

E.H. DRAKE



BLOOD HERRING

KEEP YOUR ENEMIES CLOSE...

To Uncle Bear,
Who sat up with me several nights to keep me company
while I ranted about my imaginary friends and watched every
possible cheesy vampire movie with me.

We miss you.

CHAPTER I

GABE

Paperwork. All the technological advances and they were still burying me in paperwork. Each of my knuckles ached from the typing. I leaned away from the faux wood desk and pushed my hands through my hair. Off to my right, Sanders tried to coerce a witness into coming back. Sadly, none of this served to distract me from the case at hand.

This much typing should be considered cruel and unusual punishment.

In reality, I just wanted to avoid the rest of my report. I'd joined this department to help people, yet *people* were my biggest problem. Another case where humans were the perpetrator. Sadly, the stale ceiling tiles didn't offer any condolences, no matter how long I stared.

"Yo, Collins!" The shrill whistle of my partner made me jump from my chair.

"Jesus, Harper! You trying to get my attention or call back some hunting hounds?"

James Harper sat on my desk, holding a small stack of papers in one broad hand. His dark head shone in the bullpen's fluorescent light and pale flakes of Pop-Tart crumbs littered his bushy beard. "Sorry to scar you for life, buddy, but the captain just handed us a fresh one."

I groaned and eyed the already swelling inbox on my desktop. “My hands are cramped just thinking about the reports I gotta file tonight.”

Harper smiled, shifting his big brows and burly beard, and spilling some of his breakfast onto my desk. “If only you had a partner to help with all those, eh?”

I stood, reaching across my desk to brush the pastry crumbs away. “Yeah and one that could groom himself.”

My partner realized the mess he’d made and moved his big frame like something had bitten him. “Oh, shit, sorry, man!”

He dusted off the few crumbs I’d missed.

“Don’t sweat it. Not many could brag about surviving the dreaded crumb attack.” I shrugged as I finished flicking the last bits away.

Harper barked a single laugh.

My lips twisted up at the corners. “So, what’s my next report?”

“Uniforms were responding to calls out in Rockwood when they found a body,” he said simply.

My eyebrows knitted together. “That’s not exactly uncommon for the area, what makes it one of ours?”

Violence, drugs, working girls. All of these were fairly normal for Rockwood, and we hardly got calls from the residents. We’d once had a woman who’d rammed her car into her boyfriend’s truck repeatedly. The next day, he’d dropped the charges, and I caught them making out in our lobby. Very classy place.

Harper handed me the stack of papers. “Read the calls.”

I took the pages and began flipping through them. The skin between my brows pinched as I read the first anonymous 911 call. “Well then.”

“Keep going.”

I read on, practically shoving my nose through the paper. “Three different calls over four days, but all the same—”

“Yep,” Harper smacked his lips on the *p* for emphasis. “And I guess the condition of the body was pretty gnarled.”

I grimaced at the mental picture and handed them back to him. “Okay, let’s go see if this is another fake.”

Twenty minutes later, we were driving through Rockwood, and I was waiting for the twang of noir music to start. Or maybe my eyesight would slowly drift to grayscale as we descended into poverty. The bright yellow dandelions escaping through cracks in the sidewalk begged to differ. As did the expensive cars mixed among cheap lawn ornaments.

My breath turned into an exasperated sigh.

Harper flicked his gaze to me. “Something on your mind, partner?”

I debated letting out a good rant. The politics here made it so people had a hard time getting out. But then I would end up talking about the same people refusing to call the cops because many were criminals themselves. After that, I’d descend into rambling about the poor innocent kids who were quickly being taught that crime was the only way to survive and the endless revolving door of bad priorities and horrendous politics.

It would have been nice to blow off steam, but Harper had heard it all before. I decided to switch topics. “Nah, just thinking of the forms you left on my desk.”

Harper let out one of his harsh laughs. “Hey, I bought coffee. Doesn’t that earn me some kind of break?”

Harper turned down Lincoln Avenue and eased off the gas. Fast enough to move smoothly with traffic, but slow enough that we could watch for anything worth reacting to.

“A single cup isn’t going to cut it this time. At this rate, you might as well buy me a new machine. Maybe one of them fancy ones with a timer?” The distraction was nice, even if it was temporary.

“Oh, and while I’m at it, I suppose you’d like it to be a fancy latte’ thing with something for your— Ah *man!*” Harper pulled over and groaned.

A crowd had already gathered, some dancing on the asphalt in their pajamas or slippers, and even a few wearing house robes I prayed didn’t fall open. This day was ugly enough as is.

“At least the news isn’t here.” I tried to give Harper a sympathetic look. Neither of us really cared for audiences.

“Yet,” he grumbled as he climbed out of the car. “You take the scene and ME.”

I got out and scowled over the roof of the car. “You’re just trying to unload more work on me.”

“Nah, I want to talk to the uniforms, see what they got.” Harper walked off, politely elbowing his way past the onlookers and hailing one of the uniforms by name, “Hey, Johnson!”

I pulled a similar, though less successful routine, trying to smile my way through the crowd. Pretty sure someone called me a cracker, but it wasn’t worth addressing. Instead, I rolled my eyes and ducked under the crime scene tape. It gave a soft *twang* as I let it fall back in place behind me and nodded at the nearest uniforms.

“Hey, Stevens, how’s the missus?”

“She’s taken a liking to ghost pepper pickles.” He shivered in exaggerated disgust and waved me in. “How’s Michelle?”

I shrugged. No need to talk about that here.

The garish light of the ME van and a couple of cruisers tried to compete with the sun in thick red and blue waves. The body was partially shielded under a red-splotched shroud as a stubby little man examined it. It didn’t stop the putrid smell of death from wafting my way.

“What do we got, Dan?” I pulled a small notebook from one pocket, yanking the pen from the spine.

“I’m afraid it’s the real deal,” the medical examiner greeted me in kind.

“You sure it’s not a fake, like last month?”

“Certain.” The tail ends of his huge mustache danced under his mask like a couple of deranged squirrels while the tubby old man looked at me through his round spectacles. He pulled the shroud back and pointed at our victim’s neck. “Though the shoulder wound is huge, there are four distinct drag marks from the fangs. That’s almost impossible to fake. Plus, this bite is the wrong shape for most animals.”

It was hard to keep my neutral face for the crowd. No matter how many times you see a dead body, it’s always horrible. The poor kid, couldn’t have been more than twenty, was all black and purple like he’d been beaten before he’d been killed. His skin was stretched too tight over his face, like he’d tried to scream in his last minutes, but just couldn’t.

Scenes of past victims swarmed my mind, trying to claim my attention. A girl missing an arm. A man being pulled at like a dog toy between two vamps before being torn apart. A mound of human pieces too mangled for me to identify.

I closed my eyes and breathed, forcing my brain back into the present.

“See, right here.” Dan pointed to twin drag marks, the kid’s neck sliced into big ribbons just before a softball-sized hole sank into the flesh. Blood had gushed in a reddish-brown torrent, making a nauseating congealed puddle on the blacktop.

“Damn, Harper’s not going to like this.”

“And you do?” Dan eyed me as he covered the kid back up.

It wasn’t like I was thrilled it was a murder, but having an actual vampire case, that was exactly what I’d joined this team for. Not hunt down husbands who’d killed their wives with a damn deli fork. But the bloodsuckers hid their dirty business well, and I was stuck with a pile of human-posers. I sidestepped the question, “Any ID?”

“That was handled by uniforms.”

Nice way of saying, *Not my problem.*

I took additional notes and shoved the pad back in my pocket. "Alright. Thanks, Dan."

Dan looked back to the victim. "Wish I could say it was a pleasure to see you."

I shrugged. "Come beat Harper at poker next time we get together. Maybe you'll finally have a chance."

Dan shook his head. "No offense, Collins, but I think I'll pass on hearing shop talk after hours."

"See ya next time, Dan."

He wished me well as I left. It took a minute to tiptoe back around the crime scene techs and the tiny yellow markers to make my way back to my partner. He was waiting for me inside the tape.

Harper blew out an exasperated sigh and combed his beard with his hands as I gave him the news. "Man...I was really hoping it was just another dog bite."

"Hey, at least now we know those 911 calls weren't fakes."

"Always looking on the bright side, 'eh partner."

Harper probably would have done all the paperwork from now on if I offered to go solo on this one case. But I needed him with me on this one. God knew what I'd find working a real case.

"We had to expect something bad when multiple people claim folks are disappearing right off the street."

It had only been two years, but in that short time, a lot of murderers had tried to fake vampire crimes to get away with it. God knows how many had succeeded, especially during the original panic. It took months for police departments to train their officers and medical examiners to properly sort the twisted fakes from the real deal. Sadly, most of my calls were for human-on-human murders.

"Well, Johnson—" Harper pointed to the uniform in question, "says they didn't find any ID and most people were pretty hush-hush when they canvased the neighborhood."

"Shocking."

“Yeah, but a few were a bit more adamant than others. They thought we should try those.”

“Wanna see if *detective* puts the fear of God into them?” I lifted the crime scene tape to allow my partner through.

As it fell back in place, local news pulled up, the brakes barely applied before two men rushed towards the scene, giddy at their early arrival.

“Yeah, gotta start somewhere.” Harper scowled at the newcomers. “Wonder why they left the body out in public. They usually seem to clean up after a meal.”

Sad but true. We rarely found vampire victims just lying around, that was kind of the problem. Vampires might eat like rabid animals, but they were smart. They knew how to cover themselves. Probably from centuries of practice, though that was just speculation.

The last time we found actual vampire victims, it had been a pile of working girls located during a drug bust. Their arms had been littered with track and fang marks alike, their pale and bloated bodies piled in a room for later disposal. That scene still clung to my dreams. The fact that we still hadn’t brought in the ones responsible didn’t help.

“I don’t know. Maybe we got lucky and it’s a young one.” We walked up the street to the first of many houses.

“Yeah, I feel real lucky right now.” Harper rang the first doorbell. Six slammed doors, a crazy old cat lady, a hoarder, and one house of screaming children later, Harper and I sat next to each other on a rather clean floral couch, sipping tea.

We both thought tea was a bit too frilly unless you counted the sweet iced kind. However, we’d both learned a long time ago that if someone let you in and you turned down their drink offers, they’d spend all their time asking repeatedly if you were sure instead of focusing on your questions. People’s manners could be a damn nuisance.

So, begrudgingly, we both tried to smile and sip from our frail cups. “Ah, excellent, Miss Stafford. Thank you.”

“Why thank ya, dear.” The old lady’s brown cheeks lifted in a smile. The tone complemented nicely the gray bun on the back of her head. “Now what’d you boys wanna ask about?”

Harper sipped again before starting. “Well, ma’am, we’ve received a few calls about unusual violence in this area.”

“I imagine you already know that’s *not* unusual ’round here.” There wasn’t any shake in Angela Stafford’s voice but it had lost its sweetness. “It’s one of the reasons I don’t invite my children down here more often.”

When I was a little kid, I’d thought of detectives as real-life superheroes. They could crack any bad guy like magic. But then I grew up, joined the force, and started getting into the routine of interrogations. We don’t have any superpowers, but the best detectives are damn good lie detectors. It could be as simple as a rushed word or a quick bite of the lower lip, but it didn’t take much to set off our inner polygraph.

Something about this woman, how she talked about her kids, set the little bulb in my head off, bright red and on alert.

“Yes, we do. However, these reports were a bit more specific.” I took another swig as I spoke. “We’re part of the Vampire Police Bureau.”

Miss Stafford’s eyes darkened. She set her cup down on a doily covering the coffee table between us. “What are the vamp cops doin’ here?”

“The VPB got word that there were a lot of disappearances at night with no traces.” Harper put his cup down. It was well over half-full. “And I don’t know if you noticed all the commotion down the street.”

“Afraid I didn’t. I tend to keep to my own here. I’m sure you understand. Little old thing like me in this area, I do best if I’m ignored altogether.”

At her age, you only lived in this area because your budget wouldn’t allow for anything else. Yet, when uniforms had come by, nobody had answered. The bulb in my head blazed

brighter, but I kept quiet all the same, not wanting to upset the flow Harper had set.

"I'm afraid a body was discovered." Harper paused, trying to let that sink in. "We don't have a name, but the time of death was sometime last night."

"Ya mean to tell me a corpse done showed up in the middle of our street and y'all just now found it?" She looked mildly displeased by that, yet the volume of her voice didn't raise.

"It was a few hours ago ma'am," Harper continued.

She let out a *hmpf* and sat back. "I suppose you can't watch this area twenty-four seven." She picked her saucer back up and began sipping idly. "I'm really not sure how I could help. Like I said, I mind myself."

"And we respect that, of course," I tried to sound reassuring. "We understand life in this area requires special precautions."

She eyed me and Harper over her cup, pausing on each of us, then nodded. "What do you boys want to know?"

"Did you hear anything? Maybe around nine or ten last night?" Harper took the reins again.

"I hear plenty every night. Guns a-blazing, little hoodlums yammering on at all hours. Just last night there was some hollerin' over there." She placed her cup back on the saucer and waved her weathered hand in the general direction of where we'd found the body. "Course, one could hardly call that out of the ordinary."

Harper and I nodded. He tried to prompt her further. "Any specifics stick out? Even just single words or names?"

"There was a lot of cursing, yelling. I had to turn up Family Feud just to drown it out." She tilted her head and squinted her dark eyes at a distant point behind us. "I don't think I've heard that much cursing in my life."

I'd abandoned my teacup, making quick notes as Harper kept the questions going. "Any other details aside from the foul language?"

Miss Stafford pursed her lips and twisted her brows, trying to replay something in her mind as she spoke slowly, “Well...they hollered on about soda at some point.”

Harper wrinkled his nose, and I stopped writing. “Soda?”

“Yeah, before I finally gave up and cranked up the volume, I heard one yell something about Cherry Coke. Thought that was weird.”

Harper and I looked at each other. He looked as bewildered as I felt. We stood in silent agreement. “Well, Miss Stafford, I think that’s all. But if you think of anything else, let me leave you my card.”

“Nah, just write your number down.”

Best guess, she didn’t want to have a detective’s card sitting around where her neighbors might see it. I obliged, tearing a page from my notebook, and handing it to her on our way out.

As we turned back to her on the stoop, I spoke loud enough for any eavesdropping neighbors. “Thanks again for the tea. Be sure to let us know if you do see anything.”

She smiled. “So sorry I couldn’t help but thanks for giving an old bird some company, boys.”

With that, she shut the door. Harper and I shared a knowing look and walked away. We waited until we were back on the sidewalk to talk. Harper’s dark eyes shifted back towards the old lady’s window as he spoke. “Seem odd to you?”

“Yeah.” I kept my eyes on the gray slab underfoot. “She didn’t hear our ambulance arrive or a bunch of people talking over each other. But that old crone picked up on that argument no problem.”

CHAPTER 2

LILY

“I paid you to tell me what she was up to!” Mr. Anderson was starting to resemble a pufferfish. His already bloated cheeks bulged in an indignant shade of red.

“No.” I pulled out his contract and pointed to the sections I’d highlighted. “Ya hired me to figure out where she was goin’. Never once did ya ask the activity.”

He picked up the contract, flipping through the pages and slapping them on my desk as he finished. It was shocking that he didn’t rip them. After a little further arguing and me pointing out a few more highlights, he unhappily paid for my services and left.

I leaned back in my chair and chuckled to myself, “Hope ya enjoy the show.”

It was just too bad I wouldn’t get to see the look on his face when he found his daughter singing on stage, instead of whatever he’d thought she was up to. The elevator dinged and my disgruntled client kept grumbling in the hallway. “Know-it-all little bitch.”

He’d slammed my door and I got up to make sure he hadn’t busted the glass panel. After so many years behind it, I could easily read *Strictly Confidential Investigations* backwards through the frosted glass.

He called me a few more choice phrases as he left the building, and I laughed again. Seeing as he didn't realize I could still hear him, I couldn't hold it against him. I glanced at the card transaction on my phone. Hell, as long as he paid me, he could call me anything he wanted.

The phone vibrated in my hand and *Funky Town* blared through the speakers. I blinked in disbelief, watching my adoptive sire's face light up the caller ID.

It kept ringing, the song's chorus becoming more insistent with each repetition. On the third time around, I had to accept this wasn't an ass dial.

"Shite." I swiped my thumb to answer. "Ivan?"

"Hey, kid." My old boss' distressed accent leaked through the line. His was far harsher than my own, given that it was old Russian. He sounded unusually exasperated. "You busy?"

Little hairs danced on the back of my neck. I debated lying, but it was Ivan after all. I swallowed my pride. "Nope, just finished with my latest client. Why?"

He hesitated. "We're having issues in your area."

"What kind of issues?" I locked the door and turned off my light. No reason to invite some new client in.

"People have been turning up in the ER with vampire blood in their noses."

"Goddammit..." I leaned my forehead against the cool glass. Why didn't I just lie and say I was busy?

"Yeah, not my favorite news either, kid. Luckily, no one's died." The implied *yet* hung between us.

I ran a hand down my face and tried to keep my tone level. "Those fuckin' cabbages just don't get it, do they?"

"Doubt it."

I went to my desk, pulling open my drawer for notepads. "Police involved yet?"

"Not very. There's one concrete attack but no ID yet. What do you call that area again, the slummy one?"

“Rockwood’s not that bad.” Okay, it was. Most of my case-work was a partial result of something from Rockwood. I scrawled out some tester squiggles from my third pen before I continued. “Do ya have the name of the other victims?”

Ivan gave me a list of seven people, four men and three women judging solely by their names. I noted their birthdays and anything else he could tell me, which wasn’t a lot.

“How’d you find out about them?”

“They were dropped off in different ERs, high as kites and hard to restrain.”

Considering what was coursing through their bodies, that was probably an understatement. Shit, if that kept up the human population would be onto us within a week.

“You got the police names on ya?” I wrote detective James Harper’s name next to Gabriel Collins, drawing a line between them and the victims to keep the groups separate. “And what makes ya think the death’s connected other than fang marks?”

“They found vampire blood in his nose during the autopsy.”

Yeah, that sealed it. “And why does she want me?”

Ivan paused. For far too long.

“Out with it, Boss. Ritti never calls me in unless there is a unique need. Why not just send you or Cyrus?” I hated arguing with him, but there was no way I could let Ritti land me with another shit gig. “Spill.”

“The hospital records...” He grumbled slowly.

“What about ’em?” I twirled my hand, waiting for him to get on with it.

“Anna signed off on a number of them.”

“What?” I stuffed a curse back into my mouth. Of course, that little maggot was involved. This was just one more time the queen could stick it to me. “It’s been forty years. Is she really that petty?”

“We both know that’s not the only reason to send you.”

True, there was a certain rationale for sending me. The queen and I may not be BFFs or whatever, but I could see her reasoning.

“Kid?”

I chewed on the idea of hanging up before speaking, “It’ll cost ya.”

Ivan sighed. “How much?”

I stated the hourly rate and the down payment. Plus expenses.

“And if it takes a month?”

“Then you’re paying me for a month. I could make more than that trying to catch some cheatin’ spouse.” Okay, that *was* a lie. But in the time this case would take, I’d be too busy to take on new ones. Ivan was lucky he’d caught me in a slow spot. Otherwise, I would’ve demanded the Court reimburse my lost casework too.

He grumbled Russian obscenities under his breath.

“I can’t hear ya, Boss.”

“Fine,” he said a little louder. “You know she’ll bite my head off for this.”

“Tell her I forced your hand.” I let my tone soften a bit. “She’s always ready to blame me.”

With that, we said goodbye and hung up. I changed my voicemail and taped a message over the logo on my door. Both referred any potential new client to Peter Andrews, another local PI two blocks down. He did the same for me when he took any time away or when his caseload was too heavy.

Even if I hadn’t agreed to an amount to cover my bills with one case, I still would’ve dropped to just the one. If these idiots kept dealing in the area, they would expose the vampire population of Portland. I might not be living at Court anymore, but I still didn’t need the cops on higher alert.

I grabbed my coat and helmet, locking the door on my way out.

I set up shop in my living room, my mass of blonde hair tied in a big bun to keep it out of my face. I wasn't worried about my roommates interfering. They knew the drill when I worked from home. Plus, hours of research were much easier with a glass of whiskey on my couch than in my cramped uptown office.

Granted, using my PI license gave me access to some pretty cool tools on that computer, but using those would also risk drawing attention to myself. Police could easily see when I ran a background check or any other information for work. I needed to keep my human alias intact. So, I did things the slow way starting with Googling the crime stats in my city.

It was easy enough to find a pie chart from the city outlining various types of crime from drugs, violence, and other nonsense. The last slice was labeled for known vampire crimes. That part of the pie chart showed eleven percent. Whoa. That was high.

I mean it was probably lower than the actual number since we tended to clean up our own messes. However, humans usually had that number in the area of six percent; I'd seen eight once. Now it was almost double the normal figure. I leaned against my couch and sipped my drink, contemplating how that may affect my work.

If the percentage was already high, then the police may already be on high alert as it was. That would mean a lot more tip-toeing around the humans to avoid being noticed. I swirled more whiskey through my mouth before putting the glass down to add the statistics to my notes for future reference.

"Alright." I cracked my neck like I was going into battle. "Let's check Facebook."

Was I just too damn old to get it? Back in my day, kids ran around outside, dammit. Okay, back in my day, kids did farm work, but still. Why the hell did everyone feel the need to share *everything* online? Whatever happened to talking?

Yep, definitely showing my age.

Adrian St. Claire had his account set to private so I wrote a question mark next to his name. Sadly, his profile photo didn't give me any hints about his lifestyle, it was just a very close-cropped selfie. It made him look more like a shadow than a man. I made what little notes I could about his appearance since it was all I was getting. White, probably thin, hooked nose, and dark hair. Then I moved through the rest of my list.

Two of the profiles yielded very little but at least there weren't any food photos. Most of the victims were taking photos at parties with their *homeboys* or *girlfriends*. Various language and slang, along with their photos told me they probably were in high-risk areas. Easy pickings if you were a vampire trying to juice the population without getting noticed. I made my notes about each of their appearances, including a party that both of them had on their calendar for tomorrow, address included. Thoughtful of them.

Four of the profiles made me wish I could puke. They were either up to their eyeballs in debt or in a completely different social circle from the others. There was a man with an exorbitant number of photos of him and his Corvette, along with various upgrades he'd made to the machine. Each picture he posed, trying to look sexy, I think. He looked silly to me, but most people trying to look hot didn't seem to accomplish it. There was even one where he was kissing the hood of his car.

Don't get me wrong, I loved my motorcycle and it'd been some time since I'd gotten some action. Still, making out with my bike was not high on my to-do list. I rolled my eyes and jotted my notes before moving on. I didn't see any links between him and the other victims. I even spent an hour scrolling through their friends' lists, but there was nobody in common. Nothing so far, but if I was this high class, I certainly wouldn't shout about my ghetto friends either.

“And society thought they got rid of the class system,” I snorted.

One of the girls was my worst nightmare. This girl and her friends’ drama filled the screen, various declarations of rage and excitement over petty things.

Bitch, he was mine first!

Those posts were only split up by photos of the girl and every meal she ever ate.

MMMMM, scones!

“Why the hell do people insist on photographing their food?” I grumbled and scrolled through a little faster. Granted, my particular meal plan may have influenced my preferences, but I just didn’t see the bloody appeal.

Okay, so I had one unknown, two clearly lower class, and four in upper middle class or better. A shared party plan, but no other obvious friendships between them. I couldn’t call that result shocking. Multiple choices with no big obvious connection could be the result of multiple culprits or just very careful planning to hide the crime.

Still, weird that the rich kids were showing up in the hospital more than the kids from Rockwood. I’d have to look into that.

Next were the two cops, just to see who I might need to steer clear of. Gabriel Collins rose in my estimation when I couldn’t find a profile for him, not even a private one. Though that also annoyed me a bit, since it meant he could run into me at any time, and I wouldn’t know it. Hopefully, his partner would prove more social.

I’d crossed paths with the police more than once. Mostly after one of my clients got violent with their spouses or my investigation turned up a crime I had to report. It didn’t happen often, but it wasn’t unheard of in my line of work. I’d cooperate, hand over my case notes, and make myself as forgettable as possible. The humans still didn’t know how to

properly kill us, and I was not interested in lining up as the first guinea pig, thank you.

James Harper did not disappoint. It took a few wrong clicks, but I found one man in Portland old enough to be the right guy. His profile was set to private, but his picture was clear. Two men. One was beefy and dark, built like a stereotypical biker with a long dark, Santa style beard. His head was either shaved or bald, but based on that beard I was thinking the former. His black eyes twinkled with merriment.

A scruffy man had his arm around the beefy one's shoulders while holding a brown bottle up in cheers. The lean one was a little taller than his friend but only an inch or two. His arms showed muscle but it wasn't thick. Maybe a runner. His dark hair curled around his ears and was more than a little messy. It didn't look intentional or gelled, but it also didn't take away from his features. His chin was flecked with the same midnight-colored hair, just a little longer than a five-o'clock shadow.

It was the scruffy one's expression that grabbed me. He had his camera smile on as he raised his beer, but it didn't reach his eyes. They were more determined than happy, and I couldn't quite suss out the color. Maybe blue?

I leaned away in thought. Well, one of these was probably Harper. If I was lucky the other would be his partner. As I began noting their appearances, the back of the couch sagged behind me.

"He's not bad."

I smiled up at Alex, not bothering to ask which one he meant. It wasn't like it mattered. "Ya better watch Darren doesn't hear ya say that."

He was leaning against the back of the couch, using his arms to support him. He rolled his obsidian eyes. "Please. If Darren was the jealous type, he'd just be another meal buddy."

"True," I acknowledged. Darren had his weird quirks, evidenced from the stack of conspiracy rags we got in the mail

every week, but he didn't fret window shopping. "Ya'd still better get a move on it if ya want to keep him around."

"Not your business, Lils." Alex twisted his lips in annoyance before nodding at the screen. "What's up with the two guys anyway?"

I decided to let it go and turned back to my screen, gesturing to the photo. "If I'm lucky, they're the detectives I need to avoid while on my next job."

"Oh, got one of our cases, huh?" Alex leaped over the back of the couch and landed next to me. His scrawny body barely even shifted the cushions.

"Yep." I looked over at him. "Apparently, some humans have been popping up with evidence of red cocaine in the area."

CHAPTER 3

GABE

“In his nose?” I stopped writing and looked at Dan, waiting for the punchline. He didn't deliver one.

“Yeah, I might've missed it if not for the procedure to type all blood against vampiric markers.” Dan showed me the sample he was logging into evidence, as though that somehow cleared up the issue. The ME's mask muffled his words, and I had to strain to hear him anytime he turned away.

He'd found cocaine in our victim's nose, which didn't surprise me. The red tint, however, had warranted the usual labs to check if any blood on the scene was human or undead. Something about certain markers or amino acids not being present in vampire blood made it easier to type and log it into evidence. I didn't know the weird science, and I wasn't paid enough to remember.

“Okay, I get the drugs. But what was the blood doing up there?” I used my pen to point at John Doe's nose.

Dan shrugged, putting his gloved hands up in the gesture. “Not a clue. I didn't find any around the nose or anywhere else on him for that matter. The rest of the blood collected from the scene was all his.”

He pushed the corpse back into the drawer of the morgue wall, shutting the cabinet door with a thick suction sound. I

tapped my pen against my temple in thought. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

"Not that I can recall." He shrugged again before removing his mask. "I've started making some calls to other MEs and hospitals. We'll see if anyone has noticed anything similar."

"Yeah, it might be nothing but it's just too weird not to look into. I'd appreciate any updates whenever you can. I know you have other cases in need of your help." I gestured to indicate the rest of the drawers near me.

"No trouble, I'll let you or Harper know if I find out anything."

I turned to leave and grunted a goodbye to Dan. The temperature raised slightly with every linoleum-covered step as I ascended towards the bullpen.

At the top of the stairs, I saw Harper hunched over his computer, clicking away. I turned to our break room, grabbing two disposable cups from the cabinet, along with some cream and sugar packets. I pulled at the tie around my neck out of habit.

One of these days, I would just wear bike leather, like Harper. I scoffed and shook my head at the mental image as I filled the two cups from the tepid coffee pot. I didn't even feel right wearing jeans in the office, let alone what Harper wore. When I turned back to the floor, Harper sat back in his chair with a look of triumph on his face.

I made it over to his desk, handing him one cup and dropping the sugar packets off. "You first, my lead is just weird."

Harper grabbed three of the sugar packets and shook them vigorously from one end before dumping the contents into his tiny cup. He took a satisfied chug and turned his screen to face me. "Meet our Mr. Doe. Fingerprints came back a few minutes ago."

I hunched down. Sure enough, it was the same face as the corpse I'd just seen in the morgue. Hooked nose and brown hair.

“Adrian St. Claire, booked last year for assault and battery.” The rap sheet next to the photo showed a list of his other charges, petty theft and drugs among them. The poor kid was only seventeen. It had been hard for me to guess his age from his body's bruised and chewed condition. “Any known associates or family?”

“His last known address is about a block north of where we found him. Shows he lived with his mother.”

“Wanna head over and deliver the news?” I'd have to give Dan a warning, in case the family wanted to see the body. We never suggested looking at a family member after we identified them, but some people felt they needed the closure.

“Yeah, we can get that over with. I'm waiting on the subpoena for his Facebook to come back anyway.” Harper reached into his desk for his keys. “What was your lead?”

“The kid had vampire blood in his nose.” I downed the contents of my paper cup before tossing it in the trash.

“Come again?” Harper stopped halfway through shrugging his coat on.

“I told you it was weird.” I walked over to my desk and flung my coat over my arm, and we headed out.

Adrian St. Claire had died only one block from home, a dingy green ranch with curling shingles and a busted picket fence. The faded door loomed in the distance.

Be careful what you wish for.

I'd finally gotten it, a legit vampire case. I could finally make a difference. And I was scared of a door. I just didn't want to see the look on their face. Delivering the news had never been fun. I'd had people slap me, collapse in tears, and slam the door. One even broke into laughter asking where the hidden camera was. But I had no idea what to expect this time.

Harper paused, giving me a moment. “You sure you want to do this, buddy?”

“Yeah it sucks, but I signed up for it.” I had to get through this. This was why I’d requested assignment to the Vamp Queue. “Let’s get this over with.”

I forced myself forward to ring the cracked doorbell.

“Coming!” A peppy voice called from somewhere far in the house. Footsteps thumped rapidly towards the door. The thick oak squeaked open, and I immediately knew where Adrian had got those forest-colored eyes.

The tiny woman on the other side of the screen dried a dish as she glanced from me to Harper. “Can I help you?”

I tried to speak a couple of times but Harper beat me to it. “Annabell St. Claire?”

“Yes.” The curvy woman took a step back from the door.

I coughed once and tried again. “I’m Detective Collins. This is my partner, Detective Harper. May we come in?”

“Oh, no.” Her eyes grew wide, and she stopped rubbing the bowl with the rag. “What did Adrian do this time?”

“I think it’s better we speak inside.” I restrained my expression, trying to remember what I’d wanted from folks when it was my turn.

Whatever I did, it was the wrong thing.

“No.” She backed up again, tossing her brown curls side-to-side. “What did my son do?”

Dammit. I hated when they took the news through a screen door. It never went well.

“Ma’am—” Harper took a deep breath, “I’m afraid we’re not here because of what your son did.”

“No...” The bowl dropped with a thick *thud*, but it couldn’t compare to the heavy fall of the woman on her floor. “No...”

It took everything in me not to yank the screen door open. Years of practice. We didn’t have her permission to enter and, even if we did, it wasn’t like I could do anything for her. I let her rock on the floor, ringing the dishtowel in her hands until the skin was red.

After the tenth rendition of *no*, her voice shook with the words, "I knew he wasn't coming home this time."

The whole scene took about five minutes. It took her another moment to edge the screen door open in invitation.

"How?"

"Vampires." I squatted in front of her, not bothering to lower my eyes to hers. She would just look the other way.

"Figures." She snorted, the breath sending one of her slow tears sputtering off her lips. "This neighborhood may as well get a big sign that says *Drive-Thru*."

That was a bit of an exaggeration but I didn't say anything. I didn't have any reason to defend those parasites.

She swallowed and sat up straight on the floor. The pain was evident on her face, but she also looked almost numb to it. "What do you need from me?"

"Maybe it'd be best to move to the couch." Harper offered a hand.

"Yes, of course." She shook her head more slowly this time and stood, ignoring the offer. It took her several tries to pick herself up. "Can I, um, get you something to drink?"

"No, ma'am, we're fine."

"Please, water maybe?" Her eyes quaked and swelled.

Harper opened his mouth, but I beat him this time. "Water would be great, thank you."

Annabell nodded and plodded off towards the kitchen. Harper waited until the water was running to mutter, "Why'd you take it?"

"She needed something else to focus on." I was already examining pictures on the wall.

He grunted and came to stand next to me. "Is that what you needed?"

"Not a lot of pictures of Adrian lately." I gave him a warning look. "And I don't see any pictures with the rest of the family."

There was Adrian on a bike, smiling the big, gap-tooth grin of a proud child learning to ride. There he was again, his collar

popped looking happy the way only a teenager can when they look that ridiculous. There he was with his mom in a photo booth, his hair dyed black and chewing cotton candy in each frame. Nothing that looked older than fifteen. Nothing more than him and his mom.

“None on file.” Harper sighed and gave me an exasperated look. At least he didn’t push the subject.

“Where’s his father?” I swallowed like I could take the last word back.

“He heard I was pregnant and lost my number the next day.” Annabell walked back in holding two glasses of water. Her nose was red, and a wadded tissue protruded from her pocket.

“Must’ve been hard.” I drank my first sip and suppressed a grimace. The water wasn’t filtered very well. And it was warm. But now was hardly the time to judge her hosting skills.

“Not at first.” She motioned towards the couches. “My parents helped a lot. But then my dad lost his job, and he couldn’t support us anymore. We ended up here.”

We sat and I finally took in the whole room. It wasn’t manicured, like Ms. Stafford’s place had been. This felt more like a home; a jacket thrown over the back of a chair, some of the older wallpaper peeling at the corners, and mismatched furniture that was worn and dented. But nothing was flat-out dirty or out of place.

The walls were littered with more pictures of Adrian, but not many of her. Birthday parties, skating rinks, a couple of assorted sporting events that dwindled as the boy got older. Each one in a set in matching frames with precision and care, despite obviously being taken by an amateur. This woman sitting across from me loved her son, yet the tears slid down her cheeks in slow, controlled patterns.

“What do you need from me?” She clasped her hands and let her eyes roam over the gallery. “I don’t know any of Adrian’s enemies or the people that might want to hurt him.”

Well, that was an interesting answer. Harper pulled a notebook and pen from his pocket and leaned back, giving me room to take over. Witnesses were his territory, but family was mine.

“So, he did have enemies?” I wanted to start with something that would let her ramble. Family members didn’t usually divulge the best information on purpose, it was while they mourned and couldn’t really keep their thoughts organized. Not always because they were trying to hide things. Most of the time we didn’t even know what was important until we heard it.

“With what he’s been up to.” She snorted and pulled the tissue from her pocket. “*Was* up to. Yeah, he had enemies.”

“And what was that?”

“It started when he was about fourteen.” She glanced at the photo booth shot and a tear escaped her eyes as she whispered, “I knew this was coming.”

“What started?” I wanted to know how she knew, but I figured I would get the answer to that later.

“He started skipping school. He started lashing out and stealing alcohol out of the cupboard. I stopped buying any, but I kept finding bottles in his room when I went for laundry.” She blew her nose and finally looked back to us. “The school recommended a therapist, but I just couldn’t afford it. I set curfews, made him apply for jobs, I tried everything. But curfews don’t keep kids in their rooms. So, finally, I just asked him to call when he wasn’t going to be home.”

It was odd appreciating every time my mother had grounded me. You never knew what you had until it was gone.

But now, I needed to focus on her. “Did he tell you what he was doing when he called?”

“Not exactly, but I got the picture.” She looked up at me then down again. “I know I should have reported him to the police, but I just kept hoping he’d grow out of it. I mean, teenagers get into trouble, right?”

She was stalling, probably ashamed of letting it go this far. Her words seemed stiff, like she might have even rehearsed them a time or two. She'd known this day was coming, but she'd held out hope. And this was where that hope had led her.

"What kind of trouble did yours get into?" I hated pressing, but I couldn't help her son if I didn't know what I was up against.

"He started with petty crap. Shoplifting, that kind of thing." She shrugged and it was the most helpless gesture I'd ever seen. "But ever since the massacres, his friends were obsessed with vampires. They went full Renfield."

I wanted to curse, but I settled for a scowl. "How so?"

Even after all the movies and books referring to vampires were blacklisted, Renfields still caused us more casework than the actual vampires. Hell, some of them had begun organizing vampire-human relationship groups. I could only hope this wasn't one of those.

"They thought they could become immortal, get stronger, ya know. The whole stupid kit and kaboodle." She shook her head.

Okay, she was going to keep skating around that. She wasn't ready to admit what her son had been doing. She'd be admitting her own failings. If we kept going at it, she'd just get defensive, and I would get less and less out of her. I needed a different angle.

"Earlier, you said you knew he wasn't coming home." Maybe if I reminded her of her maternal instincts, she'd open up more. It felt dirty, using that against her, but I needed to catch this vamp.

"Yes." She nodded emphatically, still not meeting my eyes. "I couldn't get Adrian to stay home, so I had him call when he wasn't coming home."

I didn't point out she'd already said that. She was talking, no point in spoiling it. I just nodded and tried to remember

how she felt. Even the things that weren't her fault, she would blame herself. Hell, I still did.

"He hadn't called as much lately so I started going through Facebook, to see where he was checking in." She blew her nose then got up and walked away. She carried a laptop in her hands when she came back. "Last night was the first night he didn't post any updates. He *always* posts something, even if it's just a quick update."

She set the laptop on the coffee table and logged in, turning for us to see.

"May I?" Harper leaned forward and pointed at the keyboard.

Sure, it was just another Facebook page, but you'd be surprised how much we get from those. Social media might have a short attention span, but it never forgets.

Annabelle waved him forward. "You can take it, it's not like I'll need it anymore."

I pulled a glove out of my pocket and offered it. Harper pulled it on when a calendar notification popped up.

John's party, 7:00 PM tomorrow.

Looks like we had plans the following night.

CHAPTER 4

LILY

They were called bondage pants. In reality, they were just overpriced skinny jeans with straps crisscrossing several layers of metal studs in two diagonal patterns. My long boots hid the bottom third of my trousers, along with some extra artillery. My top half was swathed in a blouse, or so one could generously label the shreds of fabric layered in a way that barely concealed my torso and did fuck all to keep autumn air off my skin.

I'd toned down my natural blonde with layers of temporary red and silver dye and straightened my normal mess of curls, making the mass hang far past the middle of my back. A rub-on tan over my pale skin and makeup that made me look like a reject from a Marilyn Manson music video completed the look.

Alex had snapped several photos for future blackmail while our other roommates laughed before I could leave the house. Not that I blamed them. I'd chosen the goth girl look for several reasons. Chief among them, the excessive makeup made my normal features harder to pick out.

On top of that, if I looked like I used Sharpie for mascara, it tended to make my lack of social skills more excusable. Typically, you stand in a corner, people-watching at a party,

and someone tries to approach you. Then the social butterfly gets all pissy when you tell them to shove off, drawing a lot of unwanted attention.

So far, the ugly makeup was doing its job. Everyone seemed to buy the ruse. I was just some bitchy girl with a bad attitude. I overheard someone asking if they should kick me out, but their concerns were set aside because I wasn't bugging anyone.

Still, I got jostled by other partygoers as they danced badly to the obnoxious bass, nearly spilling my room-temp beer as I hunched my shoulders and surveyed the crowd.

So far, all the people surrounding me seemed to have heartbeats, but I could have missed a skip in the thumps with the crappy music. I was a little surprised the rattling windows were surviving. I turned around to check again and almost broke into laughter.

Some poor sod was passed out on the cheap sofa, one of his arms sprawled over his face as he snoozed. A few partygoers stood around him, each with a different shade of Magic Marker as they debated what to do with the kid's face.

"Hey, come on." I stepped forward to tell the group to leave the poor kid alone before he ended up with dicks all over his face. I stopped short when I saw the guy's snoring countenance. I knew that face. Where the hell did I know this guy from?

A kid wearing a do-rag snorted. "This rich jerk should know better than to pass out 'round here."

I looked up to retort but his 'rich jerk' comment clicked something into place, and I looked back down. This was the guy I'd seen macking on his car when I was looking through Facebook yesterday. Had he been in the Facebook event? I scrolled through my memory and almost swore with frustration. I was certain he hadn't been on the list of people attending, even when I had checked this morning. Adrian St Claire had been, though I hadn't seen that distinctively hooked nose

yet. Had I missed something? Do-Rag said something, and I shook my head to clear it.

“Huh?”

“You want in on this?” Do-Rag held out a marker, and I shook my head again.

“He's all yours.” I turned on my heel and tried to blend back into the crowd of miscreants while making a mental note to do more research on Corvette Guy later.

Anna wouldn't see me until tomorrow, so I'd decided to attend the party tonight. Alex hadn't liked it, pointing out that any vamp here could use their extra senses to scout me in return. It was a risk, but seeing as seven victims had grabbed the Courts' radar, this guy was probably too cocky to think about watching for his own kind.

So, I wandered randomly from one partygoer to the next, listening for the telltale skip in the rhythm of heartbeats. Right as I'd decided I needed a new cup of stale camouflage to sip, I heard the front door open. One set of footsteps followed the loud *thud* of the door closing. Only footsteps. I fought the sudden urge to snap my head up.

The newcomer would have the same predatory instincts. Any sudden motion would make my dark primping a huge waste of time. So, I continued my steady stride to the keg. Once my red cup was refilled, I turned around to take in the whole room before I took in the newcomer.

His appearance almost made me snort. Even two years after we'd been outed to humanity, the warning posters still made us look like supermodels. Their skin was paler than mine and they flashed seductive smiles, a big warning sign about the *temptations*. If only the proprietors of those billboards could get a look at this guy.

The newcomer looked to be in his thirties by modern standards. He was short and had the misfortune of being turned with a potbelly forever frozen to his gut. That alone told me he was most likely young in undead years. Obesity had been

rare before the 1950s. His head shined under a bad comb-over that no one was buying. In other circumstances, I would have told him to be bald and be proud, but I wanted to see what he was up to.

I sauntered in another direction to avoid his immediate attention. Newbie though he may be, I didn't know enough about what crown he was under or even if he was the dealer. While chances were low he had just come to relax, I didn't want to assume this was my guy without proof. I needed to wait for evidence. I didn't have to wait long.

Not even ten minutes after I'd spotted him, I learned his name was Joey as he'd accepted several shoulder slaps and all sorts of drunken bro-hugs. Many of the greetings were accompanied by questions about coke or Cheri coke. I nearly rolled my eyes at the lack of originality when I heard the street name. What cabbage had come up with that? Still, at least I knew I had the right vamp.

I kept myself on the edge of the crowd, craning my neck in obvious absorption. Everyone was staring, no need to stand out feigning a lack of interest. Joey started pulling small Ziploc bags of ruby-colored powder from his coat pockets, holding a handful up in each fist for the crowd. Several drunken yells accompanied my shock at this show.

True, I'd figured whoever I was chasing was a novice at trouble-making but this was ridiculous. Couldn't he at least do the selling in a quiet back room or something? Being this blatant wasn't just daring. It was like a fucking billboard! I was glad everyone was staring; I couldn't peel my eyes away if my life depended on it.

Money and red powder began changing hands quickly. It wasn't long before the room split between those partaking in the new entertainment and those not. A coffee table was set with several cherry-colored lines and surrounded by several enthusiasts. I kept reminding myself that stopping tonight's transactions would probably only give the Court an experi-

enced pawn. While that was a decent start, it was also easy to stop the trade here and start somewhere else if I didn't get a few rungs higher up the ladder from Joey.

So, I stayed with the crowd of pot smokers and thanked God I didn't need to breathe. The smell alone would've been enough to make me consider leaving or blowing my cover. Luckily, the perpetual 'fuck off' sign I'd erected across my forehead also kept away any offers for hits and dances.

I leaned against the wall, playing one of the games Maria had stuck on my phone and trying to look disinterested. I occasionally paused the game to snap a few photos with my camera. Little colored blobs swirled in and out of existence as I matched them haphazardly and tuned my hearing to the conversations across the room.

Granted tuning out all the other distractions and noise when I chose to use my enhanced ears was a bit of a nuisance. But once I got a mental lock on Joey's voice and slow speech pattern, it was easy enough to filter for the responses. About an hour of low scores and five stale refills later, Joey had negotiated price on a few sales, educated some new users on best practices, and shooed away one guy looking for a free high. Still, he hadn't mentioned anything supernatural like I'd been expecting.

"Come on man, what do you put in this stuff? It's incredible!" This was the fifth attempt at learning the secret ingredient.

Joey donned a poor imitation of a British accent to reply, "If I tell you, I'm afraid you won't even try it."

He followed this with repeated slurps of his tongue to continue the Hannibal Lecter impersonation. I snorted and almost shot beer through my nose.

A real vampire mocking a fake human cannibal, that was fucking brilliant. It would have been great under other circumstances. Joey had turned every prod for information into a joke or redirected the conversation. I was curious what he

would do if someone got pushy. Could be worth finding out. And it wasn't like I was doing much else.

Another forty-five minutes later, I was dancing poorly to keep up with the drunk partygoer next to me. His breath was coated in beer and weed; it was pungent even without the need to take in air. Still, I needed him. Not for what he had in mind as he snake-hipped the air near my body, but he did have value.

I'd made it seem like the massive number of drinks were getting to me, slowly peeling the scowl from my face and making myself more inviting. After all, going from cold bitch to 'ooh fuck me' would have been a bit too obvious. After I'd feigned a little shy giggling, Dean had shown me his tattoos in the hopes of breaking the last bit of my ice. He even pretended to be interested in my days in Ireland, but I verbally skated around the topic.

Bloody accent. There were definitely days I thought about learning to talk without it but it was the only thing I had left of home. That and some shitty memories.

As we white-girl-danced, I'd given him a few feather-soft kisses, barely keeping the inner grimace off my face. Acting like I was warming up should have earned me an Emmy right there, but I needed this to go just a little further for what I had in mind. I leaned in for another kiss, lingering in a way that I hoped seemed inviting.

Apparently, it was. Dean leaned in further and stuck that disgusting tongue right on in, gently gripping the back of my neck at the same time. It took all of my energy not to rip my head out of his grasp. Dean's breath had told me he'd indulged too much, while his kiss told me he had no clue how to use a toothbrush. Come on, even the undead could keep good dental hygiene.

Revulsion slithered through every nerve in my body, and I fought a shiver crawling up my spine. I counted to ten to make

sure the kiss was long enough, chanting to myself, *Fake it 'till you make it.*

I pressed on, moaning softly, hoping it sounded like I was enjoying the moment. Another Academy Award apparently, because Dean started slipping his hands through the holes of my shirt to caress my skin. I pushed at his hands, barely remembering to check my strength to chipmunk levels.

My room temp skin hadn't given me away, but he'd probably noticed if a girl who looked about fifty pounds lighter than him was somehow stronger. Still, no way in hell I could let him reach below my blouse. "Can we go somewhere more private?"

"Hell yeah, we can!" Dean gripped my hand, telling me that my blood circulation really sucked. I stifled a laugh, grateful the music swallowed some of the noise. He led me to the back of the packed house and some obvious bedrooms. The first door had a couple behind it who'd forgotten to lock the knob. The smell of sweat and some soft groans had given me that first tidbit while Dean opening the door to a surprised shriek had told me the second. After another door that was properly locked, he edged the last door open with more caution, pulling me close for another kiss. We were still in view of the party, so the show must go on, but I couldn't wait for Dean to lock that door.

The minute Dean turned back from the lock, I gave him a direct stare. A look of shock crossed his features right before his jaw went a little slack and his eyes glazed. I knew without looking that my eyes would look like the pupil had swallowed all the color. I smiled, thankful my seduction was over and wishing desperately for a breath mint.

I didn't feel too bad about using Dean. Once I was done with him, I'd wipe his memory and give him a new one of the drunken passions he'd been angling for. The least I could do was leave him with some fake whoopie, right?

“All right, you’re going to get some of that Cheri Coke outside and bring it back to me.” I kept my voice low to avoid Joey overhearing my directive. Between my whisper and the loud party music, I should be okay. He hadn’t even glanced my way all night. “You’ll just know ya need it to loosen up your date. Once you’re done buyin’, ask the dealer what makes it so powerful. If he tries to not answer ya, ask again but don’t push him if he gets angry.”

Dean nodded, still looking a bit like an extra from the *Walking Dead*. My grin widened as I let the color slowly come back into my gaze. “Okay go out there, and remember the sooner ya come back the sooner ya get lucky.”

As soon as I shut off my power, Dean blinked and looked natural again. He smiled crookedly and leaned over to give me another quick kiss. “Don’t worry baby. I gotcha covered.”

He opened the door and slinked out. I didn’t bother putting my ear to hollow wood; it wouldn’t help. The door would suppress noise for me about as well as tossing a wet blanket over my head.

I shut my eyes and sifted for Joey and Dean’s voices. I learned through the inane chatter that there was a line for the red cocaine. Thank God my directive to hurry back hadn’t resulted in Dean cutting in front or pissing people off. A little bit of small talk and some blah blahs later, I finally got the conversation I was hoping for.

“Hey, man. I need something to loosen the little lady in the back.” Dean’s voice.

“Ah...gotta give your girl some incentive?” Joey chuckled with his reply. “Good timing, I’m down to two bags. One for each?”

Dean’s response must have been a nod or something because Joey kept talking like he’d said yes. They talked price for a bit, and I reminded myself to pull a few bills out of my wallet to replace what Dean was losing. Ivan could cover it.

Joey made sure Dean knew how to use it, even had him do a sample to get the hang of it. With his proper tone, Joey could have been selling insurance. Hell, I got less professional with some of my PI clients. After the sales pitch was over, Dean came to the main question. “Dude, you gotta tell me what makes this stuff so powerful!”

“Never ask a magician to reveal his secrets, my friend—”

A loud crash announced something breaking open at the front of the house, cutting Joey short. The following bellow identified the literal party crashers.

“Police! Everyone down!”

“Shite!” I dropped my concentration and cracked the door to peek out.

Sure enough, armed men came in with their guns drawn. “Nobody move!”

Of course, the command didn't work for everybody. Half the people stood still with shock or rage on their faces. The other half bolted for the open windows or back doors, giving our new company a little extra work.

I groaned, “Double shite.”

On one hand, I didn't want the cops getting those last two bags Joey had or putting them into evidence to test them. On the other hand, I needed to get out of here before my cover was blown. If I got arrested at this party and fingerprinted, they'd find out who I really was, even if none of them had ever met me at my day job. And that didn't even cover what I was. Dean hadn't figured it out when he touched my chilly skin, but he was drunk and horny. Trained police were another matter entirely.

As I saw the approaching officers come down the back hallway, I made up my mind. At least if my cover wasn't blown, I could warn the Court we were about to have another media nightmare before it happened. I shut the door as quietly as I could, and then switched to my normal speed. My rushed movements disturbed the bedspread and curtains like a strong

breeze as I threw the window open. In my haste, I managed to break some glass from the bottom pane. I winced at the instant guilt but climbed out right as I heard someone make demands for me to open the door I'd just locked.

Once outside I sprinted to the other side of the yard and out of sight from the open window. I heard the sound of wood splintering from the room I'd left followed by the static of a hand radio as the officer advised his team that someone had gotten away on the north side of the house. I didn't wait for anything else. I hopped the back fence, glad I hadn't brought my motorcycle. The engine would have grabbed everyone's attention for miles, and I couldn't have left her behind.

I slowed to my human speed on the off chance anyone was back here to see me. It sucked I had to leave the drugs behind, but I didn't need anyone witnessing my own vampire activity. I just had to hope Joey got out too, maybe with the rest of his stash in tow.

I was halfway down the block when a car turned the corner ahead of me, headlights blinding me. Blue and red emitted from the top of the vehicle and a loud whoop sent a wave of cold panic through my skin. The larger man from Detective Harper's Facebook photo got out and told me to freeze.

I held up my hands. "Triple shite."

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS...

are a pain. Seriously, who do you thank for helping you through such a process as writing a book?

Who made this possible?

Should it be my mom, who introduced me to vampires and nurtured my inner nerd and love of literature?

Or maybe my husband, who has listened to me rant about my imaginary friends on and on for years and still signed on for more?

Should I dedicate this to my critique partners, Aisling Wilder, Nicole McKeon, and Lauren Sevier? Maybe the countless Beta Readers who helped me deconstruct this story sentence by sentence and rebuild it too many times to count?

Or, perhaps, I'll cheat and go with option "D", all of the above.

This is for every one of you. Anyone will tell you, a book takes a freaking village.