They looked exactly like the ones on his prized skull. He forced the thoughts away and returned his gaze to Stefan's eyes. "Please don't make Leesa go through with this."

Stefan raised his eyebrows quizzically. "I've not yet even heard what her choice is," he said. His fangs disappeared, replaced by a thin smile as he turned to Leesa. "Am I making you do anything, Leesa? Or are you here of your own free will?"

Leesa studied his face, annoyed that a part of her still found him sexy. "I'm here of my own choice," she said. "To save my brother."

"You know what I mean, Stefan," Dr. Clerval said, still trying to make this turn out differently than these two intended. "You're forcing her to make this horrible choice for her brother's sake."

"That's where you and I differ, Professor. I don't see it as horrible. Indeed, I relish my current existence. I would not undo it even if I could. As for Leesa's brother, my kind do not lightly meddle in one another's affairs. What I'm offering her is no small thing."

Leesa spoke before Professor Clerval could respond. "Enough, you two. I've made my decision."

She looked past Stefan, trying to probe the darkness, but still could see nothing. “Is Bradley out there?”

“He is,” Stefan said. “Shall I bring him to you? Do you accept my offer?”

Leesa took a deep breath. This was it. She could still turn back, could still return to her old life, could still enjoy life with her mom, with Rave, with Cali and her other friends. As Professor Clerval had said, no one would blame her. Indeed, except for Rave and the professor, no one would even know what she had done. Or failed to do. No one but me, she thought. “Yes. I do,” she said, her voice little more than a whisper. “Get my brother, please.”

Stefan nodded, then vanished into the darkness. Leesa kept her eyes fixed on the spot where he disappeared, waiting to see her brother. The seconds dragged by. The rain slackened, floating down now in a misty drizzle. Without the drumming of the rain on the ground and on their umbrellas, the night was suddenly silent. After what seemed an eternity, she heard the splash of slow, heavy footsteps, and a moment later Stefan and Bradley emerged from the blackness. Lurking behind them, Leesa saw the outlines of three more dark figures. Stefan knew she had a volkaane friend and was clearly taking no chances Rave might be somewhere nearby. She guessed there were other vampires out there besides the three she could see and was glad she hadn’t let Rave talk her into letting him come with her.

As Stefan and Bradley splashed nearer, Leesa’s hand rose unbidden to her mouth. She had thought she was ready for anything, but she was not prepared for this. Not even close. Bradley lurched forward woodenly, his arm around Stefan’s shoulders, his weight supported almost entirely by the vampire. His blond hair was longer than she’d ever seen it, plastered by the rain in twisted strands across his cheeks and shoulders. Soiled clothes hung loosely from his gaunt frame, and his pale skin looked almost yellow. But none of that was as distressing as his eyes. Eyes that should have been as bright and blue as hers were instead dull and lifeless, staring vacantly into nothingness.

This was not the Bradley she had been expecting, not the Bradley she could return to their mom’s joyous embrace. This was a zombie straight from some horror movie. She should have rushed forward to hug him, but was unable to move. Her vocal cords seemed frozen as well.

“He’ll recover,” Stefan said, reading the distress on Leesa’s face as he brought Bradley forward the last few steps. “His blood level is very low. He’ll need rest, and lots to eat and drink.” He looked at Professor Clerval. “And keep him warm. Very warm.”

Leesa stepped forward and placed her hand lightly against Bradley’s cheek. His skin felt like rubber and was icy cold. “Bradley?”

Bradley lifted his head. His eyes seemed to find some focus as he looked at her. “Pumpkin?”

Tears streamed down Leesa’s cheeks at the sound of that single word. She dropped the umbrella and threw her arms around her brother, holding him close and trying to will her body’s warmth into him. If only Rave were here to lend his heat.

She was suddenly aware that Bradley had put his arms around her, returning her hug, and she squeezed him even more tightly. The brother she adored was still inside this frail body. Her bargain would be worth it after all.

“Yes, it’s me,” she said. “Leesa.”

“Leeeee-saaa,” Bradley whispered. He seemed to gain strength from her presence, from her touch. After a moment, he pulled his head back and looked down at her face. “I told you...not to...look for me.” He turned toward Stefan, then back to Leesa. “Ohhh, pumpkin...what have you done?”

More tears welled up in Leesa’s eyes, but she fought them back. “Only what you’ve done for me my whole life.” She drew Bradley deeper into her embrace. “I’m taking care of you.”

Bradley's knees buckled, his strength gone. Stefan caught him easily and held him upright. Leesa was glad her brother didn't have the strength to fight her.

"Let's get him into the van," she said.

Stefan lifted Bradley in his arms and carried him to the van. Leesa pulled the door open, and after Stefan deposited Bradley onto the seat, she buckled the seat belt around him. She kissed her brother's cheek and closed the door. She turned to Professor Clerval, waiting behind her, a sad look on his wizened face.

"Turn the heat up high," she said. "Get him home as quick as you can. You heard what Stefan said. Feed him and keep him warm. When he's better, take him to my mom, and give them the letters I gave you."

Professor Clerval nodded. "I will. I promise."

"Don't tell anyone the truth until Rave tells you I'm dead."

"I understand."

Leesa gave him a quick hug. "Thank you, Professor. For everything."

"I wish I could do more," Professor Clerval replied sadly.

"Don't worry about me. I won't suffer long. Not like Bradley would have suffered."

Stefan moved closer. "It's time, Leesa. Let's go."

Leesa looked into his eyes, hoping to see some sign he might change his mind, might release her from their bargain, but saw only the familiar bottomless pools. "Yes... okay," she mumbled. "Go ahead, Professor. There's nothing more you can do here."

Dr. Clerval's face was a mask of anguish. He stared mutely at her for several long seconds, then turned and climbed into the van.

The sound of the door clunking shut was like the sound of a prison door slamming shut behind her. Without really thinking about it, she picked her umbrella up from the ground.

Stefan rested his hand on her forearm. "You'll soon have no need for that. We do not feel the weather."

Leesa turned toward him. "Except for the sun," she said wryly.

Stefan grinned. "Well, there is that, yes." He grabbed both her hands in his. "Are you ready?"

Leesa was anything but ready. How could anyone be ready for what was about to happen? But she had made a deal, and Bradley was now free. She must keep that thought foremost in her mind, must cling to it and let it carry her through the dark days ahead. Glancing toward the van, she saw the professor watching them through the driver's window. She wondered if Bradley was watching as well.

"Not here, Stefan. Not where they can see. Take me into the darkness."

Stefan took her elbow and guided her away from the road. They didn't go far, perhaps a dozen steps into the deserted parking lot—the longest, most difficult steps of Leesa's life. Her bad leg felt like an anchor, dragging heavily through the puddles, as if it were reluctant to let her leave her old life behind. She wondered if she would still limp once she became a vampire, then chastised herself for the ridiculousness of the thought.

Behind them, the van's engine rumbled to life. She listened sadly while the professor let the motor warm. What she wouldn't give to drive away with them, to take Bradley back to her mom and see the joy on her face. But that would never be, Leesa knew. She had made a bargain, and her future, such as it was, was with Stefan. As if to reinforce the thought, his hands gripped her shoulders. She could barely see his face in the blackness. There was no way her brother could see them from the van.

Stefan's pale face inched closer, near enough now that she could see the sharp fangs curving down from his mouth, could feel his frigid vampire breath on her neck. She shivered as his teeth pressed against her throat. Her heart pounded inside her chest and her knees began to grow weak. She felt a brief moment of searing pain as his fangs punctured her skin, then mercifully, consciousness left her.

Leesa awoke slowly. Her first awareness was just that—a simple awareness of being. No details of who or where or what. She was a disembodied spirit, floating in a sea of nothingness. And for a while, that was enough. More than enough, for there was a strange comfort in not knowing. Something deep in the core of her being, some last vestige of herself, told her to hold on to the nothingness, to cling to it, that it was safer, preferable to what might await her. But slowly her consciousness increased, and the comfort faded, replaced by a growing disquiet.

She lay on her back, unable to move—or unwilling to. Unable or unwilling, it didn't really matter. There was no need for movement. She tried to let her mind drift, tried to regain the comfort of not knowing and not caring, but it grew increasingly difficult. Questions began to emerge from the recesses of her awakening brain—simple questions, but questions that pricked at her comfortable complacency. Where was she? How had she come to this state?

With infinite slowness, it began to come back. Fleeting images in her still foggy mind, images that became steadily more clear. Stefan... And Bradley. A thin, unfelt smile moved her lips. She had saved Bradley; she remembered that now. But at a price—a terrible price. For the first time, she noticed the dull ache on the side of her neck.

She reached toward her throat but stopped her fingers just above her skin, afraid of what they would find. How long her fingers hovered there she had no idea, for time still had no meaning to her, but finally she could wait no longer and forced them down to her neck. She gasped when she felt the rough scabs of twin punctures. So it was done. So be it. She prayed that Rave would find her quickly and put an end to her torment.

Opening her eyes, she saw only darkness. She rolled her head from side to side, trying to pierce the blackness, hoping to see something, anything—perhaps a window a bit less dark than the inside of this unknown place. But there was nothing. It had been foolish to expect anything else—the vampire cavern would have no windows, would have little need of light.

She let her eyelids fall closed. Why wake up, when what awaited her was worse than any nightmare? Better to sleep. Better to die—but she could not die, she realized. She could only be destroyed. Mercifully, sleep once again claimed her.

As before, wakefulness came slowly, but as her mind climbed from the depths, she realized something was different now. Instead of blackness, dull purple light flickered behind her eyelids, and she sensed a presence beside her. Her first thought was Stefan had come to claim his prize, but instead of cold, she felt warmth in the air. Warmth that hadn't been there earlier. A familiar and very welcome warmth.

She opened her eyes and found Rave standing beside the bed, his copper hair glinting in the glow of a tall candle he carried in his left hand. Somehow, beyond any hope, he had found her. She smiled weakly up at him. Her ordeal would be over before it had barely begun.

Rave returned her smile and moved his hand toward her throat. Gently, he touched the twin scabs. She felt his heat seep into her wounds. If only he could make them disappear, but she knew he could not. That was beyond even his powers. And even if he could, so what? Healing the wounds would not change

what Stefan's bite had done to her. That was something that could never be undone. Nothing but death could undo that—the kind of death only one of Rave's kind could bring to a vampire. The kind of death she would eagerly embrace.

She watched as Rave bent his face toward her, drinking in his handsome features one final time. She closed her eyes just before his lips met hers. Thank you, my love, she thought as her lips parted for a final kiss.

His delicious heat surged through her, reaching every inch of her body, burning into every fiber of her being. She snaked her hands behind his head and pressed his mouth to hers more tightly, trying to draw the full force of his fire even more deeply inside her.

She could think of no better way to die.

34. EXPLANATIONS

It was a bright cold day. Bradley stood next to his mother on the deck of the Harbor Park Restaurant, leaning against the wooden railing and gazing out onto the sun-dappled river. He was bundled up in a dark green down jacket and wore a matching woolen ski cap drawn down over his ears. A week had passed since Leesa rescued him from the vampires, and while he was recovering rapidly, he still felt the cold more than most. Today was his first real outing, after five days spent lying in bed at Professor's Clerval's, warmed by an electric blanket, getting up only to eat and take short walks inside the house. His stay at the professor's was followed by two more days recuperating at Aunt Janet's, where he'd gone for a brief stroll outside with his mom each afternoon. Determined to make the most out of this trip to Middletown, he had insisted they go to the edge of the deck and watch the river before going inside to eat.

"Are you warm enough, Bradley?" Judy asked.

"I'm fine, Mom." He lifted his face toward the sky. "I thought I'd never feel the sun on my face again. It feels so good. I don't think I'll ever get enough of it."

Judy laid her gloved hand atop his. "I know exactly how you feel, dear. I don't think I will, either. We've both spent way too long in darkness."

Bradley watched a gleaming white pleasure boat chug past heading upstream, fighting the stiff current. "I still can't believe what Leesa did for me," he said after a moment.

"She did what she knew you would do, if your places were reversed. You always took care of her, ever since your father left. Lord knows I was no help."

"You had your own burdens, Mom. Which neither of us truly understood. Or believed, I'm sorry to admit."

"Well, your sister saved us both." She patted Bradley's hand. "I'm so proud of her."

"Me, too, Mom. Me, too."

"Is this a private party?" a cheerful voice called from behind them. "Or can anyone join?"

They turned to see a smiling Leesa limping toward them, holding Rave's hand. She was wearing jeans and a bright blue parka. Her head was bare and her hair was pulled back into a ponytail with a matching blue scrunchy. Underneath the coat, a navy turtleneck hid the scabs on her neck. Rave wore a heavy black and white checked flannel shirt, mostly to ward off any questions about why he wasn't cold.

"Hi, sweetheart," Judy said. "We got here a bit early, so we were enjoying the sunshine and the river."

Leesa gave her mom a warm hug and then embraced Bradley. "How are you feeling?" she asked him.

"Pretty darn good, thanks to you." He kissed her forehead. "And I intend to stay that way."

"Then you'd better be a little more careful in your choice of girlfriends," Leesa teased.

Bradley laughed. "Okay, Sis. I promise to get your approval in the future." He let go of Leesa and extended his hand to Rave. "Good to see you again, Rave."

Rave shook Bradley's hand, using his ever-increasing control of his heat—a control Leesa was enjoying *very* much—to keep his hand from being too warm. He and Leesa had decided against telling her family about his true nature, thinking they'd had enough of supernatural creatures for a while.

"You, too," Rave said. He draped his arm around Leesa's shoulders. "I've never seen Leesa happier, now that you're back."

“Thanks to her,” Bradley said.

“I still don’t understand what happened,” Judy said. “How did you get bitten, Leesa, but not end up as a vampire? Not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

“I’m not sure I completely understand it, either,” Leesa said. “I passed out when Stefan bit me. When I woke up and felt the scabs on my neck, I thought I *was* a vampire. I should have known better, because I couldn’t see anything, and if I’d been turned, I would have been able to see in the dark. But my mind was foggy, and I was feeling kind of hopeless.” She leaned her elbows on the railing and gazed out across the river.

“I got the rest of the story from Professor Clerval. He said he had started to drive away when Stefan appeared out of the darkness, carrying me. Stefan told him I had vampire blood in me.” She smiled at the irony. “It was the *grafhym*, Mom. You were pregnant when it bit you, so I got some of its essence. Filtered, but *grafhym* essence nonetheless. As soon as Stefan tasted the hint of *grafhym* in me, he stopped. He had no idea what would happen if he continued, but was afraid it would go badly. I don’t think he would have taken my blood if he couldn’t turn me in any case, but luckily, *grafhym* blood tastes really sour to a vampire, so he wouldn’t have gotten any pleasure from drinking mine. He told the professor he released me from our bargain, and since I had fulfilled my part of the deal, Bradley could remain free as well.” She wished she could tell them about Rave’s kiss, how she thought it was meant to kill her, and what an exquisitely pleasurable way to die it would have been, but that needed to remain their secret, at least for now. She was lucky Rave had learned so much control. Otherwise, when she’d locked her arms around his head and pulled her mouth tightly against his, it could very well have turned into a fatal kiss.

She straightened up from the railing. “So I guess you could say we owe it all to ol’ one-fang. The *grafhym* started all this, but in the end, it’s what saved me.”

Judy smiled broadly and hugged her daughter one more time. “I’m not sure I’ll ever completely understand, but I’m thankful for the way it turned out.” She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a digital camera. “Rave, take a picture of my beautiful children and me, please.” She pressed the camera into Rave’s hand.

Too startled to pull his hand away in time, Rave stared down at the camera, then looked helplessly at Leesa.

Leesa laughed and plucked the camera from Rave’s hand. “You’re gonna have to get yourself a new camera, Mom.”

A puzzled expression creased her mom’s brow. “What do you mean? I just bought that one.” She took the camera from Leesa and began fiddling with the buttons.

“Trust me, Mom. You’re gonna need a new one.”

EPILOGUE

Rave waved as the Taurus pulled out of the parking lot. A smiling Leesa waved back through the rear window. Lunch had been wonderful. The Nylands had been so natural and easy with one another, in a manner he had never seen or experienced among his own people. He loved watching the way they interacted. Even more, he loved seeing Leesa so happy. And Leesa had made sure he felt included in everything. Her mom and Bradley had accepted him completely as Leesa's boyfriend and as a part of the family. They had even teased him good-naturedly about his refusal to ride in the car with them. A pleasant warmth radiated through his chest, and he knew it had nothing to do with his fire.

Only one thing bothered him, one thing that threatened the idyllic future he envisioned for all of them. The *brillig* and the *tove* were continuing to strengthen—*Destiratu* seemed a near certainty. And he knew that could endanger everything.

As Leesa waved at Rave through the car window, she couldn't believe how lucky she was. As a young girl she had dreamed about falling in love, but with her leg and her shyness had never really expected it to happen. And yet it had—with the most awesome guy in the world.

She had her mom and her brother back, and she had Rave. Everything was perfect.

Except that she couldn't shake the feeling that something strange was happening inside her. Something she didn't understand. Something that potentially could be very dangerous....

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LEESA, RAVE AND STEFAN RETURN IN *DEATHLESS*, BOOK 2 IN THE BLUE FIRE SAGA.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Prussing was born in New Jersey, but was smart enough to move to beautiful San Diego as soon as he received his Master's degree in psychology from Yale University. In addition to the six Blue Fire Saga books, Scott also wrote *Blue Fire Heat*, an erotic companion piece to the Blue Fire Saga, and *Blue Fire Beginnings*, a collection of short stories recounting the origins of some favorite Blue Fire characters. He is also the author of the mystery/suspense novels *Unturned Stones* and *Tangled Webs*, the fantasy/adventure novel *Dreams of the Last Born*, and the teen romance *Mine: A Love Story*, whose plot is based on the hit songs of Taylor Swift. For those who like their reading a bit hotter, Scott recently completed two XXX-rated erotica novels, *Seduction* and *Surrender*.

Scott is currently hard at work on *Relentless*, book 7 in the Blue Fire Saga, to be released in November, 2014.

Besides writing, Scott enjoys riding his bicycle near the beach, going to the movies, reading books of all sorts, hiking, and golf. He remains one of the few people in the United States without a cell phone.

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Scott loves to interact with his fans and has placed many of them into his books as characters.