

**Aurora Sky
Vampire Hunter**

Book One

By Nikki Jefford

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For Sébastien, until the end of time

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Life Ends On A Curse

I was outnumbered six to one... at least that's how it felt.

My supposed teammates stood by uselessly as the volleyball hurtled over the net and whopped me in the shoulder.

The beautiful Brooke Harris high fived the boy beside her before switching corners. It didn't matter if she served from the right or the left. The ball flew at me—again.

I ground my teeth together and tried to pelt the ball back, but launched it into the net instead. God, I sucked at team sports.

“Come on, Aurora!” Clayton Wilcox snapped beside me.

I grimaced. A junior the size of Napoleon shouldn't be speaking to a senior that way, but that was just my opinion.

One of my teammates bent down for the ball and tossed it back to Brooke, who smiled as though auditioning for a teeth whitening ad. Brooke served again, and the volleyball sailed over the net once more—toward me, of course.

Clayton's patience had apparently worn out. He stepped in and bumped into me, but managed to smack the ball back. Fine. Whatever. My teammates should get in the game.

Behind Brooke and her team of Olympians the bleacher crowd slouched against the benches like sloths while the rest of us got wrist burns. I'd tried everything from flu symptoms to a twisted ankle to get out of participating, but Mr. Mooney saw me as an active member of the student body, unlike the loafers who regularly got out of gym.

Fane Donado and Valerie Ward, the reigning king and queen of gym exemption, seemed to believe that making out substituted for physical ed.

Valerie was gorgeous, in a classical sixteenth century courtesan sort of way. Curves graced her hips and hair, which fell in thick waves of strawberry-brown down her back.

Fane had The Worst Hair: ink black and buzzed on the sides with a mass of blond on top. Combing it back was a big mistake. It drew further attention to his long forehead and wide set eyes. He had one of those disastrous looks that captured my attention—like Edward Scissorhands.

Every day Fane dressed in head to toe black and a long leather jacket which he wore at all times, like a second skin. Maybe he was packing...or dealing. Neither would surprise me.

I usually had a thing for tall, skinny guys, but I made exceptions, especially when the guy in question had trouble keeping his tongue inside his own mouth.

I wanted my first kiss to be a pleasant experience, not pornographic.

Mr. Mooney's whistle announced the end of gym at the same time Brooke slammed the ball over. This one hit me in the chest.

“Ow!”

I know guys are sensitive between the legs, but a woman's breasts aren't exactly made out of sponge cake.

My classmates pattered across the gym floor toward the locker rooms. The bleacher crowd rose slowly and stretched their arms.

Yeah, try not to exert yourselves or anything.

I leaned down for the volleyball and walked it over to the roll out cart. As I nestled the ball into place, three more toppled off and rolled in opposite directions.

Groan. I spent enough time chasing balls around during gym, never mind running after them when I needed to change and book it to Algebra II.

By the time I retrieved each ball and set them on the cart, everyone had cleared out of the locker room, leaving hairspray fumes in their wake. *Gag.* My hair tumbled down my back as I freed it from its ponytail.

As I yanked the zipper up my jeans I heard a snicker and stopped. All was quiet and then I heard it again. Resisting the urge to call out a feeble “Hello?” I finished securing my pants then rounded a wall of lockers.

Valerie straddled Fane on the locker room bench in her corset top and black lace-up boots. Her arms circled his neck.

As she leaned back to look at me, Fane’s face emerged.

I would not blush. Not in front of Fane Donado. Too late. My cheeks flamed rouge.

From this close up I could see that among Fane’s aforementioned defects, his lips were mismatched; the top one smaller than the bottom.

Those lips curled back as Fane took note of my presence. I swear I heard him make a sound of disgust from deep within his throat, like I’d crashed a private party or barged into their hotel suite.

I stood staring like an idiot waiting to be dismissed.

When our eyes met, Fane smiled. Not a friendly ‘hello’ smile or the cute ‘you caught me in the act’ kind. Eyes locked on mine, Fane ran the tip of his tongue along his upper lip.

The lewd gesture made me feel somehow involved in their foreplay.

My mouth went dry.

Fane cocked a dark brow. “See something interesting?”

I should have squared my shoulders and informed him, “No, not at all” or “Yeah, I find it interesting that there’s a boy in the girls’ locker room. So you had that sex operation, did you?”

Instead, I turned and fled.

I didn’t have time for comebacks.

If I hurried maybe I could still catch my friend Denise at our hall lockers before she left for math.

As I speed walked toward my locker, a football whooshed across the hall, barely missing my shoulder. *Again?* I glared at the boy who had chucked it to his friend. He laughed and said, “Whoops.”

God, I couldn’t wait to graduate and get the hell out of Alaska and Denali High School.

Sure enough, when I reached my locker, Denise had long since departed. I did a quick book and binder grab, then sprinted to math. The warning bell rang as I hurried in and took my seat beside my friend. She already had her book open and pencil in motion on notepaper.

Denise used to laugh at my gym recaps. Now she didn’t even inquire after my lateness and here I was dying to tell her about the sex show in the locker room. Okay, not exactly a sex show, but practically!

“Hey, Denise,” I said. “You’ll never believe what happened after gym.”

Denise’s eyes narrowed as though I had interrupted her in the middle of a pop quiz.

I hesitated for a second. Then the words tumbled out. “Remember that guy I told you about in gym...”

Denise stopped me before I could go any further. “Can this wait until lunch?”

Suddenly I felt stupid with my mouth hanging half open seeing as my closest friend pretty much told me to shut up.

All part of Denise's new attitude "un-makeover" starting the day Notre Dame accepted me while her own first choice college, Carleton, had turned her down.

She wasn't the only student at Denali High with senioritis.

Mom warned me this would happen. Friends began focusing on finishing senior year and imagining their lives in that great place beyond: College.

Guilty as charged.

If it were up to me, I wouldn't be puzzling over an algebra graph, I'd already be enrolled at Notre Dame, set up in my dorm, attending class.

That's the thing about universities—they wanted you to finish high school first.

After eighteen years in Anchorage I could hardly wait to trade in snow and cold for civilization.

Until then, six more months before graduation.

At the end of the hour, Denise said an abrupt, "See you at lunch."

Well, she could forget about juicy details 'cause I wasn't dishing. Bitchy behavior deserved no rewards. Maybe Tracey Rowen in third period French would appreciate the story.

At least I wasn't running late for French because in about three seconds, Scott Stevens would pass me in the hall.

Speaking of juicy delights.

I swore he moved in slow motion when he rounded the corner.

Scott had the thin, towering build going for him. He didn't wear a letterman jacket, which he could have as captain of the basketball team, but Scott was the kind of guy who had his own killer style. Best of all, he looked me in the eyes and smiled whenever he saw me. And that is why I, Aurora Sky, for the first time in my life, had a major crush on a jock.

Too bad he and Emily Horton were an item.

"Hi, Aurora."

"Hey, Scott."

After he passed, I ducked into the girl's bathroom at the end of the hall. A group of juniors huddled together and leaned into the mirror as they applied makeup. They'd all dyed their hair jet black with varying streaks of colors, as if to help tell each other apart. One had blond streaks, one red, and another blue.

The girls moved several inches to give me room. When I looked in the mirror, I tried to recreate the same smile I'd flashed Scott. My lips curved over a set of straight teeth. I pulled my hair over my shoulders. That would have looked better, but I always pushed it out of the way.

The group beside me finished their faces and lips. The girl with the blue streaks rubbed concealer with two fingers over a massive hickey on her neck.

As I headed out, the warning bell rang.



At the end of the day, Denise started spinning the combo on her locker at the same time as me. I got distracted and had to start over.

Once she had her coat on, Denise shut her locker with a *thud*.

"See you later," she said, hoisting her backpack over one shoulder

So now she couldn't wait to walk out to our cars together?

Okay then.

I zipped up my jacket a minute later and headed for the student parking lot alone. The moisture on my lashes froze as soon as I stepped outside. Exhaust from idling cars hovered in the stagnant air. Not only was this time of year cold and dark, it turned my stomach inside out.

Once the car stuttered to life, I smacked my mittens together to keep from freezing solid and let the vents do their work unthawing the windshield. After the ice turned to droplets, I swiped the windshield with the wipers. They carved a porthole into the glass and grated against the coarse outer layers of ice.

The roads hadn't thawed, not even with the blast of exhaust pipes and friction of tires running across the polished ice all day. Tires spun in the parking lot. The truck in front of me gunned it and slid sideways onto the road.

College couldn't come soon enough.

I turned the radio on and sung along softly to the lyrics as I passed mounds of snow that had melted during a warm spell the previous week. This week they'd refrozen into white misshapen humps over the landscape.

My tires skidded at the first red stoplight. I slid forward four inches. Getting started again took a moment. Too much gas and my tires spun in place.

Once I lived on campus at Notre Dame there would be no more playing slip and slide on the streets. I planned to walk everywhere on solid pavement.

I passed the fast food chains lining the road just blocks from Denali High. On the long straight stretch home I drove on autopilot until business centers turned to neighborhoods. Small gaps of forest arched over the sides of the road. I was almost home when I took the sharpest curve on Jewel Lake Road.

As I rounded the corner a SUV appeared in front of me, speeding around the bend. The car made a horrible skidding sound before sliding into my lane.

Time inched forward.

Tires screeched. I braked, but the car slid out from under me. Light glinted off the SUV's front windshield, and for a moment, I saw the driver—a boy wearing a blue bandana around his forehead. Maybe I would have found him cute if he weren't about to kill us both.

In seconds, he would hit me. And I couldn't do anything. I couldn't brake. I couldn't dodge him. This was it.

I saw the boy's face. I read his lips. "Oh, shit."

We said the words together.

In the event of a catastrophe, one thing is sure. Your life ends on a curse.

Terms of Revival

Sound returned first. A gurney trundled over the floor. Parchment fluttered. The scratch of pen on paper thundered in my ear, as though someone held a microphone to the tip as they wrote.

Later I heard voices and a horrible metallic scraping. Even with eyes closed, the lights glared. The brightness penetrated my eyelids straight to the space in front of my brain. Static pinpricks of light moved inside my forehead.

Someone wheeled something over. It got closer and closer.

A smooth voice said, "Find me the moment she starts to come around."

Then sound left the room like fire sucking oxygen from a burning building. For a while there was nothing, not even the static in my mind. And then the first traces of feeling returned.

Blood rushed through my veins. My heart began a steady pump. My eyes fluttered. I balled my toes up and released them. The thin bones in my hand moved under my skin like hammers connected to piano keys as my fingers twitched over the sheet.

"How are you feeling, Aurora?"

I lowered my chin and got my first glimpse of the face behind the voice. He was a young man, cleanly shaven, wearing a gray suit.

When our eyes met he smiled. "I am Agent Melcher. Welcome back."

My voice croaked the moment I opened my mouth. "Where am I?"

"You're on Elmendorf Air Force Base and this..." Melcher said looking around the bright enclosure "is our unit's own private ER."

It made sense that I would be in a hospital, but why on base? My family had no ties to the armed forces. Dad was out of the country surveying, but where was Mom?

"What happened?"

"You were in a car accident. Do you remember?"

Of course I remembered. How could I ever forget the last seconds of my life? Or what I thought were the last seconds.

"The other driver..." I couldn't finish the sentence.

"Is gone," Melcher answered.

Suddenly the steady smile on his lips was too much. I looked at the door beyond his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Aurora. We've taken care of everything—the surgery and organ transplants. Thanks to the blood transfusion we performed your bones are healing quickly. You'll be better than new in no time."

The smile in his voice made me distrust him at once.

"Why am I here?"

"Because you have very special blood, Aurora."

No one ever referred to my blood as special. Doctors called it unique and rare—the rarest of all blood types. Less than one percent of the population had AB negative blood. Maybe that's why I was on base. Maybe the government had the only supply of AB negative for my blood transfusion. But why would they help me?

I looked at Melcher for further explanation, but he kept smiling and said, "I'll send in your mother now."

Melcher's calm, calculating tone was replaced by my Mom's own hysterical outburst as she flew into the room. "Oh, my God! Aurora! Thank God! Thank God!" She grasped me by the

shoulders and lowered herself over my chest, pressing me into the bed. She pulled back. Tears streaked her cheeks. “Thank God,” she said again. “My baby. It’s a miracle.”

She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “How are you feeling?”

I squinted at her. “Why am I on base?”

Mom’s face screwed up funny and it looked like she might start crying again. Then she took a deep breath and returned to patting my hand.

“You look like you’re feeling much better,” she answered for me. “Agent Melcher said I can take you home in another week.”

The agent, not the doctor.

“How long have I been here?”

“Two weeks...”

“Two weeks!” I cried.

Tears started pooling in Mom’s eyes once more. “They had to put you in a medically induced coma.”

My eyes darted around the room frantically looking for a clock or a calendar—a window even. “What month is it?”

Mom hesitated before answering, “December.”

“But my exams. My assignments.”

Notre Dame might have accepted me, but that didn’t mean jack if I didn’t graduate.

“I spoke to all your teachers and they’re giving you extensions. You’ll be able to go to school the week before Christmas then use the holiday break to catch up.”

Mom placed a hand on my face. “Don’t worry. Just rest and we’ll get you home.”

My stomach twisted into knots. Going home meant getting in a car and I was never getting into another moving vehicle as long as I lived.

I’d just have to walk back—all fourteen miles.



A young man in a white lab coat and crew cut burst into my room early the next morning. I pulled my bed sheet instinctively against my chest.

“Alright, Aurora, up and at ’em.”

The possibility of a car waiting outside made me wince. “Where am I going?”

“Not far...next door.”

“What’s next door?”

“The treadmill. It’s time to start physical therapy.”

I waited for him to laugh and say he was joking; he really needed to take my blood pressure and check my vitals. But he frowned when I didn’t leap out of bed and do something peppy, like a hundred jumping jacks.

“Um, I just woke up from a coma yesterday, and it sounds like I had some pretty major surgery.”

If there was ever a reason to get out of physical anything, surviving a head on collision should rank top.

“Yes, but you have special blood.”

I was starting to think it was mutant blood the way everyone talked about it in this place.

Physical therapy guy nodded at a neatly folded stack of clothing on the chair beside my bed. “I’ll wait in the hall while you get dressed. You have five minutes.”

Five minutes, I grumbled after he left. I was no doctor, but this wasn't how you treated trauma patients. I peeled the sheet aside and took a tentative first step onto the cold linoleum floor. My hand gripped the mattress in case I was unable to hold up my own weight, but I felt sturdy once I got the second foot down.

After removing the hospital gown, I glimpsed a first look at my body. A line of stitches zipped up my chest over a four-inch scar. *Nice*. At least nothing was crushed beyond repair. My legs and arms weren't even bruised. That only left my face.

I put on the gray sweatpants and army green T-shirt then entered the room's corner bathroom. My fingers trembled over the light switch. *Deep breath*. I flicked it on.

All that anticipation just to end up face to face with...a blank wall. Seriously? Why not install a sink without a faucet while they were at it? Or maybe my face was so disfigured they'd removed the mirror altogether.

I refused to believe it. Mom would have shown signs of distress when she kissed my forehead.

Pound, pound, pound. My therapist wasn't kidding about the five minutes.

"Time's up, Aurora."



At the end of the week, Melcher walked into my room with a woman who looked to be, like him, in her early thirties.

"Aurora, this is my partner, Agent Crist."

Crist nodded curtly. She wore a frown as tight as the pony tail at the nape of her neck. In their matching suits, she and Melcher looked like missionaries.

They walked over to where I sat in the room's only chair and stood on either side of me, forcing my eyes to ping pong between them.

"How's therapy going?" Melcher asked.

I glared at him. "Is that what you call this, 'cause I feel like I'm training for a marathon?"

Usually I liked making people laugh. Not so with Melcher. His chuckle grated on my nerves. Agent Crist pursed her lips.

"We needed to make sure you were fully functional," Melcher said.

"I'd say walking eight miles a day is functional enough." I could have been half way home that very morning. Then there was the running my therapist threw in at the end of our sessions: one mile the first few days and now he had me pounding out two.

They should call this shock therapy.

"Well, I have good news. We're releasing you...for now. But before you go, Agent Crist and I would like to go over the terms of your revival."

I eyed Melcher suspiciously.

"You have been saved for a specific purpose—a chance to serve not only your country, but mankind."

I don't think so. The air force or military or whoever the agents represented must be desperate if they had to abduct teenage girls from accident scenes by way of recruitment.

Melcher gestured with his right hand as he spoke. "As I mentioned, you have a very special blood type and this blood, when injected with the right combination of modified organisms and viruses, makes you a deadly and powerful force against the demonic beings that plague this earth."

Maybe I should have focused on the demonic beings part, but when my lips flew open I could only think of one thing. “You injected me with a virus!”

Melcher leaned in closer. “You have nothing to fear, Aurora. The virus won’t harm you so long as you take your monthly injection.”

“Monthly injection! Like a shot? For how long?” When Melcher didn’t answer a horrifying thought occurred to me. “For the rest of my life?”

“It’s not that bad, we’ve already administered your first dose,” Crist said.

I kept my eyes on Melcher. Something told me he was the one running the show. “Not that bad?” I repeated. “Why infect me with a virus in the first place?”

Melcher listened with patience. I was beginning to wonder if he ever frowned or if he was like one of those scary clown dolls with a perpetual smile stretched across its face.

“Think of it as a vaccination. Like a flu shot.” Melcher formed a steeple with his fingers. “As a field agent you will come into contact with all kinds of infected *individuals*. We do this for your own protection.”

“What do you mean field agent?”

“We’ll go over that during orientation.” Melcher stepped forward. Suddenly he was looming over me. “Do not doubt, Aurora, that evil is among us. It threatens our way of life. Candidates such as you are instrumental in keeping not only our country safe, but humanity itself. This is an opportunity to serve the greater good.” Melcher turned to Crist. “Have I left anything out?”

“Yes,” Crist said. Her eyes zeroed in on me. “You have no choice.”

Melcher cleared his throat. “What Agent Crist means to say is that your mother, as your legal guardian, has signed your rights over to us. We have saved your life and you, in turn, will save the lives of hundreds.” Melcher stepped closer. “You were an extremely expensive investment, Aurora. A new heart, kidney, and lungs—I think that was a record, don’t you, Agent Crist? If we’d had to replace any more organs we may’ve had our very first Frankenstein on the team.”

I resisted the urge to itch the stitches under my shirt.

Crist still had me in her glare. “Most girls in your shoes would have ended up as organ donors rather than receivers,” she said.

“That’s right,” Melcher said. “Still had a healthy spleen and liver up for grabs.” Again that smile. “Do you have any questions so far?”

I stood up. “Just one. When is my mom picking me up?”

Melcher and Crist shared a look.

“She’s in shock,” Crist said.

“She’ll come around.” Melcher turned to me. “Your mother will be here in an hour.”

My face relaxed. Fine, I’d get in a car one last time. Just to get out of there.

“We’ll see you again soon,” Melcher said, before he and Crist left the room.

Not if I could help it.

The face in the mirror had no eyes or lips. She was blurry, distorted. Every time I tried to look at her I had to look away. It was better not to tell Mom I was hallucinating. She was worried enough.

Maybe I was sick. *Viruses*. Melcher had used the plural.

Why would the agents save my life then make me sick?

Why would the agents save me at all?

I didn't feel sick. I didn't feel anything.

"Aurora!" Mom called from downstairs. "You're going to miss the bus if you don't leave soon."

I took each stair carefully. Didn't want to risk re-breaking any bones. It hardly seemed possible that they had healed so quickly to begin with. Rather than tell me to relax and take it easy, my doctor had told me to get plenty of exercise.

My foot hit the tiled entryway.

"Are you sure I can't give you a ride to school?" Mom asked. "I'd like to."

"I'd rather take the bus."

"Can I pick you up?"

"No."

I zipped my backpack closed. She grabbed a white quilted parka from the closet and held it up, waiting for me to slip it on.

I stared at it. "Whose coat is that?"

"I got it for you. Don't you like it?"

I liked my bomber jacket better, but it hadn't made it through the wreck.

I slipped my arms into the coat sleeves without comment and pulled on my winter boots. Mom lifted the hood over my head as I moved to the front door.

"Have a good day. Call me if you decide you want a ride home."

I nodded and walked into the fresh air, for once welcoming the cold prickle across my face. I'd been indoors for weeks. A dusting of snow covered the neighbors' roofs and lawns. The driveways were clear. I averted my eyes when passing the empty spot next to the garage where my car should have been parked.

The lowerclassman waiting at the bottom of the hill glanced at me when I came to a stop several paces away from the cluster they'd formed.

I felt like I'd stumbled backwards in time to a bygone era—one in which I waited at the end of the street for the school bus.

Early morning commuters chugged past in their cars. The yellow bus came along eventually, its chains rattling around the rotating tires, and ground to a halt. I let everyone else board before I climbed the stairs.

I took one step down the aisle and stopped. The smell overwhelmed me: hairspray and perfume, BO and foul breath, all intertwined—thirty-eight bodies crammed inside a tin can. My head spun. I grabbed hold of a seatback to steady myself.

I resisted the urge to back up and climb back down the stairs. But I'd had enough of wasting away in square rooms. I slid into the first available spot and stared out the window. At least the movement didn't bother me. I felt like I was in a submarine gliding smoothly through a current.



Denise waited until I walked all the way up to our lockers to give me a hug. “Welcome back! I wanted to visit you in the hospital, but your mom said they were only allowing family members. How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

The halls were filled with chatter—the volume much too loud. I winced as a locker slammed shut beside me.

“Well, you look great,” Denise told me, head in her locker as she spoke.

“Thanks.”

Students stared at me and whispered quickly as they passed our lockers.

AJ, Denali High’s ultimate player, strode over. His sneakers squeaked when he stopped in front of us. He looked me up and down. “Hey, Aurora, I heard you were in a coma.”

“Leave her alone!” Denise snapped.

“Just askin’,” AJ said with a shrug before moving on.

“I’m sure the last thing you want to do is talk about it,” Denise said.

Her meaning was clear. Denise didn’t want to hear a word about the accident.

I didn’t want to talk about it anyway.

Denise pulled a three ringed binder out of her locker and stuffed it inside her backpack. “I’m so glad you’re all right. Can I help you with anything?”

“I’m fine...thanks,” I repeated.

“Okay. See you in math.”

Yeah, okay.

At least now I had an excuse to get out of gym. Even better, Scott Stevens spoke more than two words to me.

That afternoon, “Hi, Aurora,” was followed by, “Nice to have you back.”

My own friend had failed to say those words. I liked hearing it from Scott better anyway. It came with a smile.



Volleyball had been replaced by badminton while I was gone. Mr. Mooney let me get away with sitting out class the first two days, but by the third he decided to diagnose me as fit for participation.

“Sky, ready to jump back in?”

I paused on my way to the bleachers. “I’m not dressed.”

Besides, everyone was already paired up.

“Fane!” Mr. Mooney called. “Get out here. You can be Aurora’s partner.”

I tried not to flinch or show signs of distress. My last memory of Fane involved his tongue tracing his upper lip.

Fane stood up and gave Mr. Mooney a glare so dark it sent a shiver down my spine. It was the first real sensation I’d experienced since the accident. When his eyes moved to me I momentarily forgot to breathe.

Fane held my gaze a moment longer then slipped out of his leather jacket. I watched, transfixed. This was history in the making. Fane Donado taking off his coat.

All of his imperfections breezed out the door as soon as I got my first look at the six-pack straining against his cotton tee. My eyes must have been playing tricks on me. For a guy with such a slender build, Fane was surprisingly muscled.

Fane took deliberate steps down the aisle of the bench, straight to the edge. He jumped from the bleachers, causing them to rock in his wake.

I swore I felt a *'thud'* inside the pit of my stomach when he landed.

Mr. Mooney nodded at Fane. "You two are playing Clayton and Tyler."

Fane walked past me and took two rackets off the floor. He handed me one. I took it from his outstretched hand then followed several steps behind.

Part of me was relieved he didn't say anything. All I could think about was the obscene gesture he'd made right before my world turned up-side-down. I hardly noticed the hair now. I was too distracted by his lips. And now his abs. Luckily, I wouldn't have to look at either while we played side by side.

At the far court, Clayton and Tyler bounced birdies up and down on the strings of their rackets.

Clayton nudged Tyler as we approached. "Oh great. Goth boy and zombie girl. This should be fun."

I took my place beside Fane. He held his racket loose and lazy. I barely held mine at all. Clayton pelted the birdie at me. I tried to shield my face and ended up dropping my racket.

"Oh, come on!" Clayton shouted.

I picked up the birdie and threw it over the net.

Clayton served the birdie to Fane, who smacked it over the net with the flick of a wrist. Tyler launched the birdie at me. It hit me on the shoulder, but I swung anyway as it bounced to the floor.

"Hello? Earth to Aurora," Tyler called across the net.

"I think she's still in a coma," Clayton said.

"That's game," Tyler said. "Your serve."

I picked up the birdie and handed it to Fane. It's a good thing it wasn't a real bird. Fane crushed it in his hand. Only for a moment. Only I saw. He relaxed and looked across the net. I felt that odd shiver return.

Fane smacked the birdie as though it were a fly. He walloped it right between Tyler and Clayton so fast neither boy had time to react. When they did manage a return hit, Fane gracefully flicked away any stray birds that came at me. I watched in fascination, fully engaged for the first time since the accident.

The boys tried to hit the birdie back. Fane had them racing across every corner of their court. By the end of the period they were out of breath. They took off without a backwards glance when Mr. Mooney blew his whistle signaling the end of gym.

As I walked past Fane I felt a twitch. Not my own. I felt the twitch of his hand wanting to stop me.

"Hey, you. Are you okay?"

If I had my full range of emotions left I'd laugh. He didn't even know my name—that or it wasn't worth saying.

He studied me carefully. "I've seen that look before."

Now I was curious.

Valerie jumped down from the bleachers. "Fane!"

He didn't pay attention to her. I held my breath waiting for him to tell me what he saw.

Valerie sashayed her way over to Fane. She held out his jacket. “I’m ready to blow this joint. Let’s get a bite.”

Her last words grabbed his attention, and he forgot me completely. Valerie looped her arm around Fane’s and they walked toward the double doors. I was right behind them, silent as a ghost. When I reached the hall entrance leading to the locker rooms I stopped. I saw his head start to turn. I knew he was going to look back, but by the time he did I’d be gone.



I heard the Christmas music and smelled molasses before I walked through the door. “Jingle Bells” jangled inside my ears the moment I crossed the threshold. Mom was in the kitchen amidst trays of cut-out cookies. She bit into a gingerbread man as I walked in. She turned, crumbs falling from her mouth, swallowed, and smiled.

“I was feeling festive today,” she said.

I glanced at the dining room table, where she’d set out plates of sugar cookies shaped like angels and stars; bowls of colored frosting and bottles of sprinkles.

I knew why. Tomorrow Dad returned.

Mom asked me not to say anything about the agents. Not that I had much information to relay since she’d managed to avoid the topic since bringing me home. Dad only knew about the accident, that I was fine, and the car totaled.

I understood Mom’s concern. After their last argument we were lucky to have him home for the holidays at all.

Mom grinned. “That’s not all. Look what we’ve got in the living room.”

I followed her into the adjoining room. The branches of a fir tree nearly touched the ceiling. I could barely pick up its scent through the sugared cloud wafting from room to room.

“Do you like the tree?” Mom asked. “It was the best one on the lot.”

Meaning most symmetrical, I supposed. There were plastic totes lined beside the tree, lids pulled off and stacked against the sofa.

“Go on,” Mom coaxed. “Why don’t you put up the first ornament?”

I looked inside the tote. Because my mom was waiting, I grabbed the first decoration that touched my fingers.

The phone rang. While my mom answered I dangled a glittery star from my finger.

She returned to the living room with the phone pressed against her chest. “Aurora, it’s Agent Melcher calling to see how you’re doing.”

I continued staring at the star. “I don’t want to talk to him.”

Mom hesitated before returning the phone to her ear. “She’s doing better. Yes, school’s going fine. Her friends are, of course, happy to have her back—as are her teachers.”

Mom circled the living room.

“Martial arts?” she asked. “If you say so. We’ll get her enrolled in some after-school classes. Right after Christmas? Yes, I understand. Thank you. You, too.”

I hung the star from a branch at eye level and looked at it on the tree.

“That was Agent Melcher,” she repeated.

A sudden flash of irritation burned through me. Yes, she mentioned that already.

“He would like you to start informal training. He said it will help you during orientation.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “I already told you I’m not going back to that place.”

Mom gasped. “Aurora, you have to.”

“Why?”

“The agents...they said if we don't comply...you'll die.”

Her voice quivered and broke on a sob.

I took a step forward, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Mom, it's okay. I just want to know what they want from me. How did the agents even find me to begin with?”

She sniffed and sucked in a breath. “I don't know. When I received the call about your accident they already had you on base.”

Sounded more like a kidnapping than a rescue mission if you asked me.

“And what did they tell you?”

“I can't remember,” Mom said a little too quickly. “I was in a state of panic. It's hard to remember much. I was in shock.”

“Try to remember—they must've said something.”

Mom stared beyond me. “They said there was internal bleeding and that your heart was giving out. They mentioned that three organs needed replacing if you were to have any chance of survival.” Mom made another choking sound. She took a breath. “They said they were your only hope.”

“And what did you agree to in return for my operation?”

“The agents believe you can be a big help to their division. They want you as an operative. Top secret stuff. They gave me their word that you wouldn't come to any harm if I agreed to secrecy and you complied.”

My voice quivered. “What kind of operative?”

Mom avoided my eyes. “Only the agents can tell you that.”

For all their mumbo jumbo about viruses, modified organisms, and the greater good, I was at a loss as to their intent. Curious as I was, I'd sooner steer clear of the agents all together—for the rest of my life if possible. I didn't want to train. I didn't want to be an operative. I did not sign up for this.

And why were they called agents, anyway? If they were on base, shouldn't they be lieutenants or sergeants?

I held out my arms. “Look at me.”

Mom looked.

“Do I look like I should be in the military?”

Mom shook her head slowly.

“I like to read books. I like to write.” I lowered my arms and began pacing the room. “You know what I don't like? Gym and whistles. I should be going to college—not the service!”

“Let's just wait until orientation. I'm sure the agents will explain everything there.”

“Whatever,” I said. “I'm done decorating.”

Holiday Blues

The last day of school drifted by in a trance. All the seniors went on about how they couldn't wait for Christmas break and how, "Oh, my God", when we got back it would be graduation year.

At the end of the day, I bypassed my locker to avoid receiving phony smiles and weak hugs.

I boarded my bus and stared out the window until I got home. Snow fell gently from the sky when I disembarked. It was like padding over the earth—soundproof padding. Snow still fascinated me. I'd lived in Alaska my whole life, but when the snow came down in thick white flakes, I could swear there was nothing more beautiful in the world.

A freshman gathered some of the snow in his bare hands and attempted to make a snowball, but it was too dry and turned to dust in his fingers. The herd of kids walking up the street thinned as they disappeared inside their warm homes, until only I remained—trudging alone to my house at the top of the hill.

If I kept walking, maybe I would find myself. I looked ahead to where the end of the road met the woods. She was out there somewhere: The person I was before the accident.

I looked sideways at my house and passed by.

Snow clung to the spruce trees ahead like long white coats. My heart pattered as I approached the clump of woods at the top of the hill. A dirt path led into the cave of bark and branches and silence. I walked toward it.

Inside this clutch of woods, the temperature dropped, and the light dimmed. The spruce trees didn't appear as gentle when I came closer to their sharp needles. I trampled through, keeping my eyes straight ahead. Smaller paths made by moose veered off in random directions.

There was no sound in here. No twigs snapping under hooves or ravens cawing. No rowdy teens sneaking in for a smoke or children crossing over with their sleds to slide down the steep hump at the top of our hill. The world was silent.

The trees didn't taper off where the next neighborhood began—they just stopped. This street was quiet, at least. The homes began to mash together in the next neighborhood until I reached the main road.

Snow snaked in crystallized clouds over the pavement with each passing car. I observed traffic until my toes went numb. No more shivers. I couldn't even feel the cold anymore. When there were no cars in sight in either direction, I crossed to the median, made sure it was still clear, and crossed again.

There was a hill leading to a strip mall with take-out pizza place, dry cleaners, and video store. I waded my way through the deep snow.

The next part was like something from a dream. When I rose from the hill I saw Fane standing at the top smoking a cigarette with another guy several feet in front of the video store. It was Fane who looked at me in disbelief as though seeing a ghost emerge through the snow. He dropped his cigarette and took several steps forward.

"Aurora?"

A smile hovered on my lips. So he did know my name.

Fane's companion looked me over with a scowl. "Chum of yours, Francesco?" he asked in a British accent.

Fane ignored his friend. He stepped closer. "What are you doing out here?" He gazed into my eyes. When I didn't answer he looked beyond my shoulder. "Do you live nearby?"

“Yes.”

“Are you going somewhere?”

“No.”

Fane’s bystander made a sound of exasperated impatience. He looked a lot like Adrien Brody, the clean-cut version in *The Pianist*, with pale skin, narrow cheekbones, and a lanky, thin frame.

“I’ll give you a ride home,” Fane said.

I screeched the moment he grabbed my arm. “No!” I wasn’t so out of it that I’d get into a moving vehicle with someone other than my mom.

Fane’s friend sneered. When he spoke he sounded all snotty British. “It’s not enough that you’re hanging out with those adolescent twats at Denali, now you’re consorting with a girl who is clearly insane.”

Fane let go of my arm and glared at his companion. “She was recently in a car accident.”

The scowl became further pronounced. “A car accident occurs every second—103,680 a day—over 35,000 fatalities annually in this country alone.” He walked around me as he spoke, studying me as though I was a marble sculpture at the Louvre. With my pale skin, I was nearly white enough.

He stopped directly in front of me and stared me in the eyes. “Happens all the time. Get over it.”

Fane crossed his arms over his chest. “Maybe it’s time you got over it.”

“This isn’t about me.”

“It’s always about you,” Fane said. He turned to me. “Come on, I’ll walk you home.”

“I’m not going home.”

“Oh, really?” Amusement danced over Fane’s eyes. “And where exactly are you going, Aurora Sky?”

I lowered my lashes and tried to think. “I don’t know.”

“I say you leave her out here to freeze,” his buddy said.

Fane rolled his eyes. “I’ll be right back. Go pick out your movies. Try to find something with more action and less subtitles.”

Fane took my arm and led me down the hill. “Here we go—back home.”

“I don’t want to go back home. She’ll want me to decorate and eat cookies.”

Fane laughed. “Clearly you come from a dysfunctional family.”

He removed his hand when we reached the sidewalk. When there wasn’t a vehicle in sight I nodded my consent to cross.

Fane followed my lead and shadowed my steps. When we reached the opposite side of the road he smiled. “Made it.”

Dressed in his usual black jeans and ribbed tee, he was as dark as doom against the fading light. Even the snow didn’t stick to his long leather jacket.

I didn’t know why he was doing this. I kept expecting him to offer to sell me drugs to ease the pain. But there was no pain, only a numb sense of nothingness, and he made no offers.

“Did you die?” he asked.

I craned my head sideways to look at him.

“You know, white light opening in front of you welcoming you into the heavens?”

“No, there was no white light.”

I looked away. The snow hadn’t let up. If anything, it fell thicker and faster. The flakes were like particles of light broken into tiny fragments across the sky.

My voice dropped. "But there was a white room. I didn't like the white room."

"I'm not much for hospitals, myself," Fane said. He kicked a mound of snow and it scattered like dust. "Avoid them like the plague." His words ended on a laugh.

We worked our way through the crowded neighborhood and started up the hill that led to the woods.

"Got any Christmas plans?" Fane asked.

I didn't answer. I didn't want to think about the gifts my mom would give me in an attempt to buy my forgiveness. I didn't want to moon over my upcoming orientation with the agents.

As we walked through the woods I imagined Fane taking my hand in his. I wasn't sure if Valerie was his girlfriend or if they were just fooling around. Either way, he kept his distance, returning me home as though I were a lost puppy.

Well, I wasn't lost.

Once our feet hit the road, I stopped and turned to Fane. "You can go back now," I said.

"Is your house nearby?"

"Yes."

Fane leaned forward. "Very well, Aurora. I'll wait here in case you try to wander off again."

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm not a child."

The shock of blond at the top of Fane's head made the blackened hair on the sides look like demonic angel wings. *I hate your hair*, I felt like saying. Not a child, but certainly feeling childish at the moment.

Fane looked down the street. "Which one's your house?"

I glanced at the yellow home behind me.

"Go home, get warm. I'll leave just as soon as I see you walk through your door."

Why did Fane Donado of all people care whether or not I made it home? I looked him in the eye for the longest time then turned for my house.

"Take care, Aurora Sky," Fane called after me.

I didn't turn my head for a last look. Not even when I reached my door. I guess I was alone in thinking Fane should kiss me before we parted ways. Isn't that what boys did when they walked a girl home?

What a cringe-worthy thought. I had to be the most repressed eighteen-year-old on the planet.

The moment I walked inside my mother accosted me.

"Aurora? Aurora, thank God!" She rushed forward and crushed me in her arms. She stepped back just as suddenly. "You're soaked." She peeled off my coat.

My father stood just past the doorway in the space between the kitchen and dining room. Usually he wasn't home until eight or nine. Even after a month's absence he chose to spend extra time at the office rather than home. We'd see how long Mom kept her mouth shut this time.

"Where have you been?" Dad demanded.

Mom hurried to fill my silence. "Aurora, your father and I have been worried sick. When you didn't show up after school...well, I didn't know what to think. I called the school. I called your friends."

"And then she called me." My father moved into the doorway. I didn't know if he meant to walk through and scold me by the front door or block my way to the kitchen until I apologized.

"I am neck deep in work right now. It's the end of the year. You know what that means."

Mom put my coat away. "Yes, I'm sorry, Bill. If I hadn't been so worried..."

"It's not your fault, Dana."

My father looked at me with an expression I'd never seen before. Blame.

Funny, 'cause I wasn't the one who threatened not to come home the last time he left the country on business.

I held him in my gaze. The creases in his forehead deepened.

"Go to your room, Aurora," he said.

"I'll bring you up a cup of warm tea," Mom said.

"No tea. She needs time to think about what she's done."

I really wished I'd get the feeling back in my face because I would have liked to roll my eyes. I wasn't sassy by nature, especially not to dear old Dad, but it bubbled inside me in the form of a smirk twitching over my lips.

"Oh, you think it's funny, do you?" Dad said, stepping toward me.

"Bill!" Mom said.

The fog lifted momentarily, and I saw him clearly—this man who'd stopped raising me, who ceased knowing me years ago. Like the forgotten wife at home, I was the forgotten child. And now that I was an adult, a senior in high school, he thought he could send me to my room?

I leapt to the first stair and faced my parents for one final show down.

"I'll go to my room," I said. "Happily. If you like, I'll even spend Christmas in my room."

Then I raced up the stairs.

Vampire Blood

The agents called me in for orientation at the end of the year. I was to report to duty early in the morning.

Mom didn't have to make any excuses to Dad. He had checked out of Hotel Sky an hour earlier.

Mom sat sipping a diet soda, reading the newspaper at the kitchen table. The ice cubes in her drink cracked against the glass every time she lifted and sipped.

I'd barely taken three bites of my oatmeal.

Mom looked at my bowl. "Is that all you're eating?"

"I'm not hungry."

Mom frowned. "You're going to get hungry if you don't finish your food."

No I wouldn't. Not with my stomach full of knots.

Mom folded up her newspaper. She sounded resigned. "The agents said to bring a change of clothes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

At least they weren't making me wear camo. Then again, they could have hundreds of pushups and jumping jacks in store. Maybe I would be drenched in sweat by the end of the day.

I stared out the window as we headed downtown toward Elmendorf Air Force Base. Each passing street brought us closer to certain doom. A beige sedan pulled into our lane right in front of us and, instinctively, I threw my right foot forward and pressed it into the mat. My mom pumped the brake and grumbled at the driver.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I liked the tone of her voice. It was firm and assertive. She never took her eye off the road.

"Yes," I all but whispered.

We drove down the Glenn Highway a short distance before my mom took an exit right and crossed the bridge over the highway to the gated entrance leading into Elmendorf.

The sick feeling in the pit of my stomach returned as we approached the line of cars at the gate. I wasn't aware the feeling had gone until it came back worse than before.

"What if we turned around?" I asked suddenly. "Tell the agents I'm ill. Tell them I'm not ready yet."

"Aurora, you're going to have to get this over with at some point. I think it's best you complete orientation before the new semester starts. You'll feel better once it's done."

We were currently fourth in line. The lead vehicle, a truck, didn't appear to be going anywhere. A young military man leaned outside the booth, took something from the driver, and disappeared back inside.

"Don't worry," Mom said. "I know you'll do fine."

The military man's head reappeared right before the gate went up, and the truck drove forward. The next vehicle went right in.

Now only one car stood between me and captivity.

I turned to Mom. "Talk to them! Tell them I'll pay them back for the operation. I don't care if it takes me my entire life. I'll get their money back."

“They don’t want money,” Mom said. “I tried that. I would have paid any price to get you back. But we can’t buy organs...the government can. We’re lucky. The agents chose you. They wanted you to live.”

Melcher and Crist didn’t want me to live so much as serve. Why did my mom have to try and glorify this?

The car in front of us sped through the open gate. Mom drove forward, right up to the gates of hell.

“Hello,” she said with a bright smile. “I’m Dana Sky, and this my daughter Aurora. We have an appointment with Agent Melcher.”

The young military man showed no emotion. “IDs.”

Mom and I dug out our wallets and pulled our driver’s licenses out of their tight compartments. The man glanced at our cards, turned to a walkie-talkie, and spoke into it. “The VH recruit is here. Over.”

Static ensued followed by scratchy words saying, “Send them in. Over.”

The young man handed Mom our IDs. He tilted his head toward a black sedan waiting just through the gate. “That black sedan is your escort. Follow him.”

The gate lifted and we drove onto the base.

My mom and I didn’t speak as she followed the vehicle in front of us. The black sedan tuned on its right blinker. Mom did the same. We followed it down a wooded road. If my internal compass was any good, we were now traveling north, adjacent to the now-hidden Glenn Highway.

“Is this where you came to pick me up before?” I didn’t recognize anything, but I was in a fog the last time I left here.

“Yes.”

We followed the sedan down a quiet road. A parking lot emerged through the trees, leading directly to a building that looked like a bunker with no windows.

The sedan pulled into a parking spot. Mom took the one beside it.

I turned to my mom. “Will you wait for me?”

I’d seen Mom grab the Nora Roberts novel she was reading. That was a good sign.

“I don’t know. I need to ask how long orientation lasts.”

Agent Crist stepped out of the passenger seat of the sedan. Agent Melcher joined her, and they waited for my mom and me to step out. The agents were dressed in their matching gray suits and wool military coats that fell above their knees.

“Good morning, Mrs. Sky. Good morning, Aurora,” Agent Melcher said. “No need to come inside, Mrs. Sky. I’ll call you when Aurora is finished.”

“When will that be?”

“It could take a few days.”

“A few days!” my mom and I said at the same time.

Melcher grinned. “That all depends on Aurora.”

I turned to my mother with pleading eyes. She hesitated.

“My daughter needs more time.”

Relief washed through me. I wanted to throw my arms around my mom in that moment and kiss her cheeks. Only the scowl on Agent Crist’s face stopped me.

“She just started her kickboxing and tae kwon do lessons. Couldn’t you let her finish senior year first?” Mom asked hopefully.

Crist's eyebrows lowered as her upper lip rose. "The time for negotiations is over, Mrs. Sky. I thought you understood the terms."

Mom looked from me to Agent Crist and frowned. "I just don't see why Aurora has to get started so soon."

Melcher took a step forward. "Don't worry about a thing, Mrs. Sky. We'll call you the moment Aurora is finished. The sooner we start, the sooner she can go home."

Mom frowned then turned and gave me a quick hug. "You'll be fine, sweetie, and as soon as you're done I'll be here to pick you up."

The moment Mom released me she hurried back to the car and pulled away. The pit in my stomach expanded as her car disappeared from sight.

Melcher smiled at me as though I were a child. "Let's go, Aurora. You'll feel better once you understand what's expected of you."

If Melcher was the doting dad, then Agent Crist was the wicked stepmother who couldn't stand to see Melcher's attention directed away from her. I could feel the burn of her frown even on my back.

I followed them through a sliding door into the lobby of the building. A young woman in camouflage pants and a matching jacket sat at a front desk. She nodded at Agents Melcher and Crist with the same detached look as the man at the gate.

"This is our base of operation," Melcher said. "On the right we have our own private hospital and surgeons, which you've already seen. It's small, but it's the state's best. On the left are our administrative offices, where we'll go first. Then in back, we have our training facilities and several holding cells."

What? Were they going to lock me up if I didn't do as I was told?

I followed the agents down a glaring hallway. There were no pictures on the walls. We reached a set of double doors, and Crist swiped a keycard to open them. There was another reception desk manned by yet another drone. The soldier looked at the agents briefly, never sparing me a glance.

Melcher led me into an office with two desks and shut the door.

There were no photographs on either desk; no pictures on the walls; no décor of any kind unless you counted the wooden cross nailed to the wall. It formed a triangle with Crist and Melcher when they sat down.

"Have a seat," Melcher said.

I selected the chair in front of him. It was either that or fry under Crist's direct glare.

Melcher rested his elbows on his desk and leaned forward.

"Let's get right down to it. Our unit is rather peculiar. We specialize in the identification and elimination of demonic forces." Melcher paused to smile. "Don't worry, we won't ask you to do both. We have undercover informants specially trained to weed out these unholy threats."

At the moment, the only threat I sensed was that of Agents Melcher and Crist.

"You have been recruited for a very special role in the fight against terror, Aurora."

Maybe if I stared at Melcher hard enough he'd come right out and say what he meant.

"What is a VH recruit?" I asked, remembering what the guy at the front gate had said.

"Vampire Hunter," Crist said.

I started laughing so hard I had to grip the arms of my chair to keep from falling to the floor. The agents won points for creativity, I'd give them that. Great way to break the ice. Now we could move onto the real reason I was there.

As my giggles subsided, I noticed Melcher and Crist weren't laughing.

“You heard right,” Melcher said. “You’ve been recruited by your government to eliminate the reanimated dead.”

“Vampires,” Crist clarified in a harsh voice.

I looked from agent to agent. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Melcher frowned. “The demonic plague is no joke.”

Since when did the military start allowing fanatics to run their own special units? Now that I was trapped on base, playing along seemed like the best idea until Mom picked me up and got me the hell out of that madhouse once and for all.

“And how exactly do I eliminate vampires?” I asked.

“That’s the beauty of it,” Melcher said. “Your body is now a weapon—your blood. As I mentioned briefly before, a team of government scientists recently discovered a combination of organisms that, when mixed with AB negative blood cells, are lethal when consumed by the undead. From there, they found a way to safely inject these organisms into hosts, such as yourself. When your blood cells are transferred from you to the infected, it sends them into a state of temporary paralysis.”

Crist looked me in the eyes. “By transferred, he means when one of them bites you.”

Right, ’cause that’s what vampires were all about. Biting people. It definitely concerned me that people like Melcher and Crist had access to automatic weapons.

No wonder Melcher was always smiling. He had a lot of funny ideas in his head. It made me smile, too.

“So are we talking storybook vampires with fangs and claws, only come out in the night, hold the garlic, please?” I asked with a smirk.

“Not exactly,” Melcher answered, missing my sarcasm. “They have every appearance of being human, but they’re not. They’re infected by disease and they feed on healthy humans.”

“Ohhhh,” I said, thinking I finally got it. “You mean sick people who have escaped quarantine. You’ve made me immune so I can hunt them down and bring them back in?”

Crist huffed. “No, he means vampires!”

Melcher continued speaking as though there’d been no interruption. “What you need to understand about the undead is that their disease is what keeps them in their reanimated state. Disease is the trigger. Rabies, plague, porphyria—we can trace plague vampires all the way back to outbreaks in sixteenth century Italy.”

“Are you saying that people who caught the plague never died?”

Sounded more like zombies than vampires to me.

Melcher sucked in a breath and released it quickly. “No, thank goodness. Only individuals with type AB negative blood are at risk.”

I shot up in my chair. “I’m type AB negative! And you injected me with a virus.”

Shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. Why hadn’t I been able to see myself clearly in the mirror since the accident? And why was everything so loud? I swear I’d developed a heightened sense of hearing. But I felt cold, chilled. Vampires loved the cold. I hated the cold. I was panicking. That’s all. This was all just a hazing.

I took a calming breath, determined to play along and not get laughed at when Melcher admitted it was all a ruse and they’d been observing my reactions from the very start.

“So now I’m a vampire?”

I should have earned points for asking with a straight face.

“We have an antidote to prevent that from happening,” Melcher said. “That’s what your monthly injection is for.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “And you’re saying that if I don’t take the *antidote* every month I’ll turn into a vampire?”

Melcher frowned for the first time. “If you stop taking the antidote, you’ll die and there will be no heaven to welcome you on the other side.”

I matched his frown. Maybe it was just me, but I didn’t like people telling me I was going to hell.

“Are there any side effects to having ‘vampire blood?’” I asked, thinking about the distortion in the mirror. At least I had a reflection, even if it wasn’t clear. That was a good sign, right?

Melcher looked me up and down. “You might notice some sensitivity at first, but your injections will eventually take care of any...discomforts you may experience. Do you have any specific concerns?”

I pressed my lips together, not in the mood to share with Mr. Self-Righteous.

Instead I asked, “Do you really expect me to believe this?”

Melcher looked at Crist. She nodded, and they stood in unison. I turned my head to follow their movements to the door.

“We understand your denial,” Melcher said. “In fact, every new operative goes through it. That’s why we’ve found it best to follow up this introduction with a live demonstration. Follow me.”

Right then, getting out of that room sounded good.

I followed the agents out the double doors and back down the way we’d come.

We entered the lobby and turned down another hall leading to the back of the complex, away from freedom. I wondered if the woman at the front desk would come to my aid if I called out for help.

Melcher placed a hand on my back as though sensing my hesitation and pushed me gently forward. I walked faster just to get his hand off me.

When we reached the end of the hall, Crist led us through a set of swinging double doors into a second, shorter hallway. Midway down the hall, she used her key card to unlock a metal door. She held it open, and I followed Melcher into a small, stark room. A long metal table faced a two-way mirror overlooking a brightly lit room.

I peered through the glass, expecting to see whatever creature or thing the agents wanted to show me, but the room was empty except for a metal table in the center.

Maybe they meant to stick me in there and interrogate me.

Crist stood against the door, propping it open. I followed Melcher back into the hall where he stopped in front of room number two and swiped his keycard. A metallic click unlocked the door. Melcher held it open.

He sounded way too serious when he next spoke. “You are about to meet your first vampire, Aurora. I’ll warn you, he’s no Edward Cullen. I wish there was a way to make this easier on you, but the first experience is always traumatic. To see how your blood infects the creature you will need to let him feed on you. Let me stress that it will come as a shock, but there’s nothing to fear. Your blood will protect you.”

I didn’t realize my feet were making a run for it until Crist grabbed me by the arm. “This way, Aurora.”

She released my arm long enough to shove me forward.

I spun around in time to see the door close, trapping me inside. It was the same brightly lit room I'd seen through the window. When I looked at the glass, the other room was gone, replaced by a featureless reflection.

❄ 6 ❄

Initiation

There was an electronic crackle, and a voice filled the room. “Welcome to initiation, Aurora. This test will last as long as you want”

I *wanted* out of this insane asylum. I rushed to the door and tried yanking down the silver handle, but it didn’t budge.

I turned and my eyes raced over every square inch of the enclosed room. There was a metal table in the very center. I walked up to it and looked down at the weapons laid on top: a handgun, crossbow, hunting knife, ax, and wooden stake.

The intercom crackled back to life.

“Once the subject has fed on your blood you will need to choose a weapon and finish him off.”

“What? No! I’m not killing anyone. Melcher? Let me out of here.”

“Now!” I screamed.

“Good luck, Aurora.”

I expected something horrible to occur after he signed off, but nothing happened.

I circled the table and kept glancing at the door. Trapped inside a windowless room with weapons that made my skin crawl. Fantastic. There wasn’t even a clock to track the minutes dragging by. If they planned on keeping me locked up for so long they could’ve at least put a chair inside.

I folded my arms over my chest and looked at the two-way mirror.

“What’s the matter with Dracula? Can’t find his cape?” I chuckled, but it sounded uneasy.

I walked over to the far corner of the room and leaned my back against the wall.

There was a hollow knock at the door across the room. It pounded three times in succession, producing an eerie, drawn-out echo.

I wanted to crack a joke, but something didn’t feel right. My heart pounded its way up to my throat and I’d barely swallowed when the door flew open. A middle-aged man in flannel was thrown in. The door slammed shut behind him. He nearly fell on the floor, but caught himself. Long greasy hair covered his face as he bent forward. When he righted himself, I saw that his cheeks were sunken, lips bared over yellow teeth. He snarled and spit leaked out the corners of his mouth.

I stood up straight.

The motion caught his eye. He wheezed when he saw me. His eyes were bloodshot. His clothes looked like they hadn’t been washed in months.

This was no vampire. This was a lunatic.

He crossed the room, passing the weapons laid out on the table. At least he showed no interest in those.

I sprang to life, skirting the wall as I hustled to the exit on the opposite side.

“Let me out of here!” I pounded on the door. “Let me out!” I screamed so hard my new lungs felt ready to rupture.

The lunatic came snarling toward me. That’s what he was, not a vampire, but a deranged madman who’d been locked in the room with me by psychopaths. I was part of some kind of experiment. Maybe this was a test to see how I handled stress. Maybe they wanted me as an altogether different type of operative. They wanted to desensitize me by subjecting me to unimaginable horrors.

Well, I didn't care if I passed. I just wanted out—and not just out of that room.

I kicked the door and walked over to the two-way mirror, glaring so hard my temples throbbed. “Enjoying the show?”

I turned and began circling the room, always keeping the table between me and the madman. He kept coming at me slowly, like a zombie in a horror film. At least he'd shown no sudden bursts of locomotion.

We moved clockwise around the room. The space was so small it made me dizzy, but still I moved, matching the maniac's speed to keep him as far from me as possible.

My neck soon ached from constantly craning it over my shoulder to keep track of the lunatic's location. I suppose I had my physical therapist to thank for being able to walk for miles on end. Unfortunately, my pursuer showed no signs of fatigue, either.

Round and round we went until my stomach began turning and my vision blurred.

It took a while for the first feelings of exhaustion to creep inside my consciousness. A snarling, slobbering loony will keep a girl on her toes. But hours began to feel like days, and finally, I collapsed when rounding a corner. I hit an elbow as I landed, sending a tingle up my arm. My pursuer came toward me at the same creepy pace. His eyes opened wider and murky irises burned inside.

I scrambled back to my feet and stumbled forward. I glared into the two-way mirror.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I screamed.

I rushed to the table and picked up the revolver. Before this moment I'd never even held a gun. I pointed it at the madman. He stared back with vacant eyes, sunk inside a twisted face. “Stay where you are!”

He looked at me, not the gun, snarled, and kept coming.

I retreated and began sobbing when I re-entered the circle.

Make it end. Whatever it takes.

I turned suddenly and aimed the gun at the man's leg with a shaky hand. The last time I felt terror this all-consuming was right before that SUV took me out. My heart seized inside my chest as I pulled back the trigger.

Nothing happened.

“Shit!” I screamed.

I dropped the gun. It clattered over the floor as I sprinted away and resumed my place circling directly across from the man.

Tears leaked down the corners of my eyes. It could have been the middle of the night for all I knew. I could suddenly understand how people went crazy. Maybe that's what the agents were really up to—some sick experiment to make a loon out of me.

I glanced over my shoulder. The last of my energy was beginning to drain. I willed my feet to keep moving, but at some point they stopped and I stood rooted in place. The maniac's rasp was much too loud. It sounded like hissing. It was disgusting. The fear in my heart had lessened due to extreme fatigue, but as the foul being closed in on me, terror renewed itself like a jolt of electricity to the brain.

I intended to shove him onto the floor. He didn't look sure-footed enough to handle much force. Bracing myself, I slammed both palms against his chest, but instead of falling, the madman grabbed my arm in a bruising crush and pulled me toward him with a deafening snarl.

At that point, my heart stopped beating. I opened my mouth, but was unable to inhale or exhale.

A cold, sweaty hand gripped my face so hard it felt like my jaw would break.

I would have liked to know that in the last instant I struggled. That I fought for my life. But I didn't. I was paralyzed. I even suspected my own heart—at least the one I was given—might kill me before the madman did.

I felt his teeth at my neck. His hand loosened around my face. My heart began pounding inside my ears, thumping against my chest. His teeth tore into my neck. He broke through my skin and pierced deep inside my flesh. It was invading and it was revolting and stirred a nauseating arousal inside me that I couldn't explain. Blood rushed to my head. My pulse pounded at my neck.

Then he began to suck.

I tilted my head back and closed my eyes. I envisioned needles extracting blood. Vials filling with thick, red gore. The clammy lips on my neck felt like a suction slowly draining the life from me.

With a sudden jerk, I was released. The thing, whatever it was, began to spasm beside me. It thrashed and gasped as though in agony. Its eyes widened until they looked like they would pop out of their sockets.

I lay spent across the floor, like a bloody human rag. I looked toward the mirror. "What did you do to me?"

"Congratulations, Aurora, you have poisoned your first vampire. As you can see, he is in a state of paralysis. He can barely move. Unfortunately, the effect is only temporary, a contingency we're working on, but eventually he will get up and want to feed again."

I felt like throwing up when I heard the word "feed." Instinctively I touched my neck and pulled back bloody fingers.

"This is your gift, Aurora. Your blood. Now finish the creature off."

I pushed myself into sitting position and looked toward the mirror. The ghoulish wheezing behind me didn't let up. Several minutes passed before the faint crackle reemerged.

"If you don't take the creature's life, you will have to do this all over again. We can't let you out of this room until the thing is dead. A word of warning—the creature is capable of killing. He could snap your neck or suffocate you."

I thought I was too overcome to allow terror to return, but the first shiver rocked through me. I'd avoided looking at the body behind me. The sounds it made were ghastly. I almost wanted to kill it just to make the noise stop. It was that four-letter word that anchored me to the ground.

Kill.

How could I?

"You're asking me to commit murder," I said to the mirror.

"Murder would involve killing another human. This is not human."

I gathered my knees in my arms and laid my head on them.

"Aurora, this creature is a killer. Before we captured it, it killed women and children without discrimination—hundreds, possibly thousands of victims over time. Think of the lives you could save. This isn't murder. This is justice."

"Please just let me out of this room."

"You know what you need to do to get out."

I looked up at the silver table in the center of the room. From the ground, I couldn't see the weapons. I got to my feet and stumbled on the first step. The weapons were spread across the metal table like a killer's buffet.

The gun had been a no go. The knife gave me shivers, as did the ax.

I grabbed the wooden stake, tightening my fist around the smooth handle.

The intercom was silent, but I could hear the static voice inside my head. *“Good, Aurora. Now take that stake and drive it through the creature’s heart.”*

I turned around. The vampire twitched on the floor. Blood trickled down his chin—my blood. I approached slowly. Now I was the hunter. I knelt so close to the body it touched me every time it convulsed. Its fetid breath prickled my nostrils. I raised the stake. I held my arm high, as though preparing to swing a hammer into a nail. The stake remained suspended in air. I was a photograph, a statue, a cartoon frozen in still life until the creature stopped twitching and attempted to lift himself off the ground.

I raised my arm higher then slammed the stake down. It pierced the vampire in the gut. The thing cried out and clawed at my ankle. I lifted the stake again.

It’s like a peg, I told myself. It’s like putting a peg inside a cribbage board.

I closed my eyes at the last minute and ended up puncturing the vampire in the throat. Blood gushed out. Bile filled my mouth. I swallowed and screamed; raised the stake again, aimed, and pounded the weapon into his heart.

The vampire went limp. I pulled out the stake. It slipped from my hand and clattered to the ground. For a moment I was only aware of my own shaky breath.

The door to the room opened and Agents Melcher and Crist walked in. Melcher applauded. *“Bravo, Agent Sky.”*

I swiped several loose strands of hair off my forehead. I’d probably just rubbed blood over my face, but I didn’t care. At the moment, I wanted to smear it like war paint over my cheeks, leap up, and attack Agent Melcher.

Melcher grinned. *“It may not feel like it now, but you did well, Aurora. You passed.”*

I stood up slowly. My arms and shirt were covered in blood. *“What happens to people who don’t pass?”*

“Some let themselves get killed by the creature.” Agent Melcher walked over to the body. *“This one nearly destroyed the last test subject.”*

“And you let him live?”

Agent Crist stepped in. *“It is not up to us to kill it.”*

Melcher circled the body. *“Some subjects try to take off after completing orientation, but we always catch them.”*

I caught his eye. *“What do you do with people who try to run?”*

“We don’t kill them if that’s what you’re wondering. We make them useful in other foreign divisions—desk work.” Melcher’s grin widened. He had perfect white teeth. They were obnoxious.

“Then there are the ones who go crazy,” Crist said.

Melcher clasped his hands together. *“But! Let’s talk about the ones who become agents, our team of vampire hunters. We didn’t just bring you back to life, Aurora. We made you superhuman. Other agents dream of having your gift.”*

“What? To become a vampire’s chew toy?”

Melcher chuckled. *“You serve a far greater purpose than that.”*

“Yeah? And what purpose is that?”

“Haven’t you been listening to a word I’ve said? Your purpose is to rid the world of evil.” Melcher clapped his hands. *“But that will come in time. For now, go home. Go to school. We want all our young agents to obtain a high school diploma and we encourage college, as well.”*

You don't have to give up your life, Aurora. Far from it. In fact, we want to give you a chance to get back to normal."

How normal was he talking?

"Can I still go to Notre Dame?"

"Unfortunately not," Melcher said. "You're needed in Alaska. This state's become the latest hot spot for the reanimated dead. They appear to be gravitating to the dark."

"And cold," Agent Crist added.

All thoughts of vampires were momentarily forgotten as a horrifying thought occurred to me. "You mean I can't leave Alaska?"

"You get time off for vacation, naturally, but no, you can't move out of state."

They should never have revived me. They should have just let me die in peace. At least I might've had a shot at heaven, or even peaceful oblivion, opposed to a lifetime confined to this frozen hell.

"Does my mom know what you've recruited me for?"

"She's been briefed, but I warn you, she's under contract not to speak of it."

"Even to me?"

"You are the one who needs to hold your tongue, Aurora. Your work here is top secret."

"As is the existence of vampires," Crist said.

"We've dropped a bomb over you," Melcher said. "But I think you can handle it."

"A bomb?" I repeated and looked at the bloody corpse on the floor.

A terrifying thought occurred to me. "Will I get rabies now?"

Melcher shook his head. "You already have rabies. That's one of the viruses we injected you with and why you must take the antidote every year."

Crist shot me a snide look. "Unless you want to end up like him."

I cupped my palm over my bleeding neck and watched the body to see if it would turn to dust. It didn't.

"Don't worry about any more of those for a while," Melcher said. "We want you to train first. We can assign you a personal trainer on base or you can continue taking classes near home. The choice is yours."

"Can I take a shower now?"

"Of course, come with me." Agent Melcher turned his head to talk as he led me toward the open door. "I know this is a tough time to be taking on extracurricular activities, but at least it's your last semester of high school."

I focused on the exit. Melcher and Crist moved at a snail's pace, as though they were out for a winter stroll. They stopped in front of the door.

"Good work, Agent Sky," Melcher said with a smile.

Crist looked me over. "Try to make it less messy next time."

The agents exited first. I stepped out after them. The clinical white room led into more blinding whiteness. I got the feeling I wasn't escaping at all.



I was washed up and waiting in the lobby when my mother arrived.

"I came just as soon as I got your call," she said to Agent Melcher. "How did orientation go?"

“It went well, Mrs. Sky. You should be very proud of your daughter. I can see you’ve taught her to excel in all areas of life.”

Mom’s voice rose. “Oh. Thank you.”

“I know it’s not the future you envisioned for your daughter, but Aurora has a chance to make a difference in the world.”

I tuned them out and stared at the clean sneakers on my feet. The old pair had been disposed of, as had my bloody clothes. The facility’s showers were as white and clinical as the test room. Both locations made the blood more vivid. In the shower, it mixed with water and turned into a river of red that swirled around the tile by my feet before emptying down the drain.

I touched the bandage Crist had affixed to my neck. “Can we go now?”

My mother smiled. “I don’t know.” She turned to Agent Melcher. “Are we free to go?”

Melcher swept his arm open. “Of course. Aurora completed orientation with flying colors. Next we’ll assign her a mentor—someone who has been through the same process and can show her the ropes. Thank you for making the trip down, Mrs. Sky. Aurora, we’ll be in contact.”

I nodded, but couldn’t meet Melcher’s eye. I didn’t ever want to look at Melcher again except to give him the finger, and even then I didn’t want to look into those smug, conniving eyes.

Resolutions

“So orientation went well?” Mom asked cheerfully as we got inside the car. “How should we celebrate? A movie? Dinner out?”

I bet she’d stop smiling if I told her I’d killed a man.

“I want to go home.”

The reflection from the snow hurt my eyes. I shielded my face with one hand.

Once Mom drove through the gates she cleared her throat and asked how it had gone.

“We’re not supposed to talk about it, remember?” I hadn’t meant to sound so rude, but I wasn’t about to apologize either.

“Oh,” Mom said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to break any rules.”

I snorted.

“How long have I been away?”

Mom’s eyes darted sideways then back to the road. “You don’t know...” She stopped herself. “I dropped you off yesterday morning.”

“Didn’t Dad wonder where I was all night?”

“I told him you were spending the night with Denise.”

“Denise is in Girdwood.” *Having a real holiday at the ski lodge.*

Mom leaned forward into the steering wheel. “So, that’s it for orientation? You’re done?”

Yeah, I was done all right. Now I could get onto the training and killing.

I wished my mom would just shut up and drive.

“Yep, I get to spend the next semester being a normal teenage girl.”

“That’s great, honey.”

My sarcasm really wasn’t getting through to anyone.

Mom put her blinker on as she approached our neighborhood. Our street still needed plowing, which meant the car had to do the work of pushing through snow. She clicked open the garage door and pulled in. As soon as she turned off the car, Mom turned to me and said, “Tomorrow’s New Year’s Eve. I think everything will be better once we put this year behind us.”

Great, another holiday.

I unclicked my seatbelt. “Wow, a new year.”

Mom followed me from the garage into the living room.

“New leaf. New me. I feel some resolutions coming on,” I said. “I resolve to break the sixth commandment.” I stomped over the linoleum floor between the dining room and kitchen, calling out my resolutions.

“I resolve to live out the rest of my life in this godforsaken state. I resolve to get drunk for the first time. I resolve to finally kiss a boy. No, scratch that. I resolve to lose my virginity!”

Mom’s face turned red. “Aurora, stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“This isn’t you.”

“You’re right. This isn’t me.” I turned on my heel and stormed up the stairs to my room, slamming the door behind me. The *bang* echoed through the walls. I ripped open my top desk drawer and threw a legal pad onto the surface with a *thwack*.

I pressed my pen into the notepad so hard it indented the pages five sheets back.

kill first vampire
get drunk
kiss a boy
lose virginity

I stared at the list then leaned forward and crossed out ~~kill first vampire~~.

Everything else should be a piece of cake.

I stuffed the notepad back inside the desk drawer then moved onto my dresser and began digging through my scarf drawer, dumping them onto the floor.

One scarf in particular caught my attention.

I snatched the red one out of the tangle of fabric and locked myself inside the bathroom. For a long time I stood in front of the mirror using my peripheral vision to check out the figure reflected in the glass. Whenever I tried to look at her, she was covered in blood and scars.

I focused on the bandage instead and peeled it off slowly. There were teeth marks in my neck rimmed in purple, blue, and red. I dabbed at it with a wad of tissue paper then threw out the bandage.

I wrapped the soft red scarf around my neck and remained in my room until Mom called me down to dinner.

“What’s with the scarf?” Dad asked, knife and fork poised several inches off the table on either side of his plate.

“Don’t you like it?”

“Why do you have it on inside the house?”

“Cause I feel like it.”

Dad’s eyes narrowed a fraction, probably at the snide pitch in my voice. He turned to Mom. “So are you coming to the party tomorrow or not?”

Mom chewed on her lip before answering. “I don’t know if I should leave Aurora alone...”

I stabbed a piece of broccoli. “I’m eighteen. Of course you can leave me alone.”

“With everything that’s happened—” Mom said to Dad as though I’d never spoken.

“It’s not like I’m going anywhere. Don’t drive anymore, remember? Don’t have friends, either. You two should go enjoy yourselves. I promise not to burn down the house.”

“That’s enough!” Dad said. “I’m not sure I like this new attitude of yours.”

I turned to my mom. “Maybe the agents replaced my brain as well and I’ve inherited someone else’s attitude.”

“What are you talking about?” Dad asked.

“I’m staying home,” Mom said.

“Fine, do whatever you want.” The legs on Dad’s chair scraped against the floor as he pushed back. He went into the living room, where he turned on the news.

“Aurora,” Mom said.

I folded my arms over my chest and waited for the rest, but that was it. Just my name. Mom started down at her plate, tears glazing her eyes.

Aw, hell.

I slipped into the chair beside her. “Look, I know I’ve been a pain in the neck lately...” I stopped and laughed.

Mom didn't so much as crack a smile.

"Anyway, you should go to the party with Dad. I'll be fine. Promise. I could use a little time to myself."

"I don't think I'll go."

"Why not?"

Mom shook her head. "I don't know anyone at those parties."

"You know Dad."

"Everyone knows your father, and they'll all want to talk to him."

"So go for the free food and drinks."

"I don't know."

"Go."

"I guess I could go. I do every year."

"Right. They'll be expecting you."



As far as attending Dad's holiday function, Mom dragged her heels, literally, right up to the last minute when she shuffled across the carpet in her black pumps. She ended up taking a separate vehicle. Fine, whatever made her more comfortable.

As soon as the garage door closed, I headed down to the wine cellar.

Time to start on the list of resolutions and *número uno* was: Get Drunk. It was New Year's Eve, after all. After years of disuse, Dad had converted part of the downstairs into his beloved wine cellar: a walk-in oak enclosure much like a sauna, only this one was cool with long bottles laid across wood planks, mostly reds. At the far corner was a small selection of champagne. I grabbed a bottle of Moët—what the celebs drank during the Oscars.

I set the bottle on the kitchen table and removed the foil around the cork. After the first attempt to twist the metal cap off failed, I studied the cork. How did I get this thing off? Weren't they supposed to pop off on their own? I grabbed the bottle by the neck and pointed it at the wall. I'd already lost a heart, kidney, and lung—I didn't want to add an eye to the list. I pushed my thumb against the cork. It didn't budge. I pushed harder and the cork shot out, hit the wall, and *thunked* to the floor.

I giggled. "Whoo-ee!"

Foam bubbled up the bottle's neck and spilled over the edges like one of those erupting volcanoes kids made with baking soda and vinegar for the fourth grade science fair. I leaned forward and sucked in a mouthful of foam.

I lifted the bottle in the air. "Happy New Year!"

So I was early. It was midnight somewhere in the world. It was nearly midnight in Massachusetts.

I walked around from room to room drinking straight from the bottle. I paused in front of the framed photos in the family room. I took another swig. "Happy New Year, Dad. Happy New Year, Mom."

I walked upstairs, turned my stereo on, and danced, bottle in hand. I bowed to my dresser. "So this is where the hottest party of the year is being held. Who knew?"

I drank and danced. I used the bottle as a microphone and discarded it when it was empty. There was more downstairs, but the cellar was a long way down, and I was feeling lightheaded. Bed was looking good, but it wasn't even midnight yet.

Finally I collapsed on top of the blankets. I hadn't fallen asleep so heavily since the accident. The moment my head hit the pillow, I was gone. Sweet oblivion until I woke sometime in the middle of the night. My room was shrouded in darkness. I knew I'd left the light on before falling asleep.

What concerned me more was I could hear breathing that wasn't my own.

Two sick yellow eyes glowed from a twisted face. He wore the same dirty flannel shirt. I sat up in bed. "What are you doing here? I killed you."

He grinned and approached slowly.

My hands trembled above the covers. "I'm warning you. Get out of here. You're not real." I covered my head in my hands and rocked myself. "You're not real." I squeezed my eyes shut. When I reopened them his teeth were affixed to my neck. I screamed. I began flailing against the covers all the while screaming to a shattering pitch. "You're not real!"

"Aurora! Aurora, wake up." My mother shook me.

Didn't she get it? I was awake. I'd always been awake. I slapped at her and resumed the fetal position, face in my knees and arms covering my head.

"My God, what's wrong with her?"

There was an edge to my father's voice. I didn't have to look at him to know his jaw bones were clenched around his chin. I listened from the safety of my tight enclosure.

"It's just a nightmare."

"It's more than that. She hasn't been right since the accident."

"We have to give her time, Bill. Bill?"

My parents' voices moved out of my room. They crossed the hall into the master suite, fainter now.

"Bill, what are you doing?"

"I'm packing a bag."

"Where are you going?"

"Somewhere I can get a decent night's sleep."

I smiled inside my cocoon, not because I thought it was funny, not because I was glad, but because I couldn't help it. People reacted so predictably under pressure. Running was the easiest course of action. If only I could run away too.

My father's footsteps moved in a flurry around the room down the hall. It wasn't until he'd zipped his bag that my mother attempted to appeal to him one last time. "Bill, please don't go."

He didn't answer. His feet pounded down the stairs. I heard him grab his set of keys from the hall table. He started his car in the garage just below my bedroom. The garage door went up, and the car pulled out with a roar then took off down the street.

I heard my mother walk inside my room. "Your father needed some time alone," she said weakly.

I kept my head planted in my knees.

Mom rubbed my back. "My poor girl. You need to get better. This needs to stop."

I lifted my head. "Don't you get it? This is who I am now. You signed the contract. It can never be undone."

"You don't have to act this way. We can go back to the way things were. You're just not trying hard enough." She looked at me with pleading eyes.

I sighed. "Get some rest, Mom. I'll try not to bother you with any more of my demonic dreams."

As predicted, my mother didn't ask for details about the aforementioned dreams. She kissed my forehead and shuffled into the empty bed that awaited her. I lay back and stared at the ceiling. I shut my eyes, but he was there looking at me again. He would always be looking at me. No matter what he'd been, I'd killed him. I was a murderer.

The Mouseketeers

The throbbing inside my skull woke me the following morning. I dragged myself downstairs and found my mom not looking so hot herself. She wore a light blue robe and fuzzy slippers. Her face was puffy when she looked up from her paper. She eyed the red scarf around my neck warily.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“I have a headache.”

“I saw the empty bottle of champagne in your room.”

“Had to celebrate somehow.” I shrugged. “Which reminds me, Happy New Year.”

Mom’s lip quivered. Tears gathered in her eyes.

“Look, sorry about the scene last night. Obviously I was under the influence. Tell Dad I was drunk and that it won’t happen again.”

Mom blinked several times and nodded. “You shouldn’t have had the entire bottle.”

“I learned my lesson.”

The lesson was to lie through my teeth so my mom wouldn’t worry so much.



While I had been off getting my neck chewed open, Denise spent the holiday with her family at Alyeska Resort—skiing by day, hot tubing by night.

She sipped coffee from a paper cup with her friend Erin in front of our lockers the first day of school.

Second semester. The end was near. Literally.

I threw back my shoulders before joining the girls. “Hi, guys! How was your holiday?”

Denise and Erin exchanged looks at my cheerful tone. Mom had advised me to be more peppy. Like if I acted that way, I’d feel that way. Fat chance.

“Fine,” Denise said. “How was yours?”

“Wild!” My mouth expanded on the word.

“That’s nice,” Denise said, turning back to Erin. “So anyway, like I was saying, Alan Baxter called me yesterday to invite me to the winter ball.”

Once upon a time, in a world without vampires, Denise would have tracked me down to share that news.

“When’s winter ball?” I asked.

“At the end of the week.”

“What did you tell him?” Erin asked.

“I told him yes.”

“Who do I want to go to winter ball with?” I pondered aloud.

This was enough to pull Denise’s attention away from Erin. “Aurora, you’ve been acting like a complete freak lately. Who’s going to want to go take you to winter ball?”

I never realized how little I cared for Denise until now.

I straightened to my full height and took a step toward her. “You mean I haven’t quite been myself since I nearly DIED?”

She glared at me, keeping her ground even though I was practically in her face.

“Um, I should get going to class,” Erin said.

Denise shot me a nasty look before turning to Erin. "I'll come with you."

Good. Denise should be friends with someone whose mission in life was something other than killing vampires.

I could make new friends, too. Maybe even ones who were aware of 'demonic beings', as Melcher called them. I thought about the hickey I'd seen on the black-haired girl's neck. Only I no longer believed it was a hickey.

It was just a hunch, but there was only one way to find out.

I made my way to the girl's bathroom in C Hall and, sure enough, I noticed three familiar forms: the juniors with their varying shades of highlights. I followed them inside the girls' bathroom.

They were all short, like they'd formed a club—the Three Mouseketeers.

I set my backpack on the counter in front of the mirror and made a show of digging through my bag. A toilet flushed behind me. There was a spray of water at my side. The warning bell rang, and several girls rushed out. The Mouseketeers kept their places at the mirror, applying liner and rouging their lips. At least they didn't chatter.

When the final bell rang and it was just the four of us in the ladies' room, I unwrapped my scarf, folded it, set it on the counter in a corner clear of water drops, and turned my exposed neck to the mirror, reflecting the fading wound. I dug around in my pack again.

The hooded girl looked over and nodded at my neck. "What is that?"

I pulled out a tube of pink lipstick, puckering my lips after I applied pale pink shimmer. "What does it look like?"

The girl with the red streaks in her hair laughed. "It looks like you and your boyfriend had a heavy make-out session."

"Oh, please," I said with a roll of my eyes. "Like I need a boyfriend. What I've got is so much better."

"And what's that?"

"None of your biz."

All three girls turned toward me and folded their arms.

"Wait a minute," Red said. She lowered her arms. "Are you the girl who was in a coma?"

"Yep." My lips puckered as I formed the word.

The two other Mouseketeers lowered their arms. They looked me up and down. "I heard they had to reattach your body parts."

"Nope, just replace my organs."

"Wicked."

Red took a step toward me. For someone so short, she did a good job of giving me the once-over. "So are you looking to party?"

I tossed my lipstick inside my pack and picked up my scarf. "I'm not *looking* to party. I party."

"I'm Whitney," Red said. "This is Noel and Hope."

"Noel," I repeated, looking at the girl in the hoodie. "Don't tell me your parents wanted to give you an 'Alaskan' name, too?"

"I was born on Christmas."

"Then I guess you're in the right place."

Whitney lifted her chin as I threw my scarf over my shoulder. "Where'd you get it?"

"The mall."

She smiled slightly and waited.

“Crashed a party across town during the holiday.”

“It wasn’t one of Marcus’s, was it?” Noel asked. “Marcus throws the best parties.”

Crap. I hadn’t thought this through enough.

I rolled one of the red fringes at the end of my scarf between my fingers as I reached for an answer. “I didn’t get a name. I didn’t really care, if you know what I mean.”

“Sure,” Whitney said, though her expression said otherwise.

“Want to hang with us in the library?” Noel asked.

I hesitated. This badass group hung out at the library?

As though reading my thoughts, Whitney laughed. “Hall monitors don’t bother us in the library. They think our teachers sent us there to study.”

“Oh, clever.”

The four of us started out the door.

“I like your scarf,” Hope said.

“Thanks, I’m ironic like that.”

The juniors, it turned out, had some tricks to teach me. The library, for instance, was a sanctuary from the humdrum boredom of the classroom, and no one bothered us there. Believe it or not, the lounge inside the front office was another safe haven where a student could sit undisturbed, and if the secretary happened to get off her lethargic ass, you just said you were there to see your counselor or waiting for a parent to pick you up for a doctor’s appointment. During third period, the music room was unoccupied, and we could mess around by creating our own out-of-tune masterpieces or let Whitney play real music.

“Are you guys going to winter ball?” I asked as Noel made her way down her keyboard, pressing each key from left to right.

“We don’t go to school dances,” Hope said.

No, of course not.

Fane Donado didn’t go to school dances, either.

His loss, ’cause I’d made up my mind to attend winter ball even if I had to go stag. If he bothered to show up I might have asked him to dance.

On the walk home he’d proved he had a sensitive side. And if Fane could dance half as well as he played badminton it could be fun.

But I’d never seen Fane at a school dance.

Not once.

Not ever.

At least we had gym together. I couldn’t wait to say ‘hi’ now that we were on speaking terms.

I changed into my gym clothes quickly with the other girls in the locker room, pulling stray strands of hair out of my scarf into a ponytail.

Inside the gymnasium, Mr. Mooney rolled out a cart filled with basketballs. The eager beavers were already dribbling balls down the court, warming up.

I paced the floor, keeping my eyes peeled for Fane. Seconds before the warning bell rang, he pushed through the double doors, Valerie by his side. I tried to catch his eye, but Fane ignored me completely. It was as though I had dreamed the entire encounter of him walking me home in the snow.

How stupid of me to believe someone at this school might actually notice what I was going through. Not Fane. Not anyone.

Fane took a seat behind Valerie and began massaging her shoulders. Valerie leaned her head back and closed her eyes. I felt like chucking a basketball at them.

I grabbed a ball and beat it to the ground with my fist. Over and over it bounced back for further abuse.

Mr. Mooney blew his whistle. "All right, everyone, as you can see, we're playing basketball this month. Let's break into teams. AJ, Brooke, I'm making you team captains. Start picking your teammates."

AJ and Brooke walked to the middle of the gym and faced the rest of us. AJ poised his ball under an arm at his side. Brooke hugged hers to her stomach.

"Paul," AJ said.

"Tyler."

"Mike."

"Angie."

What bullshit. Low and behold, I was one of the last to be called onto Brooke's team. I didn't play in the first game. In the next, I raced up and down the court, capable of matching anyone's speed with energy to spare. No one passed me the ball, so I snatched it when the opposing team failed to catch a pass. I pounded down the court to the awaiting hoop. Clayton came at me with a cocksure grin on his lips. I slammed my shoulder into him and shoved him to the ground. Clayton landed on his ass with a *thud*.

The blast of Mr. Mooney's whistle pierced every ear in the gym. "Sky, what was that?"

Everyone looked at me. That much attention might have mortified me before. Now I lifted my chin. "He was in my way."

"Then go around him."

Mr. Mooney gave three blasts of his whistle. "All right, back to the game, everyone. Sky, you're out."

I shrugged and walked over to the bleachers, sitting at the bottom, several rows in front of Fane and Valerie.

Valerie's voice drifted down. "Someone doesn't know how to play nice."

I faced forward as I replied, "I guess comas aren't enough to get a girl out of gym class. What does it take these days? Herpes?"

I felt the bleachers shift and creak. "You better watch your mouth or I'll put you back in a coma."

"Oh please, save that line for a freshman."

The bleachers shuddered when she stood.

I stood, too, and whipped around. There was no longer a smile on my lips. "You want to do this now or after class?"

I wanted to see Fane's expression, but I couldn't break eye contact with Valerie.

"God," Valerie said in mock pity. "That accident must have really messed up your brain. I could kick your ass, little girl, but I don't fight handicaps."

I had to say something. Fane was watching.

I narrowed my eyes. "And I don't fight cowards."

With that, I leapt off the bleachers and headed for the locker room.

❄ 9 ❄
Winter Ball

The next day, I added gym to the skip list. Hope and I hung out in the library. Apparently, Whitney never missed keyboarding, and Noel had a crush on her second-period Psych teacher.

I'd worked out a routine where I could avoid Denise almost entirely. In the morning, I went straight from the bus to English. I skipped math altogether, avoiding Denise and the numeric hell that was Algebra II.

No need to worry about keeping my place with Notre Dame. I wasn't going anywhere so to fuck with it.

The Mouseketeers treated me with a certain respect I was becoming accustomed to.

"Was that your first bite?" Whitney asked one day in the library when the four of us were seated together at a table by the back wall.

I tightened my scarf. "Yeah."

"How was it?"

"How was it?" I repeated. Those sick yellow eyes returned to me—like a smoker whose whites have discolored. I shuddered.

Noel propped a hand under her chin. Her hood was pulled back and her hair fell over her shoulders. "I'll never forget my first bite."

"Why don't you tell me about it?"

"His name was Henry, and when he sunk his teeth into my neck I could feel him break through each layer of skin right down to my vein. It was agonizing, but then there was this sudden rush and release of blood, as though my body wanted to give him as much as he wanted to take. My heart was all over the place. I was like a deer in the headlights. You know—stunned."

I was momentarily speechless. "And you, Hope? What was your first time like?"

Hope twirled a strand of red hair. "Well, I'm not a poet like Noel, but it was unforgettable. I guess that much is obvious. And it was with Henry's friend, Gavin."

I looked at Whitney. "And you, Whit?"

"Henry was my first, as well." Whitney laughed. "He likes to whisper sweet nothings inside your ear. He likes to compare your skin to the finest porcelain and say his heart won't go on if he can't have one taste of your sweet blood."

"Gavin wasn't much for words—just biting," Hope said.

Noel laughed. "And sucking."

Hope smacked Noel on the shoulder.

"So what was the name of your first?" Whitney asked.

"I'd rather forget," I said. "He turned out to be a brute."

"You have to watch out for the brutes," Noel said. "Let me know if you need me to kick anyone's ass, 'cause I can do that."

Hope smiled. "Noel's small, but freakishly strong."

"Thanks, but I'm pretty good at kicking ass, myself."

Noel flipped her black and blond-streaked hair over one shoulder. "If you ever need back-up, just say the word."

"Same goes for you. How long have you guys known about vampires?"

Whitney leaned back in her chair. “I found out at the end of sophomore year. I was heavy into coke back then, and a friend from West High invited me to a party. She said there was going to be something better than drugs. Hope came with me.”

“We found out together,” Hope said.

“And we saw Noel there.”

Noel smiled. “It was one of Marcus’s parties.”

“Who’s Marcus? Is he a student at West?”

Noel grinned. “Not Marcus. He’s too old. Well, they’re all old, but he looks it.”

“How old are we talking?”

Noel looked at Whitney and shrugged. “Twenty-six?”

“Or twenty-eight.”

“Anyway, he lives by West High and his friends Henry and Gavin do the school routine and find kids who like to party with the undead.”

I sat up. “And they just reveal themselves to you like that? ‘Surprise! I’m a vampire, mind if I suck your blood?’”

Hope chuckled. “She’s funny.”

“They’re a bit more selective than that,” Noel said. “They seek a certain type.”

“And what type is that?”

“The seriously fucked-up type.”

The Mouseketeers laughed in unison. Whitney leaned forward and grabbed my wrist. “Welcome to the club, Aurora. I’m guessing your accident messed you up pretty good.”

I grinned. I liked these girls. They couldn’t begin to imagine what I was, but I wasn’t alone after all. Just so long as they didn’t discover I was out to destroy the creatures whose bite they found so addictive.

“Your turn,” Noel said. “How did you first become acquainted with vampires?”

Acquainted. I liked that word. As though one strolled up to me one day and said, “*So I’m a vampire. We do exist. Crazy, huh? Oh, and nice to meet you. Mind removing your scarf so I can bite you?*”

“It was sort of sprung on me,” I said. “Like, out of the blue.”

Whitney and Hope bobbed their heads. Noel studied the black polish on her nails. It wasn’t until later that it occurred to me she never did divulge how she came to be partying with vampires or how long it had been going on.

After leaving the library and waving goodbye to the juniors, I turned and found myself face-to-face with Valerie.

“I was beginning to wonder if you’d driven your car off a cliff, but it turns out you’ve just been making friends with lowerclassmen. Probably a good idea since you’ll most likely end up repeating senior year.”

“I suppose you’d know about that. What is this—your sixth year at Denali?”

Valerie took a step forward, but stopped when a hall monitor rounded the corner and headed our way. She smiled with deep red lips. “As much as I’d enjoy kicking your ass, I *do* plan on graduating. Got to get to class. We’ll talk later.”

I rolled my eyes as Valerie headed off. Once she was out of my face, I noticed Fane propped against the far wall watching us...or me, rather, now that Valerie had stormed off. I could take the far hallway and avoid walking past him, but then I’d have to do a lap around the school to get to my locker. Besides, Fane needed to know I wouldn’t be intimidated by him or his wench.

He grinned as I walked past. “Shouldn’t you be in class?”

“Shouldn’t you?”

He pushed off the wall and walked toward me. “We’ve missed you in gym. I enjoyed your little performance the other day.”

I turned my head to follow Fane’s movements as he circled me.

“I’m glad to see that you’re feeling better,” he continued.

“Yep. Never better.”

He stared at the red scarf around my neck. I didn’t take my eyes off him.

“Good,” he said slow and sensual. He stepped in my path as I tried to walk past.

My heartbeat quickened. There had to be something seriously sick about feeling aroused by a person who pissed me off.

My jaw tightened. “Get out of my way, unless you want me to drop you the way I dropped Clayton.”

Fane’s teeth flashed when he grinned. He stepped aside. “Careful, Aurora, I might take you down with me.”

I hurried past him, feeling his smile on my back the entire way. Now I had a whole other reason to avoid gym besides loathing the class.

To think I actually wanted to dance with the scoundrel at winter ball. I’d sooner dance with a viper.



Mom did the final touches on my hair the night of the dance. Having it swept up in a twist made me want to wear my scarf more than ever, but Mom convinced me to leave it for one night.

“The wound has nearly faded.”

“Has it?” I asked absently.

“What about a necklace instead?”

I suppose a winter scarf didn’t exactly go with my short black dress. I opted for a choker on a thick velvet ribbon. I needed something on my neck.

Mom had on her happy face. I looked at her reflection in the mirror beside me rather than my own.

“You look beautiful. The boys are going to be sorry they didn’t ask you to the dance.”

I found myself smiling back at her.

In the past, Denise and I arrived right on time to dances. Tonight I asked my Mom drive me two hours into winter ball.

I wasn’t the only one arriving late. Two senior couples meandered over the shoveled path leading to the school. When they opened the double doors, music blew out like a beckoning force and sucked us inside.

“Hi, Aurora!” Senior class president Susan Miller greeted me from the table where she was set up with a cash box.

I handed her six bucks, which she stuffed inside a metal box.

She stamped a blue snowflake onto the back of my hand. “Have fun.”

Music thumped inside the student center. There was already a large group dancing, including Denise and Alan Baxter. I wove through the rocking mass and made my way to the core, where I could dance unnoticed and twist my body to the rhythm of the beat.

Emily Horton was grinding against Clayton Wilcox. Weird. I thought she and Scott were together. I didn't notice him in the cluster of celebrated seniors.

I closed my eyes, ran my hands down my body, and threw my head back. I swayed side to side, inching my way to the floor. When I'd reached the ground I made my way slowly back up.

When I opened my eyes I saw Denise look over then quickly away.

A disco ball spun in slow circles overhead, sending fractured light over the students below. I danced until my throat went dry. When I'd had enough, I abruptly stopped and pushed my way out in the middle of a song.

The line in front of the refreshment table barely moved, so I bailed in favor of the water fountain. After I stood and licked a drop of water from my lips, I noticed Scott Stevens leaning against the wall, arms folded.

"Hi, Scott."

It was a beautiful thing to see a boy's face change so quickly. Scott brightened when he smiled. "Hey, Aurora. How's it going?"

"You know. It's going. How 'bout you?"

"Yeah," he said.

I looked over at the students dancing. "Aren't you here with Emily Horton?"

Scott half-laughed, half-grunted. "Sort of."

"Why is she dancing with Clayton?"

"She's trying to make me jealous."

I flashed Scott a smile. "Want to give her a taste of her own medicine?"

He hesitated for only a second. "Would you like to dance?"

I put my arm around his in answer. Scott led us toward the gathered mass. He pushed through the dancing bodies, bringing us by the speakers and most popular kids at Denali. The couples in this section ground against each other. Scott danced about a foot from me until I stepped forward and put my hands around his neck. Scott required no further encouragement. His hands slid over my hips. He thrust himself at me in tempo with the music—a beat that pulsed as wildly as his body.

Classmates glanced our way. This was my moment: Aurora Sky dancing with Scott Stevens. I was high on a cloud.

I didn't even care when Emily confronted us during a slow dance.

"Scott, what the hell is this?" She stood beside us, brandishing an unattractive scowl.

"I'm dancing with Aurora Sky. What does it look like?"

"It looks like you forgot you came with a date."

Scott didn't let go of me. "So you can go off and dance with other people, but I can't?"

Emily glanced at the small audience taking in the scene. "Fine," she said. "You know what? I'll find someone else to give me a ride home while I'm at it."

By the time the deejay announced the last song of the night, Emily had stormed off with Clayton. She got the short end of the stick in my opinion. Literally. Clayton Wilcox barely reached five four.

The speakers stopped pounding as a lulling slow song drifted over the student body. Scott pulled me closer. I'd never had a guy's arms around me like that. It felt good.

Now that the last slow song of the night was playing, only couples remained on the dance floor. The girls wrapped their arms around their guys, eyes half closed on a sigh.

"Sorry about your date," I murmured against Scott's chest.

I felt Scott shrug. "Don't worry about it. Emily wanted to break up last week, but postponed because of winter ball."

"Timing's everything."

Scott laughed softly. "Anyway, the dance turned out good." He stopped rocking and leaned back. "I bet you didn't know that I've had a crush on you since the beginning of the year."

"Me?"

Scott's cheeks dimpled. "Yeah, you, Aurora Sky."

I wished I still had my head against his shoulder so he wouldn't see me blush.

Scott's voice turned to a whisper. "You're so beautiful when you smile."

He took my head in his hands and leaned in.

Hallelujah! Scott Stevens was about to kiss me.

I parted my lips slowly. Scott opened wide.

Be cool, Aurora. I'd die of embarrassment if he figured out this was my first kiss.

It was pretty simple, my lips needed to touch his. But when I leaned forward, rather than make contact, my mouth went inside Scott's. His lips moved all over me. He wasn't kissing, so much as sucking my face.

This couldn't be right. Not Scott Stevens. He was the basketball captain. He'd had girlfriends since like the sixth grade.

His tongue joined the action, drenching the lower half of my face in a saliva bath.

The vampire lunatic appeared in my head without warning. I could feel his clammy lips over me.

No, not now. Nothing would ruin my first kiss. Not bad memories or sloppy mechanics. I just needed to get in the game.

I mashed my lips against Scott's...teeth. He took my lower lip between his own and ran his tongue along the edge.

I closed my eyes and pictured Scott's face, his dimples, his deep brown eyes and thick lashes.

A murmur worked its way up Scott's throat. He liked the kiss. Maybe my expectations were too high.

We pulled apart after the music stopped. The last of the lingering couples headed out of the student center when the lights came on. Scott stood in place staring at me. It made me feel bashful all over again. He ran a hand through his hair.

"That was really unexpected," he said.

"Tell me about it."

When our eyes met we laughed. Scott's shoulders relaxed.

"Look, I really like you. I'd like to hang out again."

"Me, too," I said.

This put a big smile over Scott's face. He cleared his throat.

"I know this is really soon, but my parents are out of town this weekend...if you want to come over and hang out."

Yeah, sure, why wouldn't I? Just Scott Stevens and me, alone in his house.

The kiss would be better if we had more time and privacy. We could get to know each other better.

"Sure."

"Do you want me to pick you up tomorrow?"

I was no longer looking at Scott when I spoke, but far into the distance at the flashes of color and sequin as the last of our classmates exited the school.

“No, I’ll take the bus. What time do you want me to come over?”

“Anytime you want.”

The way he said it all cute and eager made me smile again.

“How about later?” I asked. “Like four o’clock?”

Scott set a hand on my cheek. “Can’t wait.”

❄ 10 ❄
No Turning Back

I hadn't looked at my list of resolutions since orientation. Saturday morning, I set the list on my desk, pulled the cap off my pen, and slashed through two more. Then I stared at the words until my vision blurred.

kill first vampire
get drunk
kiss a boy
lose virginity

One more to go.

That night I had laid awake thinking.

I almost died a virgin. I mean, what experience was more life altering than sex?

It's true that getting drunk and being kissed weren't the great experiences I thought they'd be, but sex had to be different. It had to be better. Scratch that. It had to be like no other physical sensation known to mankind.

There was only one way to find out.

Scott was as good a candidate as anyone. I liked him. He liked me.

Wasn't that how it worked?

There was only one way to find out.

When I came down to breakfast, I cleared my throat. "I'm going over to a friend's."

Mom stood behind the kitchen counter, pouring a can of Diet Coke into a glass filled with ice.

She turned around. "Which friend's?"

"Her name's Noel."

Mom's shoulders relaxed. "Noel. That's a nice name. How come you've never mentioned her before?"

"We just met."

"Will you be back for dinner?"

"No."

"Can I have your friend's phone number?"

"Mom, I have a cell."

"You don't always answer it."

"Fine."

I jotted down Noel's number on the back of an envelope and slapped it onto the counter.

Mom followed me into the entryway and watched as I wrapped first my red scarf around my neck and then put on my coat.

"Where does Noel live?"

"By school."

Finally Mom's face relaxed. "Call me if you need a ride home. Have fun with your friend."

"Thanks," I said quickly. "Bye."

I called Noel on my way down the hill and asked her to cover for me if my mom called.

When Noel starting asking questions I told her I had to go. If she knew what I was up to she might try to cheer me on or talk me out of it. I had my mind made up.

To get to Scott's neighborhood, I needed to take the bus that picked up across the street. At least I had my pick of seats, it being Saturday afternoon and all.

Halfway to Scott's house, I pulled the bus cord. A moment later, the tires slowed and came to a grinding halt beside Jewel Lake Quickie Mart.

It sorta sucked getting off and having to wait again, but I wasn't in any real hurry, and best to come prepared.

The parking lot was empty except for two cars, thank god. It was warm inside the minimart, unlike the public bus.

I passed the chips and candy aisle and found condoms at the end of a row beside a section of toiletries. I didn't stop to read the labels or anything; I just grabbed a box of Trojans and headed to the checkout counter.

There was no line, but the cashier was on the phone.

I set the box down and stared at the tangle of brown hair streaming down the cashier's back.

Someone threw a pack of American Spirits beside the box of condoms. I glanced over, only to see Fane Donado standing next to me.

My stomach flopped down to my feet. Luckily I managed to keep cool.

I arched a challenging brow. "See something interesting?"

Fane reached over. At first I thought he was going for the box of Trojans, but he pulled gently on my scarf instead. The gesture took me aback. I didn't know how he got so close to me.

"I like your scarf."

I lifted my chin. "Thanks. Apparently red's my color."

A smile quirked over Fane's mouth. He nodded toward the box on the check stand. "Who's the prince who sent his girl in to fetch his rubbers?"

I pressed my lips together and concentrated on the register.

Fane leaned closer and spoke inside my ear. "I wouldn't want anyone to know the name of the wuss I was banging, either."

My eyes sparkled. I turned until I was face-to-face with Fane. He thought he was so badass and grown up. He thought he understood pain and darkness. He probably even thought I was fumbling around with some science geek who spent his lunch hour in lab.

I straightened up. "Not that it's any of your business, but I'm on my way to hang out with Scott Stevens."

"Right, then," Fane said. "I can see how someone in your shoes might find that numbnut attractive."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "Did you seriously just use the word 'numbnut'?"

"That'll be six thirty-five."

I didn't notice the clerk swiping the box of Trojans under the scanner. I dug out my wallet, pulled out a ten, and handed it to the cashier.

"I don't need a bag," I said.

I felt Fane's eyes all over me. His voice dropped. "This won't make him love you, you know."

So now he thought *I* was the numbnut. I turned my head slowly. When my eyes met his I almost willed him to stop me.

Who was I kidding? The last person who would ever care about my welfare was Fane Donado. I was nothing to him, and he certainly wasn't anything to me other than an ill-timed annoyance.

I grabbed the box of condoms. "I'm not looking for a soul mate."

I pushed through the doors and walked briskly through the parking lot to the bus stop. I opened the box of Trojans and shoved the individually wrapped condoms inside my coat pocket before dumping the box inside a wastebasket cemented to the sidewalk. I jammed my hands inside my pockets and ran a thumb over the foil. My teeth began to chatter.

Fane pulled up alongside the bus stop in his ugly heap of a car. He leaned over and rolled down the passenger window by hand.

“Get in. I’ll give you a lift home.”

What a jerk. He acted like Mr. Nice in Valerie’s absence, then the moment she entered the scene I ceased to exist. I couldn’t believe I ever wanted to kiss those mismatched lips. From what I’d seen he was just as sloppy as Scott and way less pleasing on the eyes.

“I’m not going home!” I snapped. “And I would never get inside a car with you.”

“What’s the matter, Aurora? Afraid I’ll bite?”

That got my attention. Something odd and unsettling fluttered inside my chest. I snapped my head in Fane’s direction. He smiled, and his teeth gleamed. A shudder worked its way down my spine to my toes.

I sucked in a breath. “Thanks for the offer, but my bus will be here any minute.”

Fane’s grin widened. His car inched away, but not before Fane pierced me with one last shaded look. “Suit yourself. Be safe, Aurora Sky.”



Scott lived in a picturesque neighborhood three blocks from the bus stop. Small white lights glowed along fence railings, bushes, and rooftops. Every now and then, I’d pass a household that hadn’t gotten around to removing their Christmas decorations.

I walked in the street because snow covered the sidewalks. Along the way, I slipped a couple condoms from my coat pocket into my jeans.

I didn’t need to check the number on the two-story house with the French windows. Scott’s Dodge Ram was parked in the drive. I marched up to the front steps and pounded on the door.

I believed that once a decision was made it should be carried out without hesitation. And shouldn’t I feel fortunate to share my first time with my number one crush? But that was part of the problem. That crush belonged to the old Aurora Sky.

An image of Fane appeared in my head. I shoved it back out.

When Scott opened the door, he smiled and asked me inside. He was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. I pulled my arms out of my jacket as I walked inside. When Scott didn’t offer to take my coat, I tossed it onto the nearest chair.

Scott nodded at my neck. “Want to take off your scarf?”

“Not right now.”

The living room furniture was all dark wood with burgundy upholstery. I avoided stepping on the brown bear hide pancaked to the floor. The head stuck up off the floorboards facing the TV.

I nodded to the rug. “That’s gross.”

Scott flashed a toothy smile. “Isn’t it great? My dad shot it.”

I passed the head of a mountain goat mounted to the wall. “Can we go someplace else?”

“How about my room?”

“Sure.”

I followed Scott down the hall, but stopped as he led me past the kitchen.

“Do you have anything to drink?” I asked.

He turned and grinned. “You mean like beer?”

“Do you have anything stronger?”

“I can make a rum and Coke.”

“Sure.”

Apparently, Scott’s mom had a thing for roosters. They were on all the kitchen towels and the set of ceramic jars lined on the counter by the stove. There was a rooster on the switch plate cover, kitchen mat, and clock. The only thing missing was a stuffed rooster head coming out of the wall.

“How about vodka? Got any of that?” I sat on a stool at the counter listening to the clink of bottles as Scott rummaged through his parents’ liquor cabinet.

“Yep, lots of vodka.” He set the bottle in front of me, reached for two shot glasses, and filled them to the brim.

I lifted my glass. “To the last semester.”

Scott grinned. He threw back his shot glass and emptied it in one gulp.

I did the same then coughed and sputtered. “Ick!”

Scott rocked with laughter.

I grinned, too. “That’s awful.”

Scott laughed harder. I pushed my glass toward him. “Give me more.”

“More?”

“More.”

“You’re really cool, you know? I always figured you for a goody two-shoes.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just pour, already.”

The next shot didn’t go down any easier. I coughed and waved a hand in front of my face. “Obviously people don’t drink it for the taste.”

“Usually you mix it with something. We have Kahlua.”

“I’ll take it straight.”

Maybe the third one would do the trick. Wasn’t the guy supposed to be the one getting the girl plastered so she’d sleep with him? Women had to do everything these days.

The fifth shot finally hit me. I don’t think it was the quantity as much as the timing. I was downing them so fast the alcohol hadn’t had a chance to catch up until now. I gripped the counter and grinned.

“So let’s see your room.”

I felt all warm and tingly inside. It was the only way. Otherwise I’d back out.

I’d passed through the hunting lodge and farm house. I could hardly wait to see Scott’s room, but it was like entering the sports zone. The walls were covered in baseball and basketball posters. He’d nailed up blue and white Denali flags and the letters he’d earned playing on the team.

His walls were like a tacky, four-sided collage.

Shorts and balled-up white and gray-edged socks littered the floor. School books were tossed in a corner. A pair of jeans stretched across a chair.

No tidying up for company.

The bed wasn’t made. Big surprise.

“What do you wanna do?” Scott asked.

“It,” I said before bursting into a fit of giggles. “I want to do it.”

I was in hysterics now. Scott was laughing, too.

What a fun guy. He was really fun.

I closed my eyes for a second and felt the world spin circles. The weirdest part was everything stayed in place when I reopened them.

Closed. Spinning.

Opened. Fine.

Scott closed his bedroom door and I doubled over laughing again.

“What?”

I tried to answer and ended up snorting. As soon as I caught my breath I said, “Why did you close your door when nobody’s home?”

Scott’s cheeks dimpled. His shoulders shook when he laughed, but he wasn’t laughing anywhere near as hard as me.

I stopped suddenly and looked at Scott. “I almost died a virgin. Can you think of anything more tragic than that?”

Scott scratched his head. “Yeah, that would have really sucked.”

I can’t believe I ever found Scott intimidating. He was so easy to talk to.

I took a step toward him, wobbling on the second and third.

“Whoa, there,” Scott said, catching me.

I liked his arms. They felt good, especially when he stroked my back.

“I don’t want to take any more chances,” I said.

“Aurora, are you sure?”

“Sure I’m sure,” I said, making myself laugh again.

Scott stopped stroking my back and took my head in his hands. He pulled me forward and put his mouth over mine.

Finally, he was taking charge...if only his wet lips weren’t plastered over mine. I reached down for the fly on his pants.

I was tired of feeling dead inside. I wanted someone to wake me up.

Scott reached for my zipper. He didn’t fumble, I’d give him that. He got me unbuttoned and unzipped in no time. I had on a pair of black lace underwear. I mean, if a boy was about to see them, black was the way to go. Scott finished where I’d left off, releasing the top button of his jeans.

He maneuvered me onto his bed. I scooted all the way on top and stretched out over the tangled sheets. Scott climbed over me on all fours. His expression was serious. Laughter bubbled up my throat, so I bit my tongue.

“Oh, I’ve got these.” I dug the condoms out of my pocket and held them up.

Scott took one. I dropped the extra somewhere in the sheets and stared at the ceiling while Scott pulled down his briefs and put the condom on. I knew when he was finished because the bed shifted and he loomed over me.

I wasn’t liking that position.

Scott pulled down my panties. I clenched instinctively, which made it difficult for him to shove his way in. The procedure was slow and excruciating. Pain arched over my pelvis. I tried to make my scream sound like one of pleasure rather than agony when Scott made it in.

The rubbing was like acid over a raw wound.

Maybe if I acted like I was enjoying it he’d hurry up and finish. I pushed myself against him a couple times and, thankfully, he blew his load in a matter of seconds. When he pulled out, it felt like a knife being yanked from my body.

I rolled off the bed and pulled my underwear and pants up. “Where’s your bathroom?”

“Down the hall.”

I staggered down the hall and locked myself inside.

I lowered the toilet seat before yanking down my pants and underwear. I sat staring at the bathtub. Slowly, I ripped off several squares of toilet paper and dabbed gingerly between my legs. When I peeked at the tissue, it was stained with blood. I dropped it into the toilet bowl and ripped off more paper, dabbing until there wasn't a trace of blood. Then I flushed it down, washed my hands, and returned to Scott's room.

Scott launched an inflatable basketball into a mini wall-mounted basketball hoop. The ball made it into the hoop and landed inside a laundry hamper beneath.

He grinned at me. “Now you don't have to worry about dying a virgin.”

Fight

For the first time since the accident, I could see my reflection clearly. The girl looking back was pale as death. She wore a plaid miniskirt exposing her long, lean, ghost flesh.

I felt like Sally in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, minus the stitches. My only visible imperfections were hidden under my shirt and scarf.

“Aurora!” Mom hollered up the stairs. “If you don’t leave now you’re going to miss the school bus!”

I made my way down and grabbed my backpack off the living room floor. Mom stared at me in horror. “You’re not going to school dressed like that?”

“Dressed like what?” I challenged.

Mom looked me over from head to foot. I had on a tight white blouse tied in a knot at my midriff. There were no tights beneath my skirt, just a short pair of white socks and black Mary Janes.

“You look like a...like a...”

“School girl,” I offered. I threaded my arms under the straps of my pack and hoisted it on my back.

She grimaced. “I was going to say stripper.”

I laughed. “Wow, really? Maybe secret agent isn’t my only calling in life.”

I headed to the door without looking back.

“Don’t forget your coat!” Mom yelled.

“Got my scarf,” I answered, tightening it around my neck. “That’s all I need.”

“Aurora.”

“Gotta go.”



I was in no hurry to reach my locker, especially when I saw Denise and Erin together. They stuffed textbooks from their backpacks to their lockers. As I neared, they looked my way then leaned together before setting off rapidly down the hall.

An arm looped around mine. The touch was light. I had a good idea whose it was.

I smiled. “Hey, Noel. I was just on my way to see if you guys were in the library.”

“Never mind the library,” Noel said. “Want to tell me what you were doing this weekend that involved me covering for you?”

“Did my mom call?”

“No. Let’s go in here.” Noel pulled me inside the nearest ladies’ room. She had a bun high on each side of her head. Her long bangs were split down the middle, hanging down her face. Every article of Noel’s clothing was black, right down to her top, skirt, nylons, and knee-high combat boots. She wore a stomach cincher over her clothes, tied tight in order to stay in place around her skinny torso.

Noel was studying my apparel as closely as I reviewed hers. “We should really talk about your wardrobe. Are you planning on joining the pep squad?”

I laughed. “Only if I get to cheer for Team Wicked.”

A freshman glanced at us and hurried out.

“I think you scared her away,” Noel said.

“Sure, I scared her.”

“So out with the dirty details already. Did you go vamping without us?”

“Whatever.” I set my backpack on the floor. I made a quick scan under the stalls and seeing them foot-free, turned to Noel. “I hooked up is all.”

Noel’s eyes bugged out. “With a vampire?”

My lip curled back. “No!”

“Let me see your neck.”

I rolled my eyes and pulled down my scarf. “See?”

“Wrists.”

I turned my arms over and held them in front of Noel. “Satisfied?”

She hoisted herself onto the bathroom counter, crossed her legs, and began swinging them.

“So who’d you hook up with?”

“Scott Stevens.”

Noel stopped swinging her legs and wrinkled her nose.

“What?”

“Nothing. Interesting choice.”

“Why?”

“It’s just you’re so coffee and he’s so...herbal tea. So, you had sex?” Noel began swinging her legs again.

“Um-hmm.”

“How was he?”

“Horrible,” I said without thinking.

The leg swinging stopped again. Noel stared at me wide-eyed right before bursting into peals of laughter.

I started to smile. “I guess it is kind of funny. What a dope he turned out to be.”

Noel laughed harder.

“And that’s not the worst of it...” I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and looked away. “He was my first.”

Noel instantly stopped laughing. She jumped off the counter. “Oh, fuck,” she said right before throwing her arms around me.

I patted her back even though she was the one trying to comfort me.

“It’s all right, really. I mean, the first time’s supposed to suck, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Noel said, pulling back. “It hurts like hell.”

“I guess I didn’t get drunk enough.”

“You won’t need to next time.”

“Right, like I’d do that again.”

Noel raised her brows. “Famous last words.” She walked to the bathroom door. “Think we can make it to the library without being caught?”

“It beats spending second period in the water closet.”

“Let’s go.”

Noel and I walked down the middle of the hallway toward the library.

Noel nudged my shoulder. “You should come out with Whitney, Hope, and me next time. We’ll show you who to avoid and who knows how to nibble on a girl just right.”

“Eh,” I answered without enthusiasm.

That’s the problem with vampires. They didn’t nibble; they chomped.



A fight broke out inside the cafeteria as I passed at the end of the day.

A month earlier, I would have walked in the opposite direction instead of pushing my way through the double doors to get a closer look.

One quick peek and then I'd catch my school bus.

The expressions on surrounding students morphed from resigned boredom to anticipated glee. We surged forward—the sound like a riptide pulling us in.

Students were cheering.

“Get him, Jason!”

“Knock that pansy to the ground.”

The taller guy, Jason, got the shorter guy into a headlock and pounded his face.

I didn't recognize either student. They were just two more nameless hooligans going about the motions, which at the moment involved swinging fists.

A month earlier, I would have walked in the opposite direction instead of pushing my way closer until I was at the front of the horde encircling the boys.

“Stop!” the shorter boy yelled.

“Don't stop! Hit him, Jason! Harder!” the crowd screamed back. This was followed by an obliging smack against the smaller boy's face.

“Enough!” shorty yelled.

“You sure? You learn your lesson yet?”

“Yeah, I'm sorry. You can stop. Stop already!”

Jason pushed the boy forward and lifted his hands over his head in victory. His victim stumbled and nearly fell face first onto the squeaky cafeteria floor. The crowd began to disperse. I was planted to the ground, unable to move.

Something wasn't right. A warning whispered up my spine.

A look of murder settled deep within the beaten boy's eye sockets. He staggered upright then walked to the nearest table. Shorty didn't look dangerous. He was small and moved slowly. But to see his expression...it was unmistakable.

He grabbed a fold-up chair and lifted it above his head. Jason never saw him coming. The smaller boy approached silently from behind and slammed the chair over Jason's head.

I heard nothing. Sound ceased to exist. Blood sprayed the floor, landing in round droplets. It stained the ground inches from my black Mary Janes. I looked up and saw Fane in the crowd staring at the blood with an expression of enrapture. I should have been disgusted, but when I looked at the blood again I felt something stir inside me.

Jason lay flat on the floor. He wasn't moving.

The collected student population was momentarily gagged. The boy started toward Jason, chair still in hand. He'd kill Jason. He'd kill him and no one would do a thing to stop him. But I could.

I stepped in Shorty's path and yanked the metal seat from his fingers. I threw it aside. Sound returned like the clash of cymbals when the chair clattered to the ground. Something snapped inside me. I grabbed the boy by the hair and kned him in the gut. He grunted in pain. His agony filled my ears like a sweet melody. I turned and jabbed my elbow into his ribcage. My skirt lifted several inches as I twisted into the punch.

The boy howled. He couldn't manage to fight back. He was too busy shielding himself from my blows.

Suddenly I was falling backward, being yanked from behind. I struggled and slapped at the hands that had latched onto my midriff.

“That’s enough, young lady!”

Mr. Burke, my old biology teacher, stood frowning at me.

“All right, all right,” I said, dusting myself off. “You’re welcome!”

“Let’s go,” Mr. Burke said. “Principal’s office.”

The last thing I saw were the whites of Fane’s teeth as he grinned. A month earlier I wasn’t so much as a blip on that boy’s radar. Now he was everywhere, appearing at my worst moments, like Satan witnessing my fall from grace.

The Ultimate Baddie

By the time Principal Romero finished suspending me, the school had all but emptied out. I slipped on my backpack, which sagged down to the exposed skin on my lower back. I pushed open one of the front doors and stepped outside. It was like walking into a freezer.

A rich velvet voice caused a second wave of shivers to ripple through my body.

“My, my. Someone’s on a downward spiral.”

I would have rather ignored the sensation his murmur stirred inside my stomach. I turned my head to the side. Fane leaned against the brick wall, one knee bent and foot planted against the building, smoking a cigarette.

I rolled my eyes. “Who, me?”

“What’s the punishment for first-time offenders these days—a slap on the wrist and a warning?”

“Three days suspension.”

“Crash and burn, baby.” Fane flicked his cigarette to the ground and smashed it into the packed snow with the heel of his boot. “Your yellow school bus is long gone.”

“So I’ll walk,” I said.

Fane looked me up and down. “Wearing that? You’ll have hypothermia before you reach home.”

“Well, then, the doctors can revive me and bring me back to life. It’s amazing what modern medicine is capable of,” I said.

Fane chuckled. “Well, aren’t you jaded.”

“Are you laughing at me?”

“Not me. Come on, I’ll give you a ride.”

“You know I won’t get inside a car with you.”

“Is it me or the car?”

“Both.”

“What about lover boy? Would you get inside his truck?”

I glared at Fane. “No.”

“I didn’t think so. Come on.”

“I told you...”

“I’ll walk you to the bus stop.”

“Whatever.”

It must have been the sharp contrast between Fane and the freshly fallen snow that made him appear so overtly dark as he moved in sync by my side. He followed me inside the open Plexiglas shelter and stood in silence, as though he were my own personal bodyguard. The agents didn’t mention anything about issuing one of those.

“You don’t have to wait with me, you know.” I fought back the urge to shiver. It would be a bit like crying in front of him.

Nevertheless, he took off his long leather jacket and held it open for me.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re cold.”

“So?”

“So put on my jacket.”

My mind must have gone numb in the cold because I let Fane to slip the jacket on me without further protest. I anticipated Fane's warmth enfolding me, but the coat was as cold as a corpse.

"Brrr!" I snapped. "I might actually feel colder in this jacket."

Fane's ego showed no sign of injury. "You'll warm up. At least you look better."

My ego was another matter. "What do you mean I look better?"

"I mean that slip of a skirt. You look like some prissy airhead. The coat makes you look cool, like Trinity in *The Matrix*."

My cheeks heated. "You know what? You can have your damn jacket back."

I yanked my arms out of the sleeves and thrust the coat in a wad against Fane's chest.

He didn't say a word as he shook out the jacket and put it back on. While he was doing that, I untied the knot in my blouse and smoothed the top over my exposed midriff, buttoning it at the bottom. I hugged my arms around my chest.

Fane lit a cigarette. The first puff of smoke drifted by like a breath in the cold air. "Why are you so angry?"

I could ignore him or even act the airhead and play dumb, but Fane was the first person to bother asking.

I dropped my arms. "What do you care?"

"I'm curious."

I leaned against the Plexiglas and sighed. "I had my whole life ahead of me. I was going to get out of here and start my own life. I'm only eighteen, and I'll never get to do any of that now."

Fane arched a brow. "You talk as though you were dead."

"I might as well be." My nose started running. I sniffed and rubbed my bridge.

"So what's the hitch? How come your life's come to a sudden and conclusive end?"

I opened and closed my mouth, unsure how to answer. "Medical bills," I blurted. "I can't leave the state to go to college because of all my medical bills."

"A lot of kids don't get a chance to go to college at all."

"You don't get it! All I've ever wanted is to get out of here."

"So go. Take a road trip, pick fruit in Australia, backpack across Europe, volunteer in Africa, join the circus... whatever."

I stomped my foot. "You're not helping!"

Fane grinned. "You see? It's not the end of the world."

I walked out of the enclosure and looked over the schedule posted against the bus sign. "God, transportation sucks in this city. You're lucky if a bus comes along every hour."

"I could take you home right now."

"Thanks, but the bus feels safer."

"Want a smoke?"

I looked at the cigarette in Fane's outstretched hand and laughed. "No! God, what are you? The dark prince of temptation?"

I could feel my heart pitter against my chest when Fane smiled at me next. "I like that. It's clever. You're a very interesting girl."

"Well, it's good to know I'm not a complete airhead."

"I don't think you're an airhead at all. You just look like one."

"Thanks!" I yelled.

I glanced at Fane's lips as he took another drag on his cigarette. I rarely got a chance to look at him up close. From here I could trace the outline of his abs through the opening in his jacket. His eyes were a rich, dreamy brown and fully focused when he looked at me.

Fane lowered the cigarette and pointed it at me. "I do like your legs."

Despite the cold, my cheeks heated and were quite possibly the only warm part on my entire body. The cold had officially gone to my brain.

"These pasty things?"

"Pale. Ivory. Silk." Each word was like a caress. "Your skin is a thing of beauty."

I trembled, and it had nothing to do with the cold.

The tip of Fane's cigarette turned to ash as he held it by his side. Before it broke off, Fane flicked the cigarette into the street without looking. He reached inside his pocket and popped something inside his mouth. I heard him suck and swallow. He repeated the sound.

Fane was not Scott. He'd eat me alive.

A bus appeared in the distance. Maybe it was mine. God, I hoped it was. I'd get on even if it wasn't.

I passed Fane without meeting his eye and pulled my wallet from the front pocket of my backpack. I slung the pack over my shoulder and only looked at him when the bus was coming to a stop.

"Thanks for the company," I said quickly.

I pitched myself inside the bus the moment the doors opened. Heat engulfed me. The abrupt change in temperature caused my skin to itch uncomfortably. I deposited my coins beside the driver and walked down the aisle toward the back of the bus.

I tossed my pack onto a seat in back. I had the last six rows to myself. I smoothed my skirt back as I sat. I should have felt relieved instead of disappointed by his absence.

Relief arrived when Fane boarded the bus. The achiness was another matter.

When he walked toward me, I felt something familiar and terrifying. He took each step slowly as though he had all the time in the world.

The bus lurched forward. It had no effect on Fane's footing.

My breath came out ragged, but I concentrated on steadying it as Fane approached.

He smiled wickedly and took the seat beside me.

I waited impatiently for Fane to explain himself, but he didn't say anything. He just sat there all mysterious and cocksure of himself. I looked sideways at the smooth line of his jaw. His cheeks were slightly sunken in. He had a proud and well-proportioned nose.

Then there were his infamous lips—the upper one slightly smaller than the bottom. The tongue I imagined touching them was now my own.

The bus plowed over a snow berm and jolted me in my seat. I willed Fane to touch me, but he sat facing forward as though he were nothing more than a commuter.

And they said girls were teases. I couldn't take it anymore.

I flipped my leg over his and straddled him in his seat. Before Fane could make some glib comment about how I'd become the ultimate baddie, I kissed his lips into silence. His mouth tasted like menthol.

That broke the spell of passivity. Fane lifted me by the hips and seated me over his groin. My lower legs pressed against the plastic bus seat. Fane pulled my head toward him and drew kisses from me as though he planned to suck every last breath out of my lungs.

The thrill of him was maddening. I tried to widen my mouth, but he closed it with his own lips in a succession of intoxicating kisses that made me lightheaded. Fane kissed like he knew exactly what he was doing. He kissed like he'd kissed a hundred times before. I tried to keep up.

I felt like someone else. Aurora Sky didn't straddle vagrants on public buses and stick her tongue down their throats. Yet here I was grinding against him, relishing every intake of breath.

My skirt was spread wide open. I felt his rough jeans against my panties.

Fane pushed my hair back when it fell into my face. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him harder.

He slid his fingers beneath the pleated fabric and spread his fingertips across my thigh.

"I changed my mind," Fane said between kisses. "I like the skirt."

A chime rang down the hollow of the bus. I pulled my lips off Fane's and looked out the window. We'd already turned the corner on Jewel Lake Road.

My words sounded breathless. "My street's coming up."

I slid back and planted my feet on the ground, pausing when I stood above Fane.

He flashed me the Cheshire grin.

I wrapped my fingers around a pole and steadied myself as I reached for the cord above the windows. I yanked down harder than intended. I grabbed my pack and slung it over my shoulder.

As the bus slowed, Fane locked eyes with me. He held me in a trance.

"This is my stop," I said.

The bus ground to a halt yet I couldn't look away.

Fane crossed one leg over the other and leaned back. He propped an elbow against the window ledge, his arm dangling over my abandoned seat.

"Don't worry, Aurora Sky. You don't have to invite me home." His teeth flashed when he grinned. "Yet."

❄ 13 ❄

Suspension

Mom waited in the kitchen, poised with her arms crossed, back to the counter, angled so the frown on her face was the first thing I saw when I walked in. I wondered how long she'd held that pose.

She began with a calm voice. "Do you want to tell me about getting sent to the principal's office after school?"

I slipped out of my backpack. "You'd think he would have given me a medal rather than suspend me from school."

Mom didn't smile. "Mind telling me why you got into a fight?"

"I didn't get in a fight. I intervened. I already went over this with Principal Romero. That kid was about to kill the other one, and I stopped him."

"Principal Romero said you beat on him."

"Well, it put an end to his rampage, didn't it?" I crossed the kitchen, opened the freezer, and frowned. "No more fruity pops?"

"Aurora, I'm talking to you."

"I can snack and listen." I opened the cupboard and pulled out a bag of pretzels instead.

"Aurora, I'm extremely disappointed."

I stopped mid-chew and looked at her. "Well, I'm sorry. I was recruited to fight. This is who I am now. It's what they expect from me."

"Agent Melcher said you could go back to your normal life."

"Right, Agent Melcher." I sneered. The pretzel sticks made me think of small bones snapping under my teeth. I chucked the bag onto the counter. "I don't get to make my own decisions anymore."

My mother's face dropped. "Maybe they'll reconsider in a year."

"Mom," I said firmly. "They'll never let me go." I grabbed an apple out of the glass fruit bowl on the counter and headed up the stairs.

"Where are you going now?" Mom asked.

"To get started on homework." I chuckled at the surprise on her face. "Much as I despise the idea of attending the UAA next year, I loathe the thought of repeating senior year at Denali even more."

And that was the truth. I could only play the recovering accident victim for so long before my teachers started expecting more participation on my part.



The upside of suspension was it forced me to stay in one spot and get my work done. No Mouseketeers. No Skipping. No Fane.

I'd already crammed more studying into one morning than I did during a whole week at Denali.

I joined my mom at the dining room table the next morning and spread my books over the far end. A plate of toast and a glass of pulpy orange juice sat by my side.

"I'm glad you're making this time count," Mom said. "Are you sure I can't make you breakfast?"

"Mom, I'm fine."

I'd never really been sure what my mom did while I was at school. To start the day, it seemed, she read the newspaper with a glass of diet soda.

An hour later, my mom got up, put her glass in the dishwasher, and took the paper in the recycle bin. She disappeared upstairs for a while then returned fully dressed with freshly applied makeup.

"I'm going to the grocery store. I'll be right back. Do you want anything?"

"More fruity pops," I suggested.

The solitude was nice. For the first time since the accident, I got work done. The sub sandwiches Mom brought back for lunch were a welcome break, regardless of the way the bread disintegrated like sponge cake inside my mouth.

The phone rang as my mom finished putting away the groceries.

She answered. "Hello? Yes. May I ask who's calling?"

I stared at my mom. She held the phone against her chest. "Aurora, there's a boy on the phone for you. Fane?"

I leapt out of my chair and grabbed the phone. "Hello?"

"Hello, Aurora."

Even through the phone, his voice was silky.

My mother looked over.

I turned my back and spoke softly. "How did you get my number?"

"I looked it up."

I felt lightheaded in a good way. I wasn't sure if Fane would talk to me, much less call after the kiss. Scott hadn't called and he actually had my phone number.

"How's school?" I asked.

"All the boys are resting easy knowing Aurora Sky's not around to beat them up...for now."

I laughed. "They better not get too comfortable. The school's letting me return on Friday."

"I can't wait."

I gripped the phone around my ear. My heart hammered inside my chest.

"Do you have a piece of paper and pen?" Fane asked.

"Why?"

"I want to give you my phone number."

"Why Fane Donado, are you giving me your digits?" I asked in mock glee.

He chuckled. "Just write it down."

I grabbed a No. 2 pencil and piece of unopened mail from the counter, turning the envelope over to the back. "I'm ready."

Fane recited his cell number.

"Got it."

"Call me anytime."

"During class?" I joked.

"Anytime," Fane repeated.

"All right, see you Friday."

"Until then, Aurora."

My hands shook slightly when I hung up the phone.

"Who is Fane?" Mom asked.

I spun around and smiled innocently. "A boy at school."

"And his name's Fane?"

"Yeah."

“How do you two know each other?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Gym class.”

“Aurora, I don’t want to see you fall in with a bad crowd.”

Laughter bubbled up my throat. “And you’re assuming he’s a delinquent because of his name?”

“Nice boys don’t call themselves *Fane*.”

“Yeah, and nice boys aren’t always nice, either.”

“What do you mean?”

I shook my head. “Nothing, forget it. I’ll be in my room.”



I tried on five different tops Friday morning before settling on a sweater and skirt that touched my knees.

When I reached school, I avoided C Hall and the risk of running into the Mouseketeers. I wandered the halls until I heard his voice.

“Welcome back.”

Instant shiver.

I turned and smiled. I focused on Fane’s upper lip, the one that was slightly smaller. Seeing him grin made me want to kiss him again.

“Aurora Sky,” those lips said. “I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“Come with me.”

We walked side by side down the empty hall and out the doors into the student parking lot. The cold bit into my bare flesh. Fane led me to a familiar Pontiac Catalina.

“This is my car.”

I folded my arms over my chest.

Fane planted a boot on the bumper. “This thing’s a tank.”

I looked it over. “It’s certainly ugly enough to be.”

“Very funny, but it could go through a brick wall and still hold its shape. Last year, this woman in a Dodge Neon ran headfirst into me in her sedan. Wasn’t her fault, really, she was skidding on ice.”

My eyes widened.

“Don’t worry,” Fane said. “She walked out of it just fine. But her car...” Fane shook his head. “That thing crumpled like an accordion.” He moved his hands together to demonstrate.

A smile spread across my face.

“The tank?” Fane gave it a shove with his boot. “Not a scratch.”

“It sounds very safe,” I said. As Fane grinned I added quickly, “But I’m still not ready.”

“Just know that I’m here for you when you are and, at the risk of my reputation, I’m no speed demon.” Fane lowered his voice. “The tank is more of a coaster. She doesn’t like going over fifty.”

I laughed. “Thanks. I’ll remember that.”

Fane opened the back door. “Go on, have a seat.”

Was he crazy?

“I’m not...”

“We’re not going anywhere. I just thought it might help if you eased into the whole auto rehabilitation.”

“Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

“Step one: Get inside the car.”

I smiled and shook my head at his antics, but couldn’t resist playing along for the moment. I lowered my head and climbed onto the back bench. The burgundy upholstery was old and torn.

“Where are the seatbelts?”

Fane climbed in after me. “Buried under the seat someplace.” He shut the door behind him. “How’s this?”

I looked out the side window at the parked cars then out the front overlooking the west side of the school building. I nodded. “Fine for now. What’s step two?”

“Step two involves lips—yours and mine. The surest way to get over a car phobia is by creating positive associations.”

Hearing the words caused a thrum inside my chest. His lips haunted me. They were wicked. They were wonderful.

Fane twisted one of the fringes at the end of my scarf.

I stared at the red thread wrapped around Fane’s finger. “What about Valerie?”

Fane released my scarf. “I broke it off.”

“What? When?”

“First thing Tuesday. I told her that she and I had a good run, hoped there were no hard feelings, and wished her the best.”

After one kiss. I should know better than to be a sentimental sap, but my heart was on fire.

“Did you tell her why?”

“I told her I met someone else.”

My stomach did a flip-flop. “Did you tell her who?”

Fane chuckled. “As delightful as the spectacle would be, I don’t want you two to get into a cat fight in the girls’ locker room. Valerie’s got claws and I couldn’t bear to see so much as a scratch on you.”

“Excuse me,” I said, sitting up. “Did you not see the way I took down that kid in the cafeteria?”

Fane watched me with an amused half-grin.

I stood on my knees and leaned over him. “Don’t let this girl-next-door act fool you, Fane. I’m learning martial arts. I take kickboxing.” I stretched my leg over his lap and straddled him. “I could pin you down and keep you down.”

Fane looked up at me. “I wouldn’t stop you.”

He leaned forward as I leaned down. When our lips touched, the world outside his car melted away.

I ran my tongue over his teeth. His back molars were sharp. I retracted my tongue. Fane must have sucked a mint earlier; a hint of peppermint lingered on the tip of his tongue. Our lips moved together softly. I cupped his face in my hands and closed my eyes. Fane ran his hands down my back.

His lips were divine—like soft caresses against my own chapped lips. The windows began to fog, steamed by our heavy breath.

Fane managed to lower me to the bench of the car and cover my body with his own. His hand slipped up my bare thigh, but went no further. He stroked my skin softly. Wave after wave of pleasure rippled through my body.

We stopped kissing. I tilted my head back and closed my eyes. My lips parted slightly. Fane caressed my skin as though touching me was the greatest privilege in the world. I wondered if he was aware of the fact he could do anything to me right then, and I'd let him.

A rumbling engine from a nearby car woke me from my trance. More engines revved until an entire fleet came to life around us.

My eyes opened. "What time is it?"

Fane glanced at his wristwatch. "Eleven thirty."

He sat up when I pushed onto my elbows. "It's already lunch hour?"

There was a glimmer in his eye. "I didn't notice the time passing, either."

I felt dazed when I sat up. I couldn't see out the windows. They were completely fogged and icing over.

"China Garden's nearby," Fane said. "Why don't we walk over, and I'll buy you lunch?"

I smoothed my skirt down my legs, which Fane was admiring rather closely. "Sure, let's go."

We were the only students exiting a car. I spotted Valerie across the lot staring our way. Her eyes narrowed the instant she got over her shock. Sure, I could gloat, but I'd rather forget about her altogether. So much for keeping a low profile.

Fane walked on the outside of the sidewalk and took my hand. It made me grin. I never figured Fane as the hand-holding type.

He reached in his pocket. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Now you're asking?"

"Well, yeah, we're together now."

Together. I grinned so wide I could feel it in my nose.

"Go ahead," I said. "Light one for me, too."

Smoking wasn't on the list of resolutions, but I might as well add it.

Fane chuckled as he pulled his pack of American Spirits out of his coat pocket. "I don't think so."

"What?"

"They're not good for you."

"Oh, and they're good for you?"

"I'm immune." Fane pulled out a cigarette and lit it. He took my hand in his free one again.

"Must be nice."

I squeezed his hand. When he looked at me, I smiled.

The lobby inside China Garden was blissfully quiet. The Denali crowd stuck to McDonald's, Subway, and the supermarket deli. A hostess appeared and led us to a booth behind a bamboo partition. She handed us plastic menus.

"I'll have the vegetable chow mein," I said when a waitress came by to take our orders.

Fane looked across the table. "Are you a vegetarian?"

"Yep, despite my mom's best efforts to 'entice' me into eating meat again."

Fane smiled at the waitress and handed over his menu. "I'll have the same thing."

The waitress nodded and left.

"You don't have to do that," I said.

Fane smiled. "I want to. Besides, I don't really care what I eat."

I shrugged. A smile spread over my cheeks when our eyes locked. I fidgeted on the booth's vinyl bench.

Fane watched me closely. "You're cute."

My cheeks flushed with heat. “What about you?” I asked. “You call me a baddie and it turns out you’re Mr. Soft and Fuzzy—a gentleman.”

“A gentleman,” Fane repeated. His eyes lit up and he laughed. “Mamma would have been so pleased.”

I stared at Fane. *Mamma*? In addition to the word he chose, he used a faint Italian accent to say it.

“Does your mom not live in Alaska?”

“My mom is dead.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago.”

“Oh,” I said again. “Were you very young?”

“It didn’t seem like it at the time, but looking back? Yes, I’d say I was quite young.”

“Hot tea,” our waitress announced. She set down a small white and blue porcelain teapot with two small cups.

Fane poured tea into a cup and pushed it toward me.

“Thanks.” I took a small sip.

“What about you?” Fane asked. “How are things at home? Are they still trying to make you eat cookies?”

I nearly snorted the tea out my nostrils. “I can’t believe you remember that!”

Fane leaned toward me. “How could I forget? You looked like an angel who’d lost her way to heaven.”

I set my teacup down. “I’m no angel.”

And I had the mark of the devil to prove it. Fane seemed pretty dark, but I doubted he’d look at me with the same adoration if he knew I was a secret assassin for the government, engineered to hunt down and kill the reanimated dead. He might even be the type who would feel sorry for vampires. I doubted he had much respect for authority or the government. And somehow, I doubted he would take too kindly to the idea of guys sinking their teeth into me—undead or otherwise.

Luckily, he’d never know that side of me. Superheroes got to have their own separate lives, and my alter ego was no longer all doom and gloom. Who would have guessed that a boy named Fane would have made it feel right again?

When I thought about it more, I was struck by something even more unimaginable.

If I hadn’t gotten into the accident, I never would have gotten to know Fane the way I knew him now. I never would have felt his touch or kissed his lips or seen his smile. And that would have been the real tragedy.



On the way home from school, I stared out the bus window dreamily. The world outside no longer existed. I lived in my own world and I liked it there.

I took great big steps up the hill leading home, skipped up to the front door, and leapt inside. The smile on my lips died when I looked over and saw Mom waiting for me in the front parlor, with Agent Melcher sitting beside her.

❄ 14 ❄
Mission North

Melcher must have parked across the street or next door because there'd been no ominous black sedan in the driveway to warn me of his presence. He sat in our armchair in his gray suit. It was the first time I'd seen Melcher without Crist hovering nearby.

I stormed into the center of the room and glared at my mom. "What the hell is he doing here?"

Mom frowned. "Aurora, don't—"

Melcher interrupted with a smile. "Your mother tells me you've been getting into fights and missing class, Aurora."

"So?" I plopped down on the couch and slung one leg over the other.

"I understand transition period is confusing. You're not like the other kids at school anymore. You're special."

Great, just what I needed, Melcher going all student counselor on me. I didn't need a pep talk. I didn't plan on fighting any time soon. I was happy now.

"Do you mind if I have a moment with your daughter, Mrs. Sky?"

Mom stood up immediately. "Of course not. I'll be in the other room if you need me."

I folded my arms over my chest and glared at Melcher.

He sighed and spoke in a low, articulate voice. "You've been called to serve a greater purpose, Aurora. It's frightening at first, I know. We put you face-to-face with evil and you won. You have a gift. A vampire is like any other terrorist target, and we've never been better equipped to win the war on terror. The important thing to remember is they're not human. They're pure evil. I think you're ready for training, Aurora."

"I'm not ready. I have senior year to finish." And a boyfriend who deserved all my free time.

"This won't get in the way of school. I was just explaining to your mother that we've assigned you a mentor. I've chosen Dante for you. I think the two of you will find you have a lot in common."

"So he's a vampire hunter?"

"That's right."

"Fine. Whatever." I stood up. "Thanks for stopping by."

Agent Melcher got up. "Don't mention it. You can expect Dante tomorrow afternoon."



Maybe if Melcher had given us a time to expect Dante, we wouldn't have wasted the better part of Saturday afternoon peering out the window any time we heard a car on the road. Regardless of the wait, it would be nice to meet someone like me.

Finally, shortly after four thirty, the doorbell rang. When Mom opened the door, one of the cutest guys I'd ever seen stood outside. He grinned from ear to ear, his thick brown hair framing a tanned face. His muscular build was tight in all the right places. It didn't matter that his veins were filled with toxic blood—he had a smile that could kill.

"Sky residence, I presume? I'm Dante."

"Come in. Come in," Mom gushed. "Please, have a seat."

My mom wiggled her brows at me the moment Dante's back was turned. He looked around the parlor and settled in the armchair Melcher had occupied the day before, but unlike Melcher, Dante slouched all the way back into the cushions.

"I made cookies. Would you like one?" Mom asked him.

Dante's eyes lit up. "Cookies? You've discovered my weakness, Mrs. Sky."

Mom returned from the kitchen in a matter of seconds, holding out a plate of home-baked chocolate chip cookies to Dante. He grabbed not one, but four.

"I'll get you a paper towel," Mom said.

I sat on the edge of the couch on the end closest to our good looking guest. "So you're my mentor."

Dante stuffed down half a cookie and talked with his mouth full. "*Mentor* is one of Melcher's terms. I prefer to think of us as a team."

"Have you always lived in Alaska?" Mom asked, handing Dante a napkin.

"Thanks, Mrs. Sky. These cookies are fantastic. I grew up in Fairbanks. Now I'm working on my degree at the University of Alaska Anchorage."

"How do you like UAA?" Mom asked.

"Small classes, top of the line professors, and in-state tuition—paid for courtesy of the government. You can't beat that."

Mom smiled.

Dante had the build of a jock and face of a Hollywood heartthrob. I couldn't imagine him in one of Melcher's messy white rooms.

"So, how did you die?" I asked.

Mom clicked her tongue. "Aurora..."

Dante sat up and grinned. "No really, that's my favorite question. It happened last winter. Maybe you heard about it on the news. Some friends and I were flown to the top of the Chugach Mountains to snowboard. Man, the powder rocked that day. So I got on my board and headed down—not my first time up there, mind you. I'm boarding, surfing the white wave," Dante said, swishing side to side in the armchair. "Then I go over a small cliff, like I've done a hundred times before, and land not on my board, but my shoulder. Next thing I know I'm somersaulting down the mountain, crashing through brush and trees, gathering speed like a human avalanche. There's cloud coverage everywhere. I'm tumbling and I can't tell the snow from the sky. Then I'm tossed over the next cliff side and land a hundred feet down into a pile of fucking rocks. Excuse my language, Mrs. Sky."

Mom was too busy holding a hand to her heart.

I grinned. "And next thing you know you wake up in a white room?"

"Good as new," Dante said and winked.

"I'm sure you haven't gotten on a snowboard since," Mom said.

Dante leaned back. "*Au contraire*. The moment I was patched up I ran straight up to Alyeska and did a double-black diamond. Well, I shouldn't say right after—there was that little sabbatical I took first."

My face hurt from smiling. I liked this guy in a big brother kind of way. Melcher had finally done something useful.

"Can you stay for dinner?" Mom asked.

"I'd love to."



Mom radiated with pleasure every time Dante helped himself to more chicken tenderloins and mashed potatoes. Dante hummed with pleasure at each bite.

“Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had a home-cooked meal?” he asked.

“You should come over for dinner again soon,” Mom said.

“I won’t turn down an invitation.”

While Dante scooped another heap of potatoes onto his plate, Mom shot me another one of the ‘he’s a keeper’ looks.

I returned it with a narrow eyed ‘leave me alone.’

I cleared my throat. “Would you like something besides water to drink? Soda or juice?”

“Water’s good, thanks.” Dante chewed heavily and looked up suddenly. “Sky, how can you not eat with all this delicious food in front of you?”

Oh, he was winning points with Mom, all right. I glared at him.

If he noticed, he ignored me and continued. “You should eat up. We have a long drive ahead of us.”

I gaped at Dante. I must have heard wrong because I swear he just said ‘*drive.*’

“Training,” Dante said between mouthfuls. “Got a mission planned in Fairbanks.”

“Fairbanks!” I don’t know which had me more flabbergasted.

“Sorry to spring this on you, Mrs. Sky—agents’ orders.”

Mom shifted in her seat. “Did Agent Melcher not tell you that Aurora was in a car accident?”

Dante stopped chewing. “I know it’s difficult, but Aurora has to get over her phobia if she’s going to get the job done. Unless, Aurora doesn’t feel up to the task.” Dante squinted at me. “Well, Sky, are you game?”

Oh, he was good, goading me like that. The last time I did something for the agents I ended up with a bloody neck. At least Dante wanted to take me out on field work. I could do without the locked rooms.

I grumbled under my breath. “And you want to leave *now*?”

“No time like the present.” Dante leaned back and smiled. “We’ll be back by bedtime tomorrow night. Promise.”

I hesitated.

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions, and we’ll have a long drive on which to answer them.”

I scooted back and stood. “Fine. I’ll go pack a few things.”

Dante grinned. “That a girl.”

“You will take your cell phone with you?” my mom called after me.

“Yeah, Mom.”

I ran up to my bedroom and threw an extra pair of pants and a heavy sweatshirt inside a backpack. Who knew if this thing would be as messy as my orientation?

I ducked into the hallway and trotted back down the stairs. “Ready.”

As I came into the kitchen, Dante stood and nodded to Mom. “Mrs. Sky, sorry to eat and split. This was fabulous. Don’t worry. I’ll see to it your daughter stays safe and sound.”

My mom nodded slowly. “Please do, Dante.”

I gave my mom a quick peck on the cheek and headed outside with Dante. A white Jeep Rubicon was parked in the drive. I stopped in front of it. “Let me guess. Government issued?”

“Even better, government paid. I’ll even let you drive her.” Dante tossed me the keys. I caught them instinctively and stared into my palm. “Come on, Sky, it’s all about getting back in the saddle.”

I threw the keys back. “I can’t.”

“Then buckle up, baby, ’cause I’m driving.”

I glanced over my shoulder, knowing full well I’d look like a sissy if I ran back inside my house. Training couldn’t be any worse than orientation. Nothing could.

A golden retriever stared at me from the backseat when I climbed inside the Jeep. My anxiety dissipated at once.

“Who’s this?”

“Sky, meet my best bud, Tommy. I named him after Tommy Moe.”

I raised a brow.

“Olympic Gold medalist in men’s alpine skiing,” Dante said as though I was daft. “Ninety-four, first American male skier to win two metals in a single Winter Olympics, and he was an Alaskan resident at the time.”

I resisted the impulse to say something snarky and reached back to pet the silken fur on top of the retriever’s head instead. Tommy slapped a very large tongue over my fingers. I pulled my hand away.

“Watch out for that dog—he’s a lover.”

I settled back into the passenger’s seat and buckled in. A long ride up north sounded relaxing...until Dante started driving.

He ripped into Jewel Lake Road and floored it onto Minnesota Avenue. I reached for the roll bar overhead.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled.

Dante rammed the clutch into fourth gear. “I’m going to drive the terror out of you, Sky. By the time we get back, you’ll be spinning wheelies in parking lots.”

“I’ve never liked wheelies.”

“You will soon.”

“You’re a real jackass, you know?”

“And you’re a backseat driver.”

“Backseat driver? I’m not a backseat driver! Have I told you to slow the hell down or watch out for cars changing lanes?”

Dante chuckled. “Relax, Sky. We’re superhuman, remember? Danger is what we do best.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “Whatever.”

I glanced back. Tommy must have been used to Dante’s driving because the dog moved with the car.

Dante spared me from yelling at him again by slowing down.

“So what do you want to know about our fanged foes and how we’ve been recruited to rid this world of evil? Fire away.”

“All right, are there really vampires?”

“I was told you were initiated.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“It should. The beast bit you, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, but any crazy person can bite someone.”

A smile worked its way up Dante’s cheeks. “Did this one drink blood straight from your vein?”

“Yeah...”

“Welcome to the world of the demonic, Sky.”

I stared out the window at the shadowed storefronts as we passed through downtown. There was a certain thrill to leaving town even if we were headed deeper into the darkness.

I shifted in my seat. “Did *you* believe the agents when they told you there were vampires?”

Dante shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, anything’s possible. What I didn’t believe is that they’d doped me up on some kind of noxious blood that’d knock a creature out.”

“And then they initiated you.”

Dante was quiet a moment then laughed. “Oh, yeah. Who forgets their first bite? It’s more memorable than the first time you have sex.”

“That’s gross.”

“You’ll understand once you have a chance to compare.”

Well, I could compare. Not that it was any of Dante’s business. Sex and bloodsucking were seriously overrated in my opinion.

I cleared my throat. “I believe we were talking about vampires. Was yours rabid?”

“He was a mess.”

“How did you finish him?”

“Shotgun.”

“And then you entered a transition period or whatever, met with your mentor, and got to work?”

“Then I skipped town; left the country.”

I leaned forward, mouth hanging open. “What? Where’d you go?”

“Netherlands.”

I choked out a laugh of disbelief. “What? And then the agents found you?”

“Yep. Caught up with me in Amsterdam where I was smoking more weed than a hippie at Woodstock.”

I stared at Dante. I stared until he glanced over, and we both burst into laughter.

“What did the agents do to you?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you what they wanted to do—ship me off to some underground facility in Siberia.”

“How’d you get out of that one?”

“I said, ‘Hey, I was just taking a little holiday before I reported to duty. Give me a chance to prove myself. You got to have some kind of assignment you can give me. See how I do. Trust me, guys, you want this assassin on active duty, not wasting away in some ice cave.’ So they gave me a shot.”

“And you’ve been slaying vampires ever since.”

“Roger that, Sky.”

I glanced out the window. We were no longer in town, but on the highway headed north. Mountains turned to shadows, surrounding us from every angle. The snow along the highway was a glimmer in the headlights.

“Why run in the first place?” I asked. “I mean, don’t we turn into vampires if we don’t take Melcher’s special antidote?”

Dante shrugged. “At the time I didn’t care if I turned into a vampire. Who wouldn’t want to live forever? Then Melcher explained there was no way of knowing what kind of vampire I’d turn into. They’ve infected us with everything: rabies, porphyria, typhus, cholera. If it’s fatal, it’s in us.”

Dante tapped his fingers over the steering wheel. “If the rabies turned me, I’d be Schizo. Crazy. Worse than dead.”

“At least you got in one last hurrah,” I said. “Do we ever get out-of-state assignments?”

“I wish, but we’ve got our hands full in the Great North. The vamps are moving in on us. Cold. Dark. It’s like Florida for seniors.”

“So they can’t go out in the daylight?”

“Oh, they’re free to roam at any time. They just don’t like to—light sensitivity and all.”

“Any other repellents I should be aware of? Crosses? Holy water? Garlic?”

“No, no, and yes. Rabies vampires can’t stand garlic.”

“Why?”

“It’s their disease. They’re supersensitive to any olfactory stimulation, which includes garlic. Then you’ve got your porphyria vampires, whose skin is hypersensitive to sunlight. The real irony about a vampire is that their disease is keeping them alive. In most cases, their families or entire villages were wiped out, but some kind of freaky chemical reaction with their blood both killed and preserved them in a state of reanimation.”

“Their AB negative blood.”

“Yep. And now, thanks to the green revolution, scientists have discovered a way to trigger the dormant deadly virus inside vampires using modified organisms. They just needed a way to get it inside the creatures’ system. That’s where we come in.”

“I still don’t get why these organisms are toxic to them, but not to us. Don’t we share the same blood type?”

“Affirmative.”

“Then why isn’t it toxic to us?”

“The antidote.” Dante looked over and winked. “It counteracts the toxin running through our veins.”

“What happens if they run out of the antidote?”

How could Dante act so calm? A shot of liquid was the only thing preventing us from becoming one of those creatures.

“Don’t worry, Sky. If you turned Melcher would send in an assassin to put you out of your misery. Maybe me.”

I grumbled. “Comforting.”

Dante laughed. “Next question.”

“Have you ever experienced any side effects?”

Dante smacked his lips together. “Nope. Besides feeling awesome. Have you noticed anything funny?”

“For a while I had trouble looking at myself in a mirror.”

“Ah,” Dante said with a smile.

“Ah, what?”

“That would be the pellagra. Victims of the disease become perturbed when faced with their reflection for some reason. They’re also sensitive to sunlight.”

Just another perk of being a vampire hunter.” I grumbled under my breath. “How many of us are there?”

“Don’t know.”

“How long have vampire hunters been around?”

“Probably as long as there’ve been vampires. We genetically altered AB negative lab rats are the latest and greatest in the history of vampire hunters. Our kind has been around twenty years, tops.”

“Do vampires know about us?”

“They’re learning quickly and spreading the word. Not that many have an opportunity to talk. You never want to leave behind any witnesses.”

“What about human witnesses?”

“Don’t take out a vamp in front of a human.”

“What if one bites you in front of people?”

“Don’t let it.”

“What, it’s that easy?”

“Here’s a little secret, Sky. You’re not going to run into many rabid vampires. The agents round those ones up, contain them, and sic ’em on new recruits. The kind of creatures we’re after are cagey. They know how to blend in, and they’re certainly not going to tear into your flesh the first chance they get. They feed on the feeble-minded.”

I pictured my Mousketeers: Noel, Whitney, and Hope.

Dante continued. “And then they feed on them again and again. There are the hunters, of course, who enjoy the kill, but the crafty ones find willing sources to supply them.”

“Why would anyone willingly let a vampire bite them?”

“Like I said, Sky, better than sex.”

“And again, ew.”

“Makes people feel alive.”

“What about you? I don’t see any bite marks on your neck.”

Dante chuckled. “That’s vanity for you. I don’t let them bite my neck.”

I faced forward and rolled my eyes upward. “I don’t even want to know.”

“Sure you do. Chest and biceps work equally well; occasionally I’ll throw in a wrist if I have to.”

“So if they started out with human teeth, how do they pierce the skin to get to the vein?”

“Most of them sharpen a couple back molars. It’s rather thoughtful of them, actually, more like a sharpened needle piercing the skin above the vein than a rusty nail.”

“Can’t we take them out before they bite us?”

“What’s the fun in that?”

“I don’t think any of it sounds fun, but I’ll avoid getting bitten if I can.”

“Believe me, Sky, you’re going to have a lot easier time taking these things out when they’re twitching on the floor. Are you really up for hand-to-hand combat?”

I shrugged and stared out the window as we passed through Wasilla. The city was like one long strip mall paved with parking lots leading to supermarkets, sporting good warehouses, restaurants, liquor stores, gas stations, and gun shops.

“This is one ugly ass town,” I said.

“This isn’t the real Wasilla,” Dante said. “It’s just a front. Think of all the beautiful lakes and mountains in the area.”

Great, more mountains. I found them repressive.

I didn’t want to know how fast Dante was driving for us to have reached Wasilla already. There were still around six hours left to go—well, that would be the case if he’d obeyed the speed limit.

Once we passed the small town of Willow, there was a whole lot of nothing. Only, it was pitch-black out, so I couldn't see the nothing. But I could feel it out there—great empty expanses of wilderness. It was the middle of the night, and we were the only vehicle on the road.

Dante pulled off the Parks Highway into an empty parking lot at mile 135.2 to let Tommy take a pee. The retriever leapt from the Jeep as soon as Dante opened the back door. He sniffed the snow and began marking. I stepped out to stretch my legs and get some fresh air. Maybe not the best idea. The air was the kind of cold that hurt to breathe. I hugged myself in my arms and danced in place.

Dante walked to the end of the lot and stared in the distance. I joined his side.

"I always pull off here," Dante said. "It's one of the best views of Mount McKinley...when you can see her."

He seemed like he was trying awfully hard to see through the dark. I knew why he did it, because I could feel it out there, too—a majestic presence.

I turned and headed back to the Jeep.

"Tommy," Dante called. "Let's go."

Tommy ran back as soon as Dante opened the back door. The blast of the heat felt good on my legs.

Dante had the Jeep in fifth flying back down the highway in no time.

"So what's the assignment?" I asked.

"Got a target that needs taking out. Calls himself Ivo. He's been snacking on college freshmen. Last month he strangled a girl and sucked her dry."

I flinched. "She's dead?"

"Yep. Ivo hangs with another vampire named Patrick. Patrick's not violent, but he's a feeder nonetheless. I figure two of them...two of us..."

"And you want me to take Patrick?"

Dante grinned. "No, I want you to take Ivo."

I crossed my arms. "Of course you do."

"First conquer the mountain."

"What are you? A psych major?"

"Nope. Environmental studies."

"Of course."

"What about you, Sky? Got a major in mind after high school?"

"I like to read and write."

"I imagine you'll find yourself with plenty of material. It could be worse. We could be dead."

"...or in Fairbanks." I leaned forward in my seat. Were we there already? The time on the dashboard clock read two twenty-five.

The roads were deserted. The temperature on a bank display board said negative fifty-three degrees. Seriously, how did anyone other than vampires live here?

"Got to make a quick pit stop to pick up my informant."

"You have your own informant?"

"Not exactly. Melcher prefers we don't meet them at all. He likes informants to report to him and then he passes the intel onto us. But sometimes we work together."

"How do informants get chosen?"

"Like us. They die, the agents and their surgeons step in, but the transfusion doesn't take. The procedure costs a fortune. Might as well make some use out of them."

“So I guess we’re lucky.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Informants have to pose as vampire junkies, getting the juice sucked out of them time and again while we swoop in and save the day. We’ve got it made, Sky.”

❄ 15 ❄
Drink Of Death

Dante turned onto a secluded road leading into dense woods. He followed a set of tire tracks through the snow. They led to a small cabin with smoke drifting from its chimney. The windows were dark.

“Brrr!” I cried when I got out of the Jeep. “If this Ivo doesn’t kill me, the cold certainly will.”

Dante grinned. “The great thing about Fairbanks is it doesn’t matter whether it’s twenty below or minus seventy. It all feels the same: damn cold.” Dante tapped out a rhythm once he reached the cabin door.

A bolt slid back. A young woman with heavy eyeliner opened the door. She nodded for us to come in. Dante slipped in with Tommy, and I followed close behind. The woman shut the door as soon as I was through.

“Took you long enough,” she said. “Hopefully there’s still a party to go to.”

Dante raised a brow. “It’s two thirty—Ivo’s just getting started.”

“Hi, Tommy.” The woman’s voice softened when she talked to the retriever. She scratched him behind the ears.

“Aurora Sky, meet Janine.”

“Latest recruit?” Janine asked Dante.

“Roger that.”

“Is this her first time in the field?”

“She’ll do great,” he said.

Janine walked over to a small square table. Dante tossed a duffel bag on top. As Janine turned up the flame on the gas lamp, shadows stretched and leapt across the sparse room to the wood beams overhead.

I hovered by the doorway a moment before walking over to the wood stove. Tommy followed me and curled into a ball on the ground beside the hearth. The backs of my legs started to prickle as I watched Dante pull knives out of his bag and set them on the tabletop. I turned myself slowly, evenly, like a piece of corn on the cob rotating over the flames.

The cabin was one open room with a small kitchen. There was a twin bed against the wall near the fire covered in a patchwork quilt.

“I thought you were going to wait until Renard was back in town and do one clean sweep,” Janine said.

“Nah, we’ll catch up to him next time.”

“Who’s Renard?” I asked.

“A real nasty,” Janine said.

“As bad as this Ivo character?”

“Worse.”

“Worse than Ivo?” Dante asked in disbelief.

“Even the junkies avoid him.”

I was definitely not getting the romanticized version of vampires here. Surely they weren’t all rabid nut jobs and psycho killers? The Mouseketeers didn’t seem to think so.

“Sky, let’s get you a weapon.”

“Dagger,” Janine suggested.

“Perfect.”

“Lift up your pant leg,” Janine ordered.

I pulled up the right leg of my jeans. Janine wrapped a leg holster around my calf and stuck a dagger into the sheath. I wrapped my fingers around the hilt and took it back out. My stomach tied into knots when I held it in front of my face.

“You’ll be fine,” Dante said, slapping me on the back. “Let’s go party. Tommy, stay.”

I returned the knife back to its holster, covering it with my pant leg.

Janine sat in the front seat of the Jeep and navigated Dante to a house party on the edge of town. The windows on the house were all boarded up. Only four cars lined the curb.

Janine sounded uneasy when she spoke. “I thought there’d be more people here tonight.”

“Aurora, what’s your cell number?” Dante asked.

I recited my number and Dante dialed it into his own phone. My phone began to ring seconds later.

Dante hung up. “There, now you have mine. Okay. Let’s go over this real quick. Janine and I are going to make an appearance, but head out before the rest of Ivo’s guests leave. For Janine’s safety, we don’t want any witnesses placing her as one of the last people at the party. Sky, you’ll stay, pretend to get wasted, and take out Ivo. Get him to take you somewhere secluded—shouldn’t be too difficult. If you can take out Patrick, too, even better. If not, have him bite you, and I’ll finish the job. Call my cell when the junkies have cleared out.”

Janine’s safety? He was worried about *Janine’s* safety?

I leaned forward. “So basically you’re going to abandon me here?”

Dante looked over his seat. “It’s the best play, Sky. No more white rooms. You know what to do. Now lose the scarf unless you want to use it to mop up blood.”

I unwrapped the scarf slowly and set it on the empty seat beside me. A chill slid down my spine. I shuddered involuntarily.

“Remember,” Dante said. “I’m Peter and you’re Wendy. It’s safer if they don’t know our real names.”

Peter, as in Peter Pan. Pretty fitting, really. Dante was like a boy who never grew up. At least he wasn’t calling himself Van Helsing and me Buffy. Might not go over too well with the undead crowd.

I slipped out of the car as Dante grabbed a case of bottled beer out of the trunk and slung it under an arm. He put his other arm around Janine. She held a second case of beer in her free hand. We walked to the front porch, and Dante pounded on the door.

“Get the door!” someone yelled from inside.

The door opened a crack, and a scrawny young man with a pierced nose, brow, and ears peered out. His face muscles relaxed when he saw Janine. “Oh, hey, Janine, come in.”

“Hey, Thomas.”

As Thomas held the door open for us I noticed raw bite marks on his wrist. A wave of nausea rolled over me. I tensed my jaw to quell it.

The front door led into the living room. A pale young man sat on a torn-up couch. He looked like skin and bone beneath his ratty T-shirt. He was leaning against a slightly older man in slacks. The groomed man didn’t pay attention to us as he licked a drop of blood from the corner of his lip.

“Janine,” Dante chided in a booming voice. “I thought you said this thing was going to be classy.”

Nice way to call attention to us, Dante.

The man narrowed his eyes. “Who’s this?”

Janine sauntered in and plopped down on the other side of the couch. “Patrick, Peter. Peter, Patrick. Peter’s visiting from Anchorage. He’s a smart ass. I mentioned him, remember?”

“And who is this fresh peach?”

I couldn’t locate the owner of the voice at first. It was deep and far away, as though coming from an overhead speaker.

“His friend’s ex. She just got dumped and wanted to get out of town.” Janine batted her lashes. “Stay away from her, Ivo. She’s new to all this.”

“Fresh blood.” Ivo laughed.

I located him in a corner in a midnight-blue button-down shirt. A silver pendant with a Celtic symbol drew the eye to the dark wiry hair below his throat. Stubble covered his chin and cheeks. It was odd to assign an age to a vampire, but if Ivo were mortal, I’d place him around thirty. He was seated on a large armchair with worn upholstery. A girl with black cropped hair sat in his lap like a limp doll.

My skin crawled.

“Did we arrive late?” Dante asked, looking around. “Jeanie told me this place was going to be buzzing.”

Ivo shrugged lazily and looked me over. “Some folks thought it was too cold. Only the brave came out.”

Dante pulled a cap off a beer bottle with his bare hand. “Well, we didn’t drive all this way for nothing. Beer anyone?”

The girl on Ivo’s lap stood. “I’ll have one. Thanks.”

Dante handed her the beer and began opening another. “Wendy?”

I knew I was supposed to pretend to get drunk, but I wasn’t much of a beer drinker. Heck, I wasn’t much of a drinker at all excluding my solo New Year’s Eve celebration and pre-sex binge. God, did I know how to have a good time or what?

“I bet Wendy wants something stronger,” Ivo said.

I forced a smile. “Yes, you read my mind.”

He seemed to like that I said this.

“Why don’t you come back with me to the kitchen?”

“Lead the way.”

The kitchen was as grimy as the living room. The linoleum was discolored and a section was missing in front of the fridge.

“Wendy, Wendy, Wendy,” Ivo said as he looked through a cabinet. “What would my Wendy want? Ah.” A bottle slid across the shelf like a claw over plywood. Ivo pulled out a bottle of tequila and handed it to me.

I unscrewed the cap and took a swig from the bottle. I welcomed the burn down my throat. I took a second swig then held the bottle out to Ivo. “You want a sip?”

His eyes glittered. “Not yet.”

I felt that odd pull of revulsion when he looked at me.

Ivo leaned against the counter. “Poor little Wendy, lost her boyfriend.”

Laughter trickled from my lips. I quickly covered it with another swig of tequila. Quite the opposite, Ivo. I had a boyfriend who was really into me.

Ivo’s earlier playmate walked in with a half-empty beer bottle. I couldn’t read her expression. She was most likely too out of it to form a thought, let alone expression. “Ivo, are you coming back out soon?”

Ivo grimaced.

“Why don’t you go home, Casey? I’ve had enough of you.”

Ivo might have been able to walk and talk, but he was no less despicable than the rabies vampire I’d killed during orientation.

Casey blinked at him a couple times, turned and left the kitchen.

I set the bottle of tequila down on the counter. “I should check on my friends.”

Ivo followed me to the living room. Dante was sitting on the arm of the armchair, bottle of beer in hand, smirking at Patrick as the latter glowered at him.

“So Peter, you want your blood sucked out?” Patrick said.

“Truth be told, I’d like to suck a little blood myself, but I can’t—human and all. No, I like to *watch*.”

My lips curled. Sure, Dante was a great actor, but I could swear he was enjoying himself.

“Or do you not suck women’s blood?” Dante taunted.

Patrick’s fists tightened. I willed him to get up and sock Dante in the jaw so we could get this damn assignment over with together. But just as quickly his shoulders relaxed, and he called Janine over.

Janine approached the couch and stood in front of Patrick. I couldn’t see her expression with her back to me.

“Very well, you want to watch me suck your girlfriend’s blood?” Patrick sneered. “Is that what turns you on?”

He grasped Janine by the wrist and twisted her arm as he pulled her closer.

I forgot to breathe.

Dante sounded as cool as glacial ice. “On the neck.”

Patrick released Janine’s wrist and guided her to his lap. The human boys watched without expression. Patrick’s mouth widened as he closed in on Janine’s neck. Dante leaned forward. I turned and hurried back into the kitchen.

Ivo followed behind me. I guzzled down the tequila. Sure, brilliant way to cure the sick pit inside my stomach—dose it with esophagus-burning alcohol. I coughed.

Pretend to get drunk, Aurora. Don’t get drunk!

The vampire chuckled. “You’re such a pretty young thing, Wendy. Not like the trash Patrick drags in from the gutters.”

I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand. The floor went out of focus.

When Ivo’s lips opened over his teeth in a grotesque smile, I noticed that each tooth had been sharpened to a point. I almost retched.

“Do you think they’re done?” I asked abruptly.

Ivo didn’t answer. When I returned to the living room, Dante and Janine were gone. The two boys were smoking in a corner. Patrick sat in the same spot on the couch drinking a beer.

My jaw dropped. “Where did Janine and Peter go?”

Patrick looked over my shoulder at Ivo and smiled slowly. “They wanted some time alone.”

“They left?” I knew this was part of the plan, but they didn’t even say goodbye.

“The night’s still young,” Ivo said behind my back. “Matter of fact, it’s always night in Fairbanks this time of the year.” He laughed softly. “I’ll take you wherever you need to go, but you don’t want to go just yet, do you?”

“I guess not.”

Ivo stepped closer. “You came for something, didn’t you, Wendy?”

“Yes,” I said in a voice so soft it was barely audible.

He inhaled my neck. Cold fingers ran through my hair. His arm snaked around my waist as he leaned in.

I pulled away. "Not here. I...don't want an audience."

Ivo looked me over and chuckled. "Follow me."

He led me down the dark hall to a bedroom in back.

There was a barricade of splintered wood against the outside of his windowpane. The floorboards were scuffed and creaky. A mattress sat in the middle of the room without a frame or blankets.

Homey.

Ivo closed the door behind him and circled me. "So Wendy's wandered into Never Never Land seeking answers...or something else?"

So the Pan reference wasn't lost on him.

"Has Wendy been bitten before?" he prodded.

"Once."

"Such a lovely thing, our Wendy. I bet your blood is sweet." Ivo swooped up to me. "I want to drink. Every. Last. Drop."

He opened his mouth so wide, I feared he'd snap off my neck. I recoiled. When he tried again, I pulled my arm back and rammed my fist in his face. Pain splintered across my knuckles. I twisted my hips to add torque to the blow. Ivo grunted in surprise. He put a hand to his face, but when he looked up, he smiled.

"Well, well. Wendy's a feisty thing. I don't get many live ones these days. Youth today is so dark and disturbed. They've given up. Takes the fun out of it. Come on, Wendy, let's teach you to fly."

Ivo grabbed my shoulders and tossed me across the room. I hit a set of drawers and landed on the floorboards. Ivo hauled me up by the neck and threw me so hard over his bed that I flipped and fell over the other side with a tremendous *whack*.

I tried to stand. My arms shook underneath me. Warm blood tickled from my lip, and I noticed Ivo's eyes shine. He dropped to his knees and loomed over me.

"Where are your friends now, Wendy? They've abandoned you. Soon they'll go out into the world and live out their useless little lives. They'll grow up, age. But you, Wendy, you'll never grow old."

Ivo's razor teeth pierced through my skin. He dug in deep and shook his mouth like a bloodthirsty wolf. My skin tore. Blood spilled down my neck. My heart pumped blood up my throat. Ivo drank greedily.

One,two,three,four,five...six. I counted in my head.

Suddenly his jaw slackened. His grip weakened. He fell on top of me, convulsing. I shoved him off.

While he twitched, I pulled up my pant leg and took out the dagger. His eyes bulged.

"Hun...Hun..." He tried to speak.

"Vampire hunter," I said for him. "Not so sweet anymore, am I?"

I lifted the dagger with both hands and brought it down through his heart. I tore through his skin the way he'd torn through mine.

The twitching stopped. Ivo's eyes gaped at me. I pulled out my dagger and wiped the blood off on his shirt.

I still needed to kill Patrick. I unlaced my boots and left them in Ivo's bedroom before walking down the edge of the hall. The floorboards bent under me, but didn't creak. The entry to

the living room loomed closer, and I crouched by the doorframe. For a long time, no one spoke inside. Finally, one of the boys said he was tired.

“You know the rules,” Patrick said. “You can party here, but you can’t crash.”

Their footsteps creaked on the floorboards, followed by the slam of the door. Outside an engine sputtered and chocked before rumbling to life.

I peeked inside the living room. Patrick sat alone on the couch, sipping a beer, probably washing down the blood. I doubled back, put on my boots, and walked into the living room. I stumbled into the room, leaning against the doorframe.

Patrick looked me up and down, a smirk on his lips.

Blood trickled from my lip and neck. My head throbbed from the whack I’d taken on the floor.

I forced a sloppy grin to make Patrick think I was drunk. “He’s a bit rough.”

I staggered over to the couch and “passed out” with my head in Patrick’s lap. His legs tensed under me, and he started pushing me aside.

Come on, Patrick, easy offering—drink!

The push against my shoulder eased up. Patrick’s breath blew over my skin when he inhaled the bite on my neck. I waited for his teeth to break through. He ran his tongue over the open wound.

I had to force myself to stay still. The licking wasn’t causing him to convulse the way the biting did.

Patrick swallowed and I had to suppress a shudder as he licked me again.

Maybe Ivo had sucked out the good stuff and left behind diluted blood.

Patrick licked and swallowed again. Then he became very still right before he began to convulse.

I rose off his lap, pulled out the knife, and stuck it in his heart.

I took my time walking to the bathroom. The warm water didn’t seem to be working so I ran a hand towel under cold. When I glanced in the mirror I saw myself clearly. A cut bled over my forehead. I dabbed at it with the wet cloth then went to work on my neck. I dabbed and rinsed until the water ran clear.

I pulled out my phone after I finished.

Fane answered immediately. “Aurora.”

He felt so far away. Hundreds of miles and a dark void in between separated us.

“I miss you,” I whispered. Tears gathered in my eyes.

“Aurora, where are you?”

“Never land.”

“Aurora?”

I flipped my phone shut, reopened it, and dialed Dante. I spoke before he could say hello.

“It’s done.”

❄ 16 ❄
Battle Wounds

I waited in the back of the Jeep while Dante and Janine dosed the place in gasoline. I had my scarf back on. If my neck bled anymore at least it would blend in.

I didn't see Dante and Janine return to the Jeep so much as hear the doors open and slam shut.

Janine's expression softened when she turned to look at me. "Good work, Aurora."

"Did I tell you she was ready or what?" Dante spread a hand over his chest. "My raven-haired prodigy. I'm so proud."

"Let's get out of here," Janine said.

Dante held up a hand. "Wait. I want to make sure the fire catches."

I turned to my window and stared at the boarded house.

When black smoke began to leak from the cracks of the house, Dante shifted into drive and took off down the road.

I stared out my window at the deserted streets. It looked like a ghost town at night.

Dante ran a red light. It didn't matter. We were the only moving vehicle on the road.

Tommy wagged his tail when we returned to the cabin.

I sat with a *thud* on one of the wood chairs.

Janine grabbed a plastic gallon of water and poured it into a kettle by the cook stove.

"Coffee before the drive home?"

"Me, me," Dante said.

"Aurora?"

"Yeah, coffee's fine." Anything warm would do.

Janine lit the flame on the stove then took a seat across from me. I reached under my pant leg to remove the dagger. It scraped the table as I pushed it toward Janine.

"Keep it," she said.

I nodded and returned the dagger to its holster.

Janine was back on her feet the moment the kettle hissed steam.

My eyes wandered to the corner of the cabin. The quilt from the twin bed now lay on the floor in front of the fireplace. The sheets were in a wad at the foot of the bed, along with the pillows.

Tell me they didn't. Not while I was off getting pummeled, bitten, and left to stab two vampires in the heart.

"Smooth moves, Sky," Dante said, interrupting my train of thought. "I wish I'd been there to see them. We found Patrick in the same place on the couch as though he never saw it coming. Ivo was on his back on the floor."

Janine set an enamel mug in front of me. The steam rose below my chin.

"We found Ivo in his bedroom," Janine said carefully. "Did everything go okay? I noticed you have bruises."

"Those aren't bruises!" Dante said. "They're battle wounds. You fought the good fight, Sky." He drank from the mug Janine handed him and winced after swallowing the scalding liquid. "Next time we'll do it together."

In your dreams.

I'm sure Dante didn't mean it in a sexual way, but I couldn't help feeling annoyed. I wasn't angry at Janine. She looked genuinely concerned, and I'm sure a quick rough and tumble while I battled for my life wasn't her idea.

"I can't wait until Renard and his cohorts get back to town. We're going to buzz right back up here and paint this town red."

"Dante?" I said.

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

Janine smirked.

Even Dante smiled.

"Come on, Sky, *lighten up*. We've got another long drive ahead of us."



There were no traces of light when we stepped outside. It was hard to tell night from day in this arctic wasteland.

Janine walked us to the Jeep. She shook my hand.

"Welcome to the team, Aurora. You really impressed me back there. I look forward to working with you again."

"Thanks for the dagger."

"My pleasure."

Dante gave Janine a big bear hug, lifting her off her feet in the process. She laughed and swatted Dante playfully on the back.

"Until the next time duty calls..." she said, laughing again.

Dante broke out into a lopsided grin. "See you soon. Let's roll, Sky."

The only thing rolling were my eyes. We jumped into the Jeep and slammed our doors shut at the same time. I gave a quick wave to Janine before she disappeared inside the cabin.

Dante blasted through the secluded road to the paved streets.

"Mind if I speed?" he asked.

I had stabbed two more vampires in the heart. Dante could gun it for all I cared.

"Just get me the hell out of here."

"That's the spirit, Sky."

Dante floored the gas pedal at the first big intersection. As we approached the center, he cranked the steering wheel. The Jeep slid at a sideways angle.

I grasped the nearest handlebar.

Dante straightened out the wheel and we were once more moving head first.

When I'd regained my breath, I screamed, "In one piece, Dante!"

He chuckled. "Sorry, it's just so much fun driving these streets when no one's on them."

I pulled out my cell phone and dialed into voicemail.

"Who are you calling?" Dante asked.

"Shh!"

Fane's voice spoke urgently inside my ear. "*Hey, I've been trying to reach you. Are you okay? Give me a call.*"

Dante whistled a tune as I tried to listen.

When we entered Nenana, Dante said, "Gotta gas up," before pulling into a Chevron.

He hopped out of the Jeep singing “Young Forever” by Jay-Z. I could hear him through the glass. “Forever young, I wanna be forever young...”

Tommy lifted his head at the sound then settled it back over his paws and sighed.

I called Fane while Dante refilled.

He answered immediately. “Aurora, I’ve been worried.”

“I’m fine. Sorry about cutting you off earlier.”

“What’s going on?”

“I got kidnapped...by choice anyway. Sort of. I just left Fairbanks.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Wish I was.”

“How’d you get there?”

“A friend convinced me to skip the whole car rehabilitation thing and dive in head first...or in this case, *drive* in head first.”

“A friend,” Fane repeated. The words dropped like a frown. “Who’s this friend?”

“Why? So you can get jealous?”

“It’s a guy then.”

I glanced out the window. Dante belted out, “Forever, forever,” into the pre-dawn darkness.

“More of an annoying big brother.”

“When will you be back?”

“I don’t know. Noon maybe? I’ll call you when I’m in town. Could we meet at the video store?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

Some Like It Red

While the streets of Fairbanks had been dead, Anchorage was choked with traffic when we returned late morning.

I stifled a yawn.

Dante hadn't shut up since we left Fairbanks —like he was on some kind of adrenaline rush. He'd wanted a detailed play by play of what went down at Ivo's. Finally, I'd relented. It was either that or listen to him sing.

Dante said I did good. I had to admit it went a lot smoother when I only had to stab my target once.

"Do you mind dropping me off in front of Video City?" I asked as we neared home.

Dante raised a brow.

"I want to spend a quiet night watching movies."

Dante broke out into his trademark grin. "Good idea. Rent some chick flicks, kick back, and relax. You earned it, Sky."

I began tapping my fingers over my thigh as we approached the video store.

I unclicked my seatbelt when Dante parked.

"Thanks for dropping me off. See you around?"

"No, it's cool," he replied. "I'll wait while you pick out some DVDs, then drive you home. I can help make suggestions if you like. I have excellent taste in movies."

I looked at the dashboard. "I'm kind of meeting someone here."

Dante clucked his tongue. "Is this someone a boy?"

"None of your business."

"We're partners, Sky. You don't ever have to lie to me. Just say the word. I'm cool with it."

I relaxed in my seat. "Yeah, I know. Thanks."

"No problemo."

I reached back and scratched Tommy's head. "Bye for now, Tommy. Keep Dante out of trouble."

Dante chuckled. "Stay out of trouble yourself, Sky. Sure I shouldn't stick around and meet this boy, make sure he's up to snuff?"

"I never said it was a boy."

Dante smiled way too much, but at least it wasn't creepy like Melcher. "Of course it's a boy."

"Whatever," I said. "You're such a man child."

Dante reached behind my seat for my backpack, laughing as he did.

"Forever young," he said with a wink, handing over my pack.

Once on solid ground, I said my last goodbye to Dante.

"Be in touch again soon, Sky. Get your rest!"

The Rubicon sped away.

I opened my phone and called Fane to tell him I was at Video City. A minute later he pulled in. Either he drove at lightning speed or was nearby to begin with. I was thinking the latter given he was driving the tank.

The Catalina squealed as he pulled in front of Video City.

"I don't think she likes the cold," I said as he stepped out.

Not even a smile. Crescent shadows rimmed Fane's eyes. Maybe I shouldn't have called him in the middle of the night, hung up, and then ignored his calls for the next couple hours.

"So you took off for Fairbanks with some guy?" he asked.

Then there was that. "Brother-type guy."

"Right," Fane said, sarcastically. "Let's just get the facts straight. You left town with a guy who is *not* your brother and spent the entire night with him."

Tears swam over my vision—probably because I hadn't slept in twenty-seven hours and had rammed a dagger through two hearts earlier. Regardless of being killer vampires, a heart was a heart. I'd caused two to stop beating in the last twenty-four hours.

"Are you crying? Hey, come here."

I loved that Fane's voice could change in an instant. I loved his arms around me even more.

I burrowed against him, determined never to leave the comfort of his chest. The world could go on without me. Fane brushed my hair back tenderly. His fingers stilled over the bruise at the hairline of my forehead then touched it gently. He stroked the tender flesh as though he could rub the wound away. My scalp tingled.

"Want to tell me how you got this bruise?"

I looked up into his eyes. "I just want to be with you."

Fane frowned. "Why did you leave?"

"Friend emergency. I can't talk about it. I'm sorry."

"I don't care what it was. What kind of *friend* expects you to rush off to Fairbanks in the middle of the night by car? Seems like they're asking too much of you."

"Tell me about it."

My phone started ringing from inside my coat pocket. Fane raised a brow as I dug it out. It better not be Dante.

Nope, Mom.

I pressed the phone to my ear. "Hi, Mom. We made it to town. Be home shortly...I'm fine. Yep. No, he has to get going. Yes, I'm sure...Because I know. Fine." I held my phone down. "Dante, want to stay for lunch? Are you sure? Okay." I put the phone back to my ear. "He's busy, but says thanks. Right, so see you soon. Bye, Mom."

I closed my phone and rolled my eyes.

Fane stared at me. "What kind of name is Dante?"

"What kind of name is Fane?" I countered.

He chose not to answer, instead asking, "Doesn't your mother want to have *me* over for lunch?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe I ought to meet your mom and assure her my intentions are honorable."

"Oh, are they?" I teased.

Fane grinned. "Well, perhaps not all honorable, but for the most part."

"What about dinner tonight? That'll give me a chance to rest." I was fading fast.

"Just tell me when. I already know where." Fane grinned. "How about I walk you home for now?"

"That's really nice, but I've gotten over my fear of cars."

If I could survive fourteen hours in a moving vehicle with Dante, I could get inside a care with anyone.

"How about for old time's sake?" Fane asked. He grinned. "And my own selfish motivation to keep you by my side a little longer."

My smile reached my ears. "Okay then, for old time's sake."

Fane took my pack and put it over his shoulder.

The walk looked different without the snow shower coming down on us. I stole sideways glances at Fane. I saw him trying not to smile every time I stared at him. I slipped my hand inside his.

"You're not smoking?" I asked.

"I quit."

"Why?"

"I don't want to expose you to secondhand smoke."

"So you just quit like that? Cold turkey?"

"I haven't smoked all weekend."

"Aren't you having cravings?"

"For nicotine?" Fane paused. "No."

"You make it sound so easy."

He stared into the distance before answering. "Some habits are easier to kick than others."

I squeezed his hand. For all Fane's tough talk about being immune, it wasn't worth the risk. I didn't want Fane to get cancer. I didn't want anything bad to ever happen to him.

A chill ran down my spine.

"What is it?" Fane asked.

I don't know how he felt it. My body didn't visibly shudder. I pulled my hand out of his.

"What did you mean that day in gym when you said you'd seen that look on my face before?"

Fane gave me a blank stare. Then something seemed to register in his eyes. He turned quickly away.

"It just reminded me of something. It's nothing."

It wasn't nothing, but I couldn't exactly demand an answer when he'd been so cool about the whole pulling an all nighter in Fairbanks Operation Fake Friend emergency.

As we topped the hill, I grabbed Fane's hand again.

"Thank you for walking me home."

Fane pulled me to a stop. There was a kindness inside his eyes that took me aback.

"Next time your friend has a crisis that can't wait call me," he said. "I'll drive you wherever you need to go."

"In the tank? We'd still be on the road."

Fane chuckled and kissed me on the head, managing to avoid the bruise.



Mom woke me gently at six thirty. I showered in under five minutes, combed my hair, blew it dry, and put on a fresh change of clothes. I waited to wrap the scarf around my neck until I'd finished getting ready. My neck ached where I'd been bitten.

I sat on top of the couch's back in the front parlor, just staring out the window until I saw two headlights beam into our driveway. I jumped to my feet and opened the door before Fane had a chance to knock. He stood outside holding a bouquet of assorted flowers and a bottle of red wine.

"Thank you," I said as he handed me the flowers. "Please come in."

Fane was dressed in his usual head to toe black.

I led him into the kitchen. “Mom, I’d like you to meet Fane.”

Mom’s mouth hung open. She looked at the dyed hair on his temples rather than his eyes. Then her head twisted abruptly when she saw the flowers in my hand.

Her alarm was quickly covered by a forced smile. “Nice to meet you, Fane.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Sky. Thank you for having me over.” Fane walked into the kitchen and set the bottle of wine on the counter. “I brought this for you. I hope you drink red.”

Actually, mom drank brown—as in soda. She’d never been much for wine. And what was a teenager doing bringing over a bottle of wine? It’s not like Fane lived at home and could raid his parents’ wine cabinet.

“Thanks,” Mom said slowly.

I opened one of the bottom cabinets and rooted around for an empty vase for the flowers. When I found it, I filled it with a bit of water and set them in the center of the dinner table.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Fane asked my mom.

“No, I’ve got everything under control. . . Thanks.”

“Come on,” I said, taking his hand. “We can hang out in my room until dinner’s ready.”

“Actually, Aurora, I need you to make a salad.”

When my mom wasn’t looking Fane winked at me. His smile made me want to drag him to my room and kiss him senseless.

“Sure, Mom,” I said in an upbeat voice.

After fifteen minutes of Mom never leaving me alone with Fane, we sat down to dinner.

Fane dished up salad and passed on pot roast. “Smells wonderful, Mrs. Sky, but I don’t eat meat.”

Fane was losing big points with my mom. The way she looked at him, you’d think he’d just confessed to being a meth head. Mom helped herself to the roast and ate in silence. It wasn’t like her to forgo conversation with a dinner guest. After a few minutes, she asked how Fane and I knew one another.

“Gym class,” I said and scrunched up my nose. “I suppose it was our mutual loathing for physical education that drew us together.”

Fane smiled. “Gym isn’t so tough. I just sit back and watch the game.”

I leaned back in my chair and smiled at my mom. “Fane’s more of a spectator.”

Mom’s lips tightened.

I grinned wider when I glanced back at Fane. “But I suspect he’s a closet athlete. You should have seen the way he pummeled his opponents the time he participated in badminton.”

Fane shrugged. “I’ve played a game or two of badminton in my day.”

He pushed the salad around on his plate. Watching him eat, or rather not eat, was like staring into a mirror of what I was like at the table. I felt so connected to this boy. I was glad he was there. I wished he could stay the night, and I didn’t even mean that in a sexual way. I just felt better when he was nearby.

At the end of the meal, Fane helped clear the table and began washing the dishes.

Mom snatched a plate from him. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of those.”

I didn’t like the way Mom looked at Fane, like he was trying to rifle through her china cabinet.

“Mom, we’ve got it,” I said. “You cooked.”

Okay, so usually I let her do both, but seeing Fane up to his elbows in soapy water looked so adorably domestic that I wanted to shoo my mom out and join him at the sink. She hesitated

before retreating into the living room. The TV came on, turned at a low ‘I can still hear you’ volume. I grabbed a green terry kitchen towel and sat on the counter beside Fane.

The warm white frothy water slid down Fane’s arm as he handed me plates. I didn’t worry that I was grinning like an idiot because Fane was doing the same.

“You’re cute,” he said.

I grinned. “I was just thinking the same about you.”

Fane released the pan he’d been scrubbing and let it slip back into the sink. I dropped the kitchen towel. His arms circled my waist. He pulled me to his lips. I felt the wet grip of his arms soaking through my top. Fane backed me against the counter and bruised my lips with his hungry kiss. I gripped him around his neck and crushed my lips against his.

I wanted to wrap my legs around him. I wanted to grind against him and ease that invisible ache, but Mom had her ears open. Not that I cared at the moment. My needs overruled caution.

A gentle tug on my scarf caught my attention. Fane pulled the first layer around my neck.

I broke off our kiss. “Don’t.”

I glanced in the direction of the living room.

He nodded. “This isn’t the place.”

Fane returned to scrubbing dishes. Humor returned to his voice.

“I haven’t done dishes in ages. It’s rather therapeutic actually.”

“Great, you’re hired.”

Fane nodded toward the living room. “So where’s your dad?”

“I scared him off. We don’t know when or if he’s coming back.”

“*You* scared him?”

I batted my eyelashes and spoke in a girlish voice, “Little ol’ me, I can be quite a fright.”

Fane laughed. “Whatever you say, Snow White.”

After I’d dried and put away the last dish, Mom appeared in the dining room.

“Thanks for doing the dishes,” she said evenly.

“No problem,” I answered.

“Well, it’s getting late,” she prodded.

“Mom, it’s not even nine.”

“You were already up late last night...with Dante.” Mom lifted her nose. I swear it was the first snub to ever leave her lips.

My jaw clenched. Before I could say another word, Fane glided from the kitchen to the adjoining dining room.

He smiled. “Thank you for having me over to dinner, Mrs. Sky. It was a pleasure meeting you.” He turned. “Aurora, I’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

I tossed the kitchen towel on the counter. “I’ll walk you out.”

I didn’t bother with my jacket. I had to stop myself from slamming the front door once we were outside.

“Sorry about my mom.”

Fane just smiled. “She’s looking out for you. I get it. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He opened his car door, but I shut it before he could get in. His eyes dropped to my lips as he grinned.

“I don’t want to wait until tomorrow,” I said.

I moved in for the kiss. Fane managed to steer me to the back door of the car, open it, and toss me in the back seat. He shut us inside the indestructible tank and hovered above me on his hands and knees. I did what I’d been longing to do—wrap my legs around his torso and pull him

to me. He groaned. The sound was indescribable—like a soul in torment. I suspected it might kill him if he didn't have me right then.

It would serve my mother right if I had sex with Fane in our driveway after the way she chased him out. She never would have acted that way with Dante. She would have waited on Dante hand and foot and signed our marriage certificate all because he was the golden boy with the charming smile.

If she thought it was safer sending Fane away, she had no idea who I was anymore. I rocked against him. The springs dug into my back from under the old upholstery.

Fane pulled my top up just below my breasts and began trailing kisses down my stomach. I shivered and gasped. He reached for the scarf once more. He seemed more intent on getting it off than my pants.

I rolled my head side to side on the car bench. "No," I moaned. "No."

"Why not?" Fane asked huskily.

Because he couldn't see. He couldn't know. What would he think of me if he knew?

I sat up. "I should go back inside. I'll see you tomorrow."

I thought he'd protest, but Fane grinned and said, "I never thought I'd count down the hours until school started."

I kissed him quickly on the lips and crawled to the opposite door. When I turned around on the porch, Fane waved as he pulled out of the driveway. I waved back then ran inside and up the stairs before Mom could ruin my good mood.

❄️ 18 ❄️
Call Of The Wild

Fane was waiting outside my English class when first period ended.

“Want to get out of here?”

No, Aurora. Just say no.

I smiled. “Yeah.”

As we headed for the double doors, I caught a quick glimpse of Noel. Her eyes widened. She shouldn’t look so surprised. Wasn’t she the one who told me Scott Stevens was herbal tea? I would think Fane Donada was the type of guy who merited the Mouseketeer stamp of approval.

“Are you ready to try out the tank?” Fane asked when we reached his car.

He opened the passenger door for me. And they said chivalry was dead. Turns out it came in the most unexpected places.

I raised a brow before climbing in. “Where are we going?”

“Anywhere you want.”

“How about Portage Glacier?”

“Hop in.”

Oh, I was bad skipping class...again. This time I wasn’t even staying on school property. It’s not like I could concentrate on a word my teachers said, anyway. Not with Fane on the brain 24/7.

Math and science just didn’t mean as much when I’d faced death three times. Four, counting Dante’s driving.

Unlike Dante, Fane handled his car with care. I nearly giggled. Fane drove a piece of shit. He probably had to be gentle or she’d fall apart over the first speed bump.

Fane hadn’t lied. The tank moved at a steady, slow speed, even after Fane got onto the highway going south.

I stared out the window as Fane wound his way along the base of the Chugach Mountains. The Seward Highway skirted the shores of the Turnagain Arm. Admittedly, I lived in one of the most beautiful places in the world. Still didn’t mean I wanted to freeze my ass off half the year.

“I love this drive,” I said.

“I’m impressed.”

I raised a questioning brow.

“You seem completely at ease while I’m driving,” Fane continued.

“I don’t think it’s you so much as the tank.”

He smiled. “Are you hungry? I could pull off in Girdwood.”

“No, keep driving.”

I faced the ocean on the right. It was gray and full of silt-crusting icebergs floating in and out on the tide. I only looked away when Fane pointed out mountain goats on the left. He had an uncanny ability to spot them, even with his eyes on the road.

The parking lot at Portage Glacier was empty when we pulled in.

My memories of the place were of the summer time and great glossy icebergs floating by in Portage Lake as Mom and I watched from the edge of the parking lot. The glacier itself had receded over three miles in the last century. I’d never walked across the frozen lake to the edge of the glacier in the winter, but now it sounded like a good idea.

I tightened my scarf before stepping onto the ice. I couldn’t actually see it with all the snow coverage.

Fane drifted silently by my side. I felt like we were walking on the moon. There wasn't another human in sight. The lake was covered in snow that crunched beneath our shoes. Fane and I blazed a trail across the expanse of white.

We rounded a corner carved into the lake by a mountain and saw the glacier in the distance. I wondered if Fane was as drawn to that great river of ice as I was.

We walked up to the jagged edge of the glacier. Chunks of white ice glowed unnaturally blue. The pieces looked as though they were lit from within.

"This really is an amazing place," I said.

"It's the last frontier," Fane said.

"Too bad it's so cold and dark."

"Are you kidding? That's my favorite part."

"We should turn back," I said. "My bus is going to be leaving soon."

He laughed. "I can drive you home now, remember?"

"Yeah, I guess that's true. We should still turn back. I really need to do my homework. Oh, and start going to class. I don't want to spend my summer in school or worse...next school year at Denali."

The way to the glacier felt like a journey of many miles, but the way back was quick.

"What about you?" I asked. "Do you plan on going to college?" I sort of doubted it.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it lately. I guess it's time to move on to a higher education. Meet new people."

"You mean friends who aren't junkies?"

"They aren't junkies."

I raised a brow.

"Well, I guess they are sort of junkies, but I can't judge them."

"What's your roommate into?"

"Besides foreign films and rare books—not much."

"Real barrel of sunshine he is," I said.

"He's depressed."

"Maybe Alaska's not the best place for him."

Fane huffed. "He's like that no matter where he goes."

"Have you been a lot of places together?"

"Before moving to Alaska we were roommates in New York."

I whistled. "Wow, New York to Alaska. I guess you really needed a change in scenery."

"Call of the wild," Fane said and laughed. "It was my dream to come out to the far north. One day, I told Joss I was moving and that he could join me or stay behind."

"Wow, you guys must be really...close."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. Wasn't it kind of weird for two teenage guys to move across the country together?

"Joss lost his family, too. We've been rooming together for a long time."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Fane squeezed my hand.

"Anyway, he wanted to check it out first, but I said I was moving—sight unseen. The decision was a bit tougher for Joss. You see, he loved New York's arts and culture, but hated the people. The idea of vast stretches of uninhabited land appealed to him...the lack of artistry and architecture was more difficult to swallow."

"We've got totems and igloos," I said, smiling.

Fane grinned back. "Joss is more of a Venus de Milo and Basilica di San Marco kind of guy."

"We have ice sculptures downtown."

Fane laughed. "You're tenacious. I thought you were sick of this state."

"It's still my home...and I still think it's beautiful. It's just..."

"Dark and cold?"

I nodded, but somehow I didn't mind so much anymore.



"I was about to come out looking for you," Mom said when I walked through the front door.

"Mom, I'm only forty minutes late."

"I was worried. You never answer your phone anymore."

"That's not true."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Fane gave me a ride home." I kicked my boots off and shrugged out of my jacket.

"My car phobia is cured. Isn't that great?"

You'd think my mom would look happier.

"Anyway, I'm home and I'm going to get started on homework," I said.

I headed upstairs without waiting for a response. I hadn't even had a chance to get through my English assignment when she came by to check on me later.

Her steps reached my back and stopped.

"What?" I asked when she didn't say anything. I turned in my chair to face her.

"You have a friend downstairs to see you."

It had to be Fane. Why else would my mom's face look so pinched? I skipped ahead of her down the stairs, but found Noel waiting in the entryway.

"Hey," I said.

"Hi."

Her hood was pulled back, her arms were pressed at her sides, legs together, face bent down.

"Want to come up to my room?" I asked.

"Sure."

"This is Noel," I said to my mom as we passed her on the stairs.

"Hello," Mom said.

"Hi, Mrs. Sky." Noel looked at the floor when she spoke.

Once I had Noel in my room I shut the door. "Sorry I haven't been hanging for a while," I said. "I was suspended and then...well..." I shrugged and flashed her a dopey grin.

Noel looked around my room. She was probably realizing we didn't have much in common. I was just a normal high school girl. Well, not exactly normal, but it would appear that way.

I expected her to be annoyed with me, to accuse me of not really being one of them. What I wasn't expecting was for her sudden change in expression.

"Why didn't you tell me you were macking on a vampire?"

I felt the color drain from my face. "What?"

"Fane Donado." Noel arched a brow.

"What about him?"

Noel huffed in disgust. "What do you think, Aurora?"

Fane was nothing like Patrick, or Ivo, or the rabid lunatic.

He was just a high school boy...with dead parents, sharp back molars, and an immunity to cigarette smoke.

Normal.

All of a sudden my breathing went haywire. A succession of heavy gasps rasped up my throat as I fought for air. Oxygen wasn't going to my brain. I pulled at my neck.

Noel's leaned forward. "Aurora?"

"No." I clawed at my scarf. "It's not true. You're lying!" I shouted. "I don't believe you!"

Noel glanced at my door the louder I got. She walked over, contemplated me calmly, then slapped me across the face.

My cheek stung like a bitch. For such a petite stick of kindling, Noel packed a mean punch.

I put a hand on my cheek. "What the fuck, Noel!"

"Sorry. I was losing you. Are you telling me you didn't know Fane is a vampire?"

I did feel rather stupid now that she asked. *Fane*. I mean, come on, how thick was I? Conversations raced through my mind, all his odd little quirks, like the way he preferred the cold and dark and had no appetite for food. *I don't eat meat*. No, he just drank human blood. God, and his obsession with my scarf. It was probably like waving a red flag in front of a bull.

I shuddered.

I'd been lip-locking with a corpse. If Melcher knew, he'd probably tear the wooden cross off his wall and beat me with it.

"Of course he's a vampire," I said bitterly.

I was sure Noel had no idea what I was going through. In her world, having one's own personal suck buddy was probably the ultimate score, which made her humorless expression all the more confusing.

"This isn't good, Aurora."

I tried to read her eyes. "Why not?"

"Valerie, for one thing."

Jealousy raged inside my heart. How many love bites had Fane pressed into Valerie's skin? How many times had he sucked her blood? I bet she'd enjoyed every minute.

I leapt to my feet and snarled. "What does Valerie have to do with this?"

"She won't be happy you stole her man."

"That's none of her business."

Noel pushed herself off the carpet. "She has powerful friends."

"I'm not afraid of a fight."

Noel looked me in the eye. "You should be."

"Is that why you came here? To warn me?"

"Not just you."

For a moment I struggled to breathe again. "You can't mean she'd hurt Fane?"

An image of sharp, pointy objects whirled through my mind.

Noel shifted and shrugged weakly. "I don't know."

For some reason that answer was worse than yes or no. It became a statement of certainty.

"She can't do that! She can't just..."

She couldn't just...what exactly? Murder a vampire? That was my job.

I looked at Noel helplessly. She shrugged again. "I don't want anything to happen to Fane, either. He's one of the nice ones."

"Shit!" I said, pacing my room. "I need to talk to him."

"Aurora..."

“I need to talk to him now!” I turned suddenly. “You have to get me out of here.”

“But Aurora...”

I pulled the dagger and sheath from the top drawer of my nightstand.

Her mouth fell open. “What are you doing with a knife?”

I sat on my bed and yanked the right pant leg of my jeans up. “Can’t be too safe. You know vampires, can’t expect them to play nice all the time.”

“But Fane...”

“Is capable of anything—just like the rest of them.” I shoved the dagger into the holster around my leg. Didn’t think I’d be needing it so soon. “It’s one thing to get bitten, but a whole other to date one of those... things.”

Noel looked at me curiously. “I just...How could you not know? I thought that’s why you were with him.”

Why else would I be with Fane? It was a fair question. Not one I was going to answer, but understandable.

I covered the dagger with my pant leg and stood up. “I’m ready.”

“Aurora, please don’t rush in like this.”

“I’m just going to talk to him.”

Noel looked at my leg. “Then why do you need a knife?”

“As a precaution.” I breezed past her. “Let’s go.”

Romance Is Dead

I told Mom I was going over to Noel's to study for a French test—no need for her to know Noel was taking Spanish. Noel drove me to Video City in her beat-up Volvo, begging me the entire way not to confront Fane. I was way ahead of her. I'd called him before we pulled out of the driveway and told him to meet me. It was hard to imagine that a couple hours earlier we had skipped school to go to Portage Glacier.

Before heading back to town we'd made out in his car. He'd had his tongue in my mouth. I shuddered again.

Noel pulled into a spot in front of Video City and said, "I'm waiting with you."

"Fine," I said.

I shivered. The vents were blasting cold air on us.

"And call as soon as you're done speaking to him."

"Yes, Mom," I said and laughed.

I stared at the movie posters in the window facing us. *Starship Troopers*. Seriously, ever think about updating to the twenty-first century?

Fane pulled in beside Noel. He looked over and gave her a nod. Noel lowered her head slightly.

I narrowed my eyes. "Do you two know each other?"

"Not well," she said.

"Has he ever...?" I suddenly began to ask, but couldn't finish the words.

"Fane? No, of course not. Fane's a one-woman kind of guy."

Except he wasn't a guy at all. He was a bloodsucking vampire who'd wandered far from his grave. Worse yet, he didn't trust me enough to tell me.

"Aurora..." Noel said as I opened the door to get out.

I forced a smile. "I'll be fine."

"Call me later."

Once I slipped inside the Catalina I stared forward. I was afraid if I looked at Fane my face would betray me.

"So what's going on?" he asked.

"We need to talk, but not here."

"Where do you want to go?"

"The bluff."

Fane put the car in reverse and headed to the ocean. "Sure you can't tell me what this is about?"

I shook my head.

After a spell Fane asked, "How do you know Noel Harper?"

"Funny, I was just asking her the same thing about you."

Fane's fingers, which were loosely steering, now wrapped around the wheel tightly. His voice turned silky. "And what did she tell you?"

I kept my silence. Fane cut through the airport and come out on Point Woronzof Road paralleling the coastal trail. On our way to the bluff, I pointed out a trail access surrounded by dense woods.

"Pull in here."

Point Woronzof was a popular place to make out or access the beach. I wanted something more secluded. Well, maybe not that secluded. By now it was almost four in the afternoon. The sun would set in another forty-five minutes.

The trees surrounded the deserted parking lot, shading the last gray hues before total darkness. Fane pulled into a spot in the far corner against the woods.

“So?”

“When were you planning on telling me you’re a vampire?”

Fane squinted at me. “I thought you knew.”

“Why in the hell would you think that?”

Fane waved his hand at my neck. “The red scarf. I thought it was your way of signaling to me.”

“Not even!” I shook my head. “I can’t believe this.”

Now what? What would Melcher instruct me to do in a situation like this? This was different. This wasn’t a mission. This was Fane.

His body tensed and the soft features of his face hardened. His words were silky smooth, without a trace of surprise. He even had the insolence to sound amused. “You chose to confront me in this dark, isolated location, alone in my car? What is it, Aurora—bravery or the thrill of danger?”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Good because I could never hurt you. I might want to sleep with you and suck your blood, but I’d never hurt you.”

“Stop it.”

He turned in his seat to face me. I didn’t like the way he looked me up and down. “Don’t tell me you don’t want it, too.”

“I could never sleep with you.”

I hadn’t meant to sound so repulsed. Did vampires have feelings? I mean, if they were immune to bodily harm, perhaps their emotions were equally deadened.

I didn’t have to wonder for long. The Fane I knew disappeared, replaced by a big-headed brute—or maybe he was just being a guy—who slouched back as though impervious to words or emotions. “Now you don’t want to do the dirty because I’m a vampire? Usually that’s a turn-on for girls.”

I bet it was. I bet girls like Valerie got off on a good fuck and suck.

“Oh? And how many girls have you been with?”

I tried to sound as detached as him, even though he had hurt me more than he could know, and worse, after claiming he never could.

It took him what? All of ten seconds?

“I’ve been around a long time.”

Fane pulled down his visor. A pack of American Spirits landed in his open palm. Fane pushed a car lighter into the socket on the dashboard. Within seconds, the metal cylinder popped out.

Somehow this infuriated me more than Fane’s countless line of lovers. “So you’re smoking again?”

“Depends. Are you breaking up with me?”

“You’re joking. You’re threatening me with a cigarette?”

Fane shrugged and lit up. Guess he was making the decision for me. In the end, guys were all the same whether they’d been around for eighteen years or eight hundred.

The moment his cigarette caught fire I felt myself spark with rage. I threw the car door open and got out. I slammed it shut with both hands. The smash of metal was somewhat satisfying. I began taking off across the empty lot.

Fane would either speed away or chase after me. I figured he would go for the hunt, since he was a vampire.

I just wasn't expecting it so soon.

He jumped out of the car right after me. I saw him flick the cigarette across the snowy lot. He locked eyes with me, and a shiver ran down my spine.

I bolted.

Bright idea, Aurora, let's make this even more exciting for the vampire.

I wasn't a complete dolt. I had my dagger and something even more lethal—my blood. He wanted to bite me. I could feel it with every beat of my heart. And if he did...

That thought alone made me run faster.

I crashed through the woods. Adrenaline was a powerful thing. In normal circumstances, I would have tripped over a stump by now. Instead, I leapt over fallen trunks and dashed through the trees toward the ocean. And what would I do there? Swim across to Fire Island? I wouldn't make it thirty feet before hypothermia set in.

I couldn't risk looking behind me, and I couldn't hear Fane through the pounding of my heart, which drummed inside my ears. My blood was beckoning him. An inexplicable thrill shot through my body.

When I ran into a clearing on the bluff I stopped suddenly and whirled around.

My body trembled, but it wasn't from fear or cold. Our eyes locked, stopping Fane in his tracks twenty feet away.

We stared each other down like two combatants about to duel. Fane started toward me. The important thing, I reminded myself, was not to show any fear. But for all my feigned courage, I couldn't move.

Fane took advantage of my hesitation to close the remaining distance between us. He yanked me to him with both hands. It was difficult to tell if he meant to caress or attack me. His hands ran down my back.

Fane pulled at my scarf as he whispered in my ear. "I'm dying to taste you." His words left hot marks on my skin.

I pushed at him, but he gripped me harder and ripped off my scarf. The fabric pooled over the snow like a stain. I struggled and was just about to reach for the dagger when Fane released his hold on me.

I pitched forward, falling to my hands and knees in the snow.

Fane stood over me blinking.

"You've already been bitten."

The cold air prickled my neck. It was like someone had cut off my hair and left me completely exposed.

Fane's gaze fixated on my neck. At least he didn't look as though he wanted to bite me anymore. I probably could have used stitches where Ivo bit me. Since I had the scarf to hide the wound, it wasn't carefully covered up with powder or foundation.

Fane's fingers trembled when he reached for my neck. "Who did this to you?"

"A vampire."

He didn't smile. "Who was it?"

I studied his side profile in the dying light. "Why? Do you know every vampire in Alaska?"

Wait, would I be required to report that information back to Agent Melcher? Maybe it was better if he didn't answer.

Fane's eyes narrowed. "That bite mark is fresh."

I lowered my chin and tried to look at it, which was ridiculous—there was no way I could see my own neck. It was better than looking Fane in the eye when he was staring at me as though I'd cheated on him.

"I didn't go out of my way to get this!" Okay, that was a lie, but it's not like I wanted to be bitten. I'd rather jab a needle in my arm than get gnawed on by creepy killers.

Fane bent down slowly for the scarf and handed it to me from two feet away. "Come on, you must be freezing."

The snow seemed thicker on the walk back.

Fane turned on the heat once we got inside his car. "Noel Harper dragged you to one of Marcus's parties, didn't she?"

I really had to meet this Marcus and check out one of his after hour parties. They were the talk of the town, at least among the undead and their cohorts.

A look of rage crossed Fane's face. "Aurora?" he said carefully. "A couple days ago you had a bruise on your forehead. Did someone force himself on you?"

I stared out the windshield, weighing my options. From a sitting position, I could ease my hand down my leg and retrieve the dagger under my pant leg. I didn't want to hurt him, though. It was hard enough killing evil vampires. Would the agents ever ask me to kill nice ones like Fane?

"Have you ever killed anyone?" I asked suddenly.

"What?" Fane scowled. "No."

Before he could ask about the bite again I said, "Look, any girl who hangs out with Noel and her friends ends up getting bitten."

Fane's features began to vanish in the dimming light. It was the end of January, and we were up to seven hours and forty minutes of daylight, not that it was noticeable on overcast days like this. The grayness had a calming effect...until Fane punched the dashboard. It made me jump.

"I can't stand it!" he cried. "I can't stand the thought of someone else biting you."

"Hey, I didn't like it either."

He turned to me. "You didn't?"

"It was disgusting."

"But most people..."

"I said it was disgusting!"

Fane settled back into his seat and stared forward. "Is that what you think of me? That I'm disgusting?"

I sighed and shrank back in the seat.

My voice came out so much quieter than I'd intended. "I wanted to...but I can't."

His fists tightened around the steering wheel.

I hugged myself in my arms. "Don't ever bite me, though."

I couldn't tell if Fane was nodding or shaking his head. "Do you want me to take you home?"

"Not yet."

"Do you want to stay parked a bit longer?"

Parking inevitably led to one thing—making out—and it probably went against every code of honor for a vampire hunter to have relations with a vampire. But who cared? It wasn't like Melcher had made me recite any vows. Fane wasn't a killer. He was just...dead.

I turned my eyes away from the oppressive trees. "Can we go to your place?"

"My place? That's fine, but I have to warn you, my roommate isn't hospitable."

"Honestly, I could do without the pleasantries tonight."

Fane pulled onto Postmark Drive, skirting cargo hangars and the big FedEx Express Center. We passed my street and headed toward Denali High, passing it before pulling into a nearby neighborhood.

"You live this close to school and you don't walk?"

"Walk?" Fane repeated. "I wouldn't be caught dead walking to school." He laughed.

He pulled the tank into the right side of a one-story duplex and made no movement to vacate the vehicle.

I looked over when he didn't get out. "What?"

"How did you figure out I was a vampire?"

"Noel told me. I don't know why I didn't figure it out, myself. I mean, '*Fane*.' Kind of obvious, don't you think?"

"It's spelled with an 'e,' not a 'g.'"

"You're right, that makes all the difference." It felt good to laugh, even briefly. I nodded at the garage door. "Does your roommate get the garage?"

Fane grunted. "You could say that. It's full of his books. He's a rare books dealer—sells online. That's how we cover our expenses."

I bit down softly on my lower lip. "Oh, right, I didn't think about that. You still have to make a living. So what are you doing at Denali High?"

Fane stretched his hands on the steering wheel. "Every few decades I enroll in school to check out how things have changed. Joss hates society, but it fascinates me. I miss being part of it. Besides, it's the best place to pick up chicks."

My voice rose. "Skating on thin ice." Still, I was happy we were joking again.

Fane chuckled.

"So, how does twenty-first-century high school compare to the fifties or eighties or whenever you were last in school?"

"It's changed a lot. I'll tell you, I sympathize with the teachers. These days they have cell phones and guns to contend with...I think cell phones are worse."

"And your roommate doesn't mind you playing school boy while he brings home the bacon?"

"Joss doesn't bring home anything. I have to do all the leg work. Drive him around to garage sales, mail packages, fetch supplies..."

"He doesn't drive?"

"He refuses to learn—said automobiles are just another destructive invention of mankind. It didn't matter in New York. No one drives in the city." Fane looked over. "Sure you want to come inside? Or are you stalling?"

"I'm sure."

We got out of the car and approached the front door. I didn't see any boarded-up windows.

"Welcome to my lair," Fane said as we walked in.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, it wasn't the antique furniture I focused on, but the pair of unfriendly eyes regarding me as though I were vermin crawling around his feet by the

couch. There was a white porcelain mug on the end table by his side. The mug and scowl on his face were all lit by a glass iron lamp on the table. I recognized Joss from outside the video store.

“What is she doing here?” he demanded.

“What do you think? She’s my guest, and she’s come for a visit.”

“What happened to the other girl?”

“I ate her.” Fane chuckled and turned to me. “You’ll have to excuse my roommate. A hundred years and he’s still not socialized. Aurora, meet my immortal companion, Josslyn.”

“So then...she knows what happened to us.” Josslyn looked me over in disgust as though *I* was the foul creature in this scenario.

Hello? Me, human. You, walking corpse.

“Nice to meet you, Joss,” I said.

“My name is Josslyn.”

“Kind of girly.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I don’t like you.”

“Don’t take it personally,” Fane said to me. “Joss hates all humans.”

“Hey, as long as he’s not killing them.”

Joss closed the book nestled in his lap. “*Me* kill?” He looked at Fane, eyes narrowed. “Perhaps your new companion ought to hear about the mass murder that took place in my village. It wasn’t vampires doing the slaughtering.”

Fane rolled his eyes. “As charming as that story is, let’s save it for another night.”

“Is that blood in your mug?” I asked, nodding toward the porcelain cup.

“Certainly not!”

“It’s Earl Grey,” Fane said.

“You’re drinking tea?” I raised both brows.

Joss glared at me. “I’d rather consume strychnine than *human* blood.”

I turned to Fane. “How long can you go without feeding?”

“Months, but I don’t know what vampire would want to. The cravings are intense—like no other addiction. As far as health goes, a regular diet of blood gives us strength and quicker healing capabilities.”

“What about super powers?”

Joss snorted.

“Aside from heightened senses, fast healing, and the whole living forever thing; we’re more or less human.” Fane shrugged. “Joss would know the answer to your question about feeding better. I believe he’s set the record for the longest fast.”

A light bulb went off in my head. “Oh, like a tick.”

“Excuse me?” Joss said.

“Ticks can live for seven years without feeding.”

“Francesco,” Joss said testily. “She’s comparing me to an insect.”

Fane grinned. “Yes, I heard.”

Joss stood up. “I’ll be in my room.” He took his book and tea with him and slammed a door somewhere down the hall.

Fane spread his arm toward the couch. “Have a seat.”

I settled onto the couch and looked at Fane. “How old are you?”

“Me? Gosh.” He scratched his head. “I was born in 1755. I guess that would make me...two hundred and fifty-eight.”

“Well, you don’t look a day above twenty,” I teased. “Where are you from originally?”

“Italy.”

“But you have no accent.”

“Not anymore. I didn’t stick around long. Made my way to England, which is where I learned English.”

“You don’t sound British, either. Not like Joss. Your name makes a lot more sense now. Francesco.”

Fane screwed up his face. “Now you know why I go by Fane.”

“And I thought you were being ironic.”

I shouldn’t be at his house with him. I shouldn’t be with him at all, but I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else. I was gathering intel. That’s all. Going deep undercover. What better way to learn everything I could about vampires than from the creature itself?

I faltered. Looking at Fane now, I couldn’t think of him as a creature. My insides still thrummed at his nearness. Even now, I wanted to straddle him on the couch and kiss him back to life. It was wrong to want a vampire. So very wrong.

I switched back to teasing. “You’re so obvious, you know? What’s with the long leather jacket? Kind of cliché, don’t you think?”

“This?” Fane opened his arms and looked down. “What’s wrong with following fashion trends? Frankly, I like it a lot better than the bulky cuffs and full-skirted frock coats of the eighties.”

“Eighties?”

“Oh, right, pardon, 1780s. And don’t get me started on top hats.” Fane took his jacket off and draped it over an armchair before settling on the couch beside me. “These are great times—for instance, you’ve got jeans and sunglasses and I can’t tell you how much I love cotton—so soft and unrestricting.”

I turned to him. “What about the smoking?”

“Are you kidding? It’s the easiest way to meet people.”

“So you’re not addicted to nicotine?”

Fane let out a deep, throaty laugh. “It’s the habit I enjoy.” He leaned in closer. “There’s only one thing I’m addicted to.” His eyes shone as he perused the skin above my scarf. He leaned in closer and inhaled me, his lips hovering above my skin.

“Don’t,” I whispered.

His eyes were hazy. I stood up. “I should get going.”

His eyes slowly cleared. He got up and put his jacket on.

Silence followed us on the drive home. My emotions were too jumbled to talk, my thoughts tangled up until nothing coherent could be pulled out of them.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Fane asked as he turned onto Century Heights.

“I’m tired.” Not that I expected to get any sleep that night.

He threw the Pontiac into park in my driveway and looked at me. “So are we good?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I need time to think about all of this.”

Fane tapped his fingers lightly on the steering wheel. “How much time?”

“What do you mean how much time? You have all the time in the world.”

Fane took his eyes off his fingers and looked straight at me. “That doesn’t make the seconds away from you go by any faster.”

My heart skittered. I drew in a breath and nearly forgot to release it. “You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“But it’s the truth.”

It was all I could do to get out of the car and make it to the front door without looking back. I lay awake all night thinking about Fane. I thought about him being around for over three centuries and all the changes he’d seen.

Mostly, though, I replayed the chase through the woods. But instead of the scarf he ripped down my jeans and made love to me in the fallen snow.

Every part of me tingled.

I was seriously screwed.

❄ 20 ❄
Code Red

“You are the luckiest girl ever!” Hope said when I met the Mouseketeers for lunch in front of their lockers. “How did you manage to snag Fane Donado?”

I sat on the ground between Hope and Whitney and stretched my legs across the hall, my back up against the lockers. Noel sat Indian style a foot away, hooded head bent down like the grim reaper.

“It wasn’t exactly planned,” I admitted.

Whitney pouted. “You’re not going to want to party with us now. Not when you have your own little private party for two.”

“So you and Fane are still going out?” Noel asked.

I couldn’t see Noel’s eyes from under her hood. “Yeah, I mean we talked and…” And I didn’t know what else to say.

What I needed right then was to reestablish some good habits—normal habits—like attending class.

I also needed to study and get my homework done.

That was the plan anyway when I walked up the hill after school. Right up until I found Dante’s white Rubicon parked in our driveway.

Okay. Now I was getting seriously annoyed. I was actually trying to get back on track if people would just let me.

Then a thought occurred to me.

Did Dante know about Fane? No. He couldn’t.

“I’m home!” I yelled once I got inside.

“We’re in the kitchen,” Mom called back cheerfully.

I shrugged out of my backpack and jacket and casually strolled into the kitchen. “Hi, Mom. Hi, Dante, I wasn’t expecting you.”

He leaned against the counter and shoved a leftover brownie into his mouth. He actually swallowed before responding. “Hey, Sky. We’ve got a Code Red down at the station. Agents want us both in now.”

I moved across the room so he wouldn’t catch my shiver. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“I hope everything’s okay,” Mom said.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Sky. We can handle anything.”

“Oh,” she said with a smile. “I’m sure you can.”

Dante turned to me. “Ready, Sky?”

“Do I need to bring anything?”

“Nope.”

I turned to my mom. “I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

“Take your time,” Mom said.



“Where’s Tommy Moe?” I asked as I clicked my seatbelt on.

“I left him at home.”

“Oh.” I wouldn’t have minded some furry comfort at the moment.

“Don’t look so worried, Sky. From your face you’d think you just got caught with your hand in the cookie jar.”

I grimaced. He was closer to the truth than he knew.

The Jeep zoomed backward onto the road and turned down the drive. Once on Jewel Lake Road, I watched him shift down, over, up, and down. We lurched forward then flew down Minnesota Avenue.

“So you don’t know what this is about?”

“Nope, but we’ll find out soon enough. Melcher loves to toss in a Code Red every now and then. He takes this all very seriously, you know.”

Apparently Dante and I were the last ones to arrive at the party—a rather startling surprise party that included...

“Noel?!”

Noel looked grim-faced sitting in front of Melcher’s desk. To her left I saw Valerie, dressed in a turtleneck and a pair of tall boots pulled over tight jeans. Her hair cascaded in red waves down her shoulders. She leaned against the wall, arms folded. My heart dropped.

Busted.

Melcher smiled when he saw me. “Come in, Aurora. Have a seat.” He indicated the spot next to Noel.

If Valerie was standing, so was I.

“Hi, Aurora,” Noel said, barely audible.

Agent Crist raised a brow. “You two know each other?”

“We’re friends,” I said.

Valerie scoffed at this. She looked right over me to address Noel. “And you didn’t suspect her? Fine informant you are.”

“Ladies, ladies,” Dante said, laughing. “Let’s play nice.” He crossed over to Crist’s desk and settled on the edge. “So, what’s with the little powwow?”

“Team, we have two problems,” Agent Melcher said. “Usually we don’t gather informants and agents in the same room. Withholding identities within the organization is vital and not doing so could cost someone their life, but we’re making an exception because Valerie identified you, Aurora.”

I looked quickly at Valerie and then back at Melcher.

“Valerie’s one of our top informants and an uncannily perceptive one at that,” Melcher said, proudly.

Perceptive, my ass.

Valerie’s eyes narrowed. “Actually, I thought you were a vampire.”

My jaw dropped. “So you tried to call in a hit on my life?”

Melcher chuckled. “Valerie does enjoy a prompt assassination—makes her feel like part of the team.”

Valerie lifted her nose. “Who can blame me? Look how pale she is. Even in Alaska, that’s pushing it. Then there was her accident on the road. One moment the kids at school are whispering about how Aurora Sky was in a fatal car crash, the next she’s in class without a dent on her.”

I glared at Valerie. This had nothing to do with the paleness of my skin and everything to do with a certain vampire. Of course, I couldn’t mention any of this, and she knew it. If she wanted to tell the agents about Fane, she would have done so already.

And if I truly had been a vampire, she would have happily seen me staked through the heart.

I could already see she was over whatever initial disappointment she must have felt when Agent Melcher explained I was one of their own. She still had me at her mercy. What was the punishment for dating a vampire? Death? Mine was questionable. Fane's was certain.

I wanted to rip Valerie's throat out, but I needed her to talk to me first.

"Let's get to the first order of business." Melcher said. "Valerie, Noel, we have reports of the infected prowling the halls at West High. I want one of you to transfer and identify every last one of them."

Valerie lifted her nose in the air. "I'm not leaving Denali."

Noel's voice quivered. "But all my friends are there."

"You can make new friends," Valerie said.

Melcher spoke up. "That's enough. Noel, you're transferring to West first thing Monday."

Noel's face dropped. "Yes, sir."

"Once you track down the predators, I'll meet with you and Sky to talk strategy."

Guess Noel and I would be partying together after all.

"Now that everything's cleared up, you two can leave." Melcher looked from Noel to Valerie. "I need to have a word with my assassins."

Noel hurried out of the room. Valerie pushed away from the wall, locking eyes with me as she left. Crist stood up and closed the door behind them. Melcher folded his hands over his desk.

I'd been holding my breath without releasing it. I pulled in air slowly.

"I've got bad news," Melcher said. "This is serious, gang."

Dante folded his arms and leaned forward. "Psycho vampire on the loose?" He thought a moment and snapped his fingers. "Renegade vampire army?"

"Janine's dead."

After the initial shock wore off I looked at Dante. His face was a blank mask.

"How?" he asked.

"She was found dead in her dorm room, both arms broken, trauma to the head, blood drained."

Janine bludgeoned to death. Great time for my imagination to go graphic.

I sank into a chair.

Dante's jaw was tight. "Who did this?"

"We don't know," Crist said.

"Obviously we know *what* did it," Melcher said. "What we don't know is if Janine told it anything."

Dante propelled himself off the desk. "Shit!"

Crist frowned and glanced at the cross on the wall.

"I want a name," Dante said. "I'm going to personally send this creature back to his grave."

"We're working on it," Melcher said. "But in the meantime, both you and Sky need to be on high alert."

My pulse slowed. You'd think it would quicken right about now, rather than retreat into hiding. I felt faint. "Does this vampire know who we are?"

"We don't know, but it's a possibility we can't rule out."

I nodded slowly. "I think I need some air."

"Go on, Sky," Dante said. "I'll meet you in the parking lot in a moment."

I hurried down the hallway, in a rush to get out of the compound as quickly as possible. Just being there reminded me of the white room and the vampire lunatic. Now I was sick with the thought of what happened to Janine. It overshadowed my own fear of being targeted. And I

thought I had problems before. Not only had I been made aware of Fane's condition, but now Valerie was onto us.

She was waiting for me in the parking lot, a Capri Slim between two fingers. Just what I needed right then.

I sidestepped her as she tried to blow smoke in my face.

I looked Valerie up and down. "The agents told me there were vampires, but they didn't mention anything about witches."

Valerie glared at me. "Maybe the agents didn't explain to you that you're supposed to take down vampires, not date them." She dropped her cigarette and crushed it under her boot.

"And shouldn't you be turning them in?" I countered.

"Do you want me to turn Fane in?"

I saw straight through the sweetness of her tone.

"No," I admitted.

"Then break it off," Valerie said smoothly.

I should have been relieved that she was offering to keep him secret from the agents, but relief was not what I felt inside my chest at the moment. The despair was so intense I itched to grasp the area over my heart and squeeze until it stopped hurting so much.

"You mean..."

"Break. Up. With. Him."

I ground my teeth together so hard they ached when I released. "So you can swoop back in?"

"Just remember, as long as Fane's with me he's safe." Valerie tossed her hair over her shoulder. She walked to her car, a shiny red Honda Civic that zoomed out of the lot, leaving behind a cloud of exhaust.

I didn't need to jump in place to keep warm as I waited for Dante—I was fuming. I always knew Valerie was heinous bitch. And now she thought she could blackmail me. Well, actually, she could. What was I going to do about it? What could I do? And why the hell did she think she could be with Fane if I couldn't?

I sobered up when Dante walked out. I knew there were more serious things to worry about than breaking up with Fane, though they didn't feel nearly as important.

Dante lifted his chin when he saw me. We got inside the Rubicon and he stared through the window shield into the lot before starting her up.

"Dante...I'm sorry." It seemed we were both losing someone we cared about.

"Don't worry, Sky. Janine would never rat us out."

"What about those two guys at the party?"

"I'm going to hunt them down this weekend. Wanna come?"

Not a bad idea. Break up with Fane then skip town. My life just kept getting better and better.

❄ 21 ❄
Love Bites

I waited until the eleventh hour to call Fane.

Chicken shit.

I dialed his number, heart in my throat. I'd rather do this in person, but I remembered how well that went last time.

"Aurora."

He sounded so happy to hear from me. It made what I had to say that much worse.

"I'm headed out of town again."

"Fairbanks?"

"Unfortunately."

"When?"

"In a little bit."

"When are you getting back?"

"Don't know."

Fane released a deep breath. "I've missed you."

"Me, too."

I knew what Valerie wanted—for this to be a messy breakup so Fane would run right back into her arms for comfort. If only Valerie was a vampire. I'd ram a stake right through her evil heart.

"Fane..."

"I know what I am, but I didn't choose to be this way. In the end, I'm just a boy—a boy who doesn't get any older or die but still human—and I want to be with you as long as possible."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

This was my cue to reveal Valerie's evil plot. Did I take it? No. Because there was no way to tell him without confessing my own dark secret. If I told him we'd be history anyway. I was the real killer.

"I'm seeing someone else."

"What? Who?"

I couldn't speak for a moment, shocked I'd said the words. It wasn't part of the plan.

"Who is he?" Fane asked.

"I'm so sorry, Fane," I said very softly. "You mean a great deal to me."

"Who is he?"

"Dante."

Yep, that was spontaneous as well.

"Dante," Fane spit out. "You mean the big *brother* type?"

I winced. "I guess I started seeing him as more than that. I don't want to hurt you, but Dante and I have a lot in common, and he won't look like he's twenty when I'm eighty. How long do you think we'd last, anyway?"

"So that's it then? And this Dante character's going to stick around until you're eighty?"

"Probably not, but at least it's a possibility."

"I can't believe this. We need to talk...in person."

My body shuddered with a sensation that was more pleasure than fear.

"Let me pick you up."

“I can’t. I’m about to leave.”

The soft lilt of Fane’s voice hardened. “With Dante?”

“With Dante,” I repeated. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve got to go.”

“Fane...”

It was good he hung up because I don’t know what I would have said had he stayed on the line. That, and I felt the waterworks coming on. Breaking things off probably wouldn’t sound so convincing if I started blubbering over the phone.

I threw myself face down onto my bed and wailed into the pillow.

“Aurora!” my mom called from downstairs. “Aurora, why don’t you come down and have some lunch before you leave?”

I willed her to leave me alone, but eventually my mom made her way to my room. “Aurora? What’s the matter?”

I sniffed several times to clear my nose. “It’s not like you’d care.”

“What happened?”

I turned my head away from her. “I broke up with Fane.”

“Oh, honey.” Mom patted my back as she held me in a half-hug. “I’m sorry to see you upset.”

That’s all she cared about. *Seeing* me upset. Listening to her try to sympathize with me was torture, especially the part where she said she thought it was for the best.

“Dante’s going to be here soon. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Mom led me to the bathroom. My face did feel like a splotchy horror. I’d rather not have Dante on my case the whole eight hours up to Fairbanks, or five, depending how fast he drove. I splashed my face with cool water in the sink and patted it dry with the hand towel Mom handed me.

I didn’t need a mirror to see I still looked like a mess. I could see it in the way Mom looked at me.

“I have some concealer,” she said.

“No, no make-up.” I combed my hair forward with my fingers. At least part of my face was covered.

I hung out in the kitchen for the remaining hour, just waiting for the doorbell to ring. When it did, I flinched.

“Ah, here’s Dante,” Mom said cheerfully.

She rushed past me to let him in. He stayed on the porch and nodded to her in hello.

She smiled. “Dante, it’s so good to see you again.”

“And you, Mrs. Sky. Always a pleasure.”

Mom giggled and blushed.

I brushed past her. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Do you have your phone?” Mom asked.

“Yes.”

“Be safe.”



“What’s with the boo-hoo face?” Dante asked the moment we were shut inside his Rubicon.

I twisted in my seat to give Tommy Moe pets.

I grumbled. "I can't believe I have to nurse a broken heart with you for company."

"Broken heart? Did some guy mistreat you, Sky? I'll kick his ass to kingdom come."

"It was my doing. I broke up with him."

"Then he must have deserved it."

"Not really."

"So what's the deal?"

"Nothing good could have come from being with him. Whether it was now or later, it had to be done."

"You're one tough cookie, Sky. That's one of the things I admire about you. You're able to make tough choices—no matter what the price."

"That seems like all we do—make sacrifices."

"Naw."

As we were cruising down Fifth Avenue, Dante suddenly threw on his blinker and pulled into a Wendy's. He zoomed into the drive-through.

"What are you doing?"

"It's a long drive and I'm hungry. You want anything?"

"God, no," I said, scrunching my nose. "And if I did it wouldn't be this junk."

"Suit yourself." Dante rolled down his window when he pulled up to the order speaker. "I'll take a double bacon cheeseburger, large fries, and a chocolate Frosty." Dante looked over the menu and turned to me. "Want some apple slices? They've got apple slices."

I shook my head.

"No milkshake? What happened to binge eating when you're feeling down?"

I rolled my eyes. "I don't need to puke on top of everything else."

Dante pulled up to the pickup window to collect his bag of fast food. He unwrapped the cheeseburger before getting back onto Fifth and tossed the bacon slices back to Tommy. Only Dante could manage to steer, shift gears, and stuff a burger in his face. When the burger was finished, Dante jammed fingers full of fries into his mouth and chewed loudly.

He noticed me watching and held the fries toward me. "Want some?"

I wrinkled my nose. "No, I'm good."

Soon, we were on the Glenn Highway. This time, I could actually see the landscape waltzing by. We careened past the miles of fenced forest along the base, skirted mountains and woods, and crossed over rivers.

"I won't be able to go back," I said.

"Where?"

"To Denali."

"This guy really got to you, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

I looked out the window.

"I could enroll at West with Noel." I paused. "You probably think I'm a real coward."

"Not at all. From Dante's Guide to Life: If you no longer like the scenery, change it. Keep moving is what I say." Dante tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "So you're friends with Noel, but not Valerie?"

"She's more like my arch nemesis."

"Too bad, she's really cute."

I ground my teeth together. "Let's be clear, if you ever hooked up with Valerie I'd never speak to you again."

“Whoa,” Dante said and laughed. “What did this chick do to you?”

“She’s about to steal my boyfriend...or ex-boyfriend anyway.” I guess there was no harm in telling Dante part of the truth. I’d just leave out the bit about Fane being a vampire.

“She’s a badass,” Dante said in admiration.

“I stole him first.”

“Then you’re the badass.” Dante sounded even more impressed. “Nothing like a bit of juicy assassin/informant rivalry to entertain the mind on the long drive ahead.”

I leaned back in my chair and folded my arms. “I’m done talking about Valerie.”

“Come on. How did you steal her man out from under her?”

I shrugged. “He came to me.”

Dante chuckled. “I don’t doubt it.”

I changed the subject. “It’s all fine and good to say I’ll just transfer, but I’m going to spend my last semester of senior year utterly friendless.”

“Two words for you, Sky: track team.”

“Track team?”

“Join the track team, win at the meets, and you’re golden. Take it from your officially appointed mentor. I know what I’m talking about.”

“You’re forgetting one thing. I suck at sports.”

“Ah, maybe the Aurora of yore sucked at sports, but new superhuman Sky is a champion. Vampire blood, remember? It’s in us, it enhances us—can’t let that extra boost go to waste, can we?”

“Doesn’t track start in the spring?”

“So even better—start with cross country. I remember being on the cross country team,” Dante said wistfully. “Meets, competitions, parties, girls...well, boys for you. You’ll have it made.”

I stared out the window. “Maybe I’ll look into it.”

I cleared my throat. “So you located these two guys from the party?”

Dante produced a grunt of disgust. “Apparently one of them overdosed right after we left. I did get an address on the second guy, Thomas Parks—lives at home.”

“So we’re just going to barge in on his family.”

He smiled. “Single mom. Works all the time. I checked.”

Dante made several pit stops, including his favorite pullout where, even in the daylight, we couldn’t see Mount Denali through the clouds.

“One of these times, Sky,” he said.

Once we reached Fairbanks, Dante drove straight for a rundown ranch house and parked in front on the street. He kept the engine running. It was either that or risk it dying in the subzero conditions without a plug in.

“Stay in the car,” Dante said. “I’ll be back in a sec.”

Fine by me. If I could take out two vicious vampires on my own, Dante could handle a half-dazed suck junkie.

Outside my window, Dante walked smoothly across the snow-covered yard on a path blazed by footsteps. The rest of the driveway hadn’t been shoveled. There was a concrete rectangle where a car had been parked. Dante walked onto the porch and bent over the door handle. I started to shiver even though the heat was blasting through the vents.

Dante opened the door and pushed into the house. Just as quickly, he shut it behind him.

Tommy's tongue slid back and forth between his teeth. I turned the radio on and off. I started humming.

When Dante came out the front door dragging a black-hooded body with him, I grasped the handle of the Jeep and jumped out.

"Hurry up! Open the back."

I nearly slipped on the ice, rushing to the rear of the Jeep. I don't know how Dante expected to stuff a body in his shoebox sized trunk, but he did.

Surprisingly, Thomas didn't struggle.

"Sedative for the ride," Dante said as if reading my mind.

We hopped into the front seats, and I couldn't stop shaking.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Moving him to another location to interrogate him."

"The cabin?"

"Yep."

I looked over my shoulder. Tommy breathed heavily then stopped when I stared at him.

"Is there a reason Tommy doesn't find any of this alarming?" I asked.

Dante's face softened. "Tommy's just a big teddy bear."

I guess that made Dante the grizzly.

Interrogation

Being back inside that cabin was eerie. Our mugs from the previous weekend were turned over on a kitchen towel on the counter. The bed in the corner was made. Dante got to work making a fire.

Once it flickered to life, he straightened up.

“Time to bring in Thomas.”

“Need help?”

“Nah, he’s a light weight.”

Dante’s retreating footsteps echoed over the floorboards. I rubbed my hands together in front of the fire, but it offered no heat.

The cabin door flew open, hitting the wall with a *bang*.

Dante dragged Thomas by the shoulders and dumped him on a chair.

“Tape his arms and legs to the chair will you?”

I rummaged around in the kitchen drawers until I found a roll of duct tape.

No one had ever trained me in the art of taping a hostage to a chair before. I started by pulling Thomas’s arms around the seatback.

The tape made a ripping noise as I pulled long stretches of it from the roll.

“Make it tight,” Dante said.

I held one of Thomas’s limp arms against the back and began wrapping tape around his appendage and the gap between the strips of wood backing. I ripped the pieces of tape off with my bare hands. His feet were easier.

I stood back to admire my handiwork.

“What about the hood?”

“Leave it on.”

Dante checked Thomas’s wrists. “Not bad, Sky.”

“Now what?”

The fire sparked behind Dante casting an eerie glow all around him.

His eyes were on Thomas.

“Now we wait for the sedative to wear off.”

The cabin felt a hundred degrees hotter once the fire got going. I welcomed the warmth when I ran back inside after freezing my ass off in the outhouse.

I nodded at Thomas. “Still out?”

Before Dante could answer a murmur came from under the black hood.

Dante yanked it off. The fire wasn’t the only presence in the cabin that had come to life. Far from appearing fearful, Thomas oozed with pent-up rage.

“You two!” Thomas sputtered. “You killed Patrick and Ivo, didn’t you?”

“I’ll ask the questions, son,” Dante said. “Now tell me who offed Janine.”

Thomas looked away.

“Wendy, knife.”

I grabbed Dante’s hunting knife off the table and handed it to him as though he was a surgeon asking for his scalpel, and I was the assisting nurse.

“What are you going to do?” Thomas demanded.

Dante ignored him and turned to me. “Let’s drain him.”

That got Thomas’s attention. The boy wriggled in an attempt to thrash out of his bindings.

I nodded, trying my best to seem like I thought it was a good idea. “His friends won’t have any more use for him once he has no more blood.”

“You can’t do that!” he shouted.

“It’s my job,” Dante said smoothly. “You’re a threat to the nation, Thomas. Unless you tell me everything, we’ll consider you in league with the hostiles.”

Thomas’s jaw dropped. “Hostiles?”

“Hostiles, vampires, murderers...they’re all the same—a danger to society. Now who killed Janine?”

Thomas pressed his lips together and shook his head.

Dante moved in on him. He showed teeth when he grinned. “I was hoping you wouldn’t cooperate.”

Dante sliced his dagger across Thomas’s arm. The boy screamed. I looked away.

“Let’s just get right to the other arm, shall we? Unless you want to tell me who killed Janine.”

Dante pressed the tip of his knife into Thomas’s right arm.

“Stop! Renard—it was Renard! God, just stop!”

Dante got up abruptly and went to the kitchen. He wiped his blade clean with a rag before setting it on the table. He stepped directly in front of Thomas again.

“Now for the real question. How did Renard find out?” Dante reached forward in an instant and wrapped his hands around Thomas’s neck.

Thomas began making a choking sound.

Was it wrong that I felt attracted to Dante for one fleeting second?

“This one’s a freebie,” Dante hissed into Thomas’s ear. “I’ll answer for you. *You* ratted Janine out. *You* got her killed.”

Dante released his grip, and Thomas gasped as he sucked in air.

Thomas started shaking. “I didn’t want her to die! She’s the one who got herself involved in all this. Where do you think Renard came looking once he heard the police suspected arson at Ivo’s place? He knows I’m over there all the time.”

“You could have told him you didn’t know anything rather than send a mass murderer after Janine.”

Thomas stiffened. He looked past Dante and glared at me. “You’re the murderers. *Wendy* especially. She was the last one there that night.”

“What did you tell Renard about us?”

“Everything I could!” Thomas seethed in his chair.

“Wendy,” Dante said calmly, turning to me. “Take Tommy and wait in the Jeep.”

I hesitated at the door.

“Go!” Dante yelled.

I jumped in place.

“Tommy,” I called softly. “Tommy, let’s go.”

Once we were outside, I hurried Tommy into the car. He jumped in back. I climbed in after the retriever and wrapped my arms around him, burying my face into his fur.

I heard the Jeep door open and close not long after. Dante didn’t say a word as he shifted gears and drove away from the cabin. The turns he took were gentle. He drove slow. I lost track of the time, but he eventually pulled to the side of the road. When he didn’t get out or continue driving, I pulled my head away from Tommy.

We were on the edge of town. Dante looked from me to the passenger's seat. I took the hint, scooted over to the door, climbed down, and joined him up front. He continued driving only when I'd fastened my seatbelt.

"You killed him, didn't you?" I asked once we were on the highway.

"Renard's not the only vampire Thomas could sic on us. He was a threat, and he had to be eliminated."

I looked out the front window. "Will I ever have to kill a human?"

"No. We're vampire hunters, Sky. They've got cleaners for vermin like Thomas. I've got a call into them now—although they'll be disposing of a cold one this time. He killed Janine. It was for me to finish."

I nodded slowly. "I can't believe they got her."

"There's one thing left to do—find Renard and take him out."

Right, take him out before he took us out.

"Do you think he's looking for us?"

"Probably. The agents had someone check out his last known address. It's been cleared out."

"Will he be able to find us?"

"Doubtful. All Renard has is a couple of fake names and a city...should have said we'd come from Barrow now that I think about it. Send that fucker right up to the Big Freeze. Well, live and learn." Dante turned to me and smiled. "At least this way, he's coming to us. I've had it with Fairbanks for the time being."

"I've had it with Fairbanks forever," I countered.

"Let's talk about something else—like breakups."

I grumbled. "You're a load of laughs, you know."

"You know it's on your mind."

"Doesn't mean I want to talk about it."

"Sure you do. You're a girl."

I turned in my seat. "Hey! Watch it, buddy."

Dante chuckled. "So, what makes you think this guy is going to let you go so easily?"

I'd had the same concern—and, to be honest, hope. But I reminded myself what would happen to Fane if Valerie alerted the agents. I'd seen what happened to Thomas...part of what happened, anyway, and I knew what hunters did to vampires—I had personal experience in that department. Regardless of Valerie, it was only a matter of time before Fane tried to bite me. I kept coming to the same conclusion. One way or another, this had to end.

"I sort of told him I was seeing someone else."

"Good call, Sky—surest way to inflict the deepest wound."

"I didn't want to inflict pain. I just needed him to believe it was over. I told him I was seeing you."

"Me?" Dante's voice lifted. "Sky, I'm honored."

"I didn't think you'd mind being my pretend boyfriend."

"*Au contraire*. We don't even have to pretend."

I laughed and glanced at Dante, but my smile fell. We were on a straight stretch of highway and his palms were flat, barely touching the steering wheel.

"You're joking, right?" I asked.

"Why? I find you attractive. You think I'm funny. And we have the blood link and whole saving the world from vampires thing in common. It's tricky dating normal girls. They're not really up on the up, you know what I mean?"

I sat back in my chair. “Thanks, but I don’t think so.”

“Don’t want to mix business with pleasure. I get it.”

“I don’t want to mix anything.”

“Maybe not now, Sky, but we’ll see. I’m irresistible, you know?”

I laughed. “You’re irritating is what you are.”

“And yet you can’t keep away.”

“I don’t have a choice.” I was forced to stay away from one boy and stick beside another. At least Dante wasn’t bad to look at, and he did have a knack for pulling me out of funks.

We arrived in Anchorage at midnight. Dante rolled into the driveway in front of the door and pulled up the emergency brake.

“You were amazing back there, Sky.”

I looked over at him and nearly laughed. I hadn’t done anything but watch.

He grinned. “I’m really impressed. You’re new to this, and yet you’ve managed to take out two nasties—on your own—and keep a cool head. You’re doing great.”

I smiled slowly. “Thanks. I guess it’s nice to be good at something, even if it is killing vampires.”

Dante smiled back at me. “Get some rest. You deserve it.”

“Nothing like aiding in a kidnapping and murder to get one started on a good night’s sleep.” I looked back at Tommy, who was sprawled out over the entire back bench snoozing. “Not a problem for Tommy, anyway.”

Dante chuckled. “Good night, Sky.”

“Night.”

As soon as I stepped out of the Jeep, Dante pulled away and barreled down the road. This was one girl he didn’t have to worry about seeing to the door...though he could have waited to make sure I reached it. The air felt balmy compared to Fairbanks, but an instant shiver ran down my spine. I glanced at the forest at the top of the hill.

I didn’t see anyone, but I felt like I was being watched. Not that I’d see Fane if he were lurking among the trees. It was pitch-black, and he could blend into the night in his dark attire.

I stared straight into the black void for several beats to show I wasn’t scared despite my hammering heart. I turned and forced myself to walk—not run—to the front door. Once inside, I turned the bolt behind me and shut off the front porch light. It was dark inside the house.

I made my way around the house, checking all the doors and windows to make sure they were locked without turning on any lights as I made the rounds. My eyes adjusted to the dark, and I could see the stairs outlined in the gloom. I peeked inside my mother’s room and heard her snoring lightly.

I continued to my own room. In the dark, I closed my curtains and spent the rest of the evening sitting on my bed, knife beside me. It could be Fane out there. It could be Renard. Then again, it could be nothing.

I slept through most of Sunday and stayed up all the next night. Monday morning, I told my mom I must have caught a cold in Fairbanks and needed to stay home. She left me alone for the most part to rest in my room. Honestly, I didn’t know if I could get sick. The vampire blood in me probably made me immune, but I couldn’t go to school. I couldn’t face Fane.

Transfer

The sudden ringing on my nightstand jolted me awake at two forty-five in the afternoon.

I sat straight up in bed, heart running amuck. I hesitated, but grabbed my cell phone. My breathing returned to normal when I saw it wasn't Fane calling.

I held the phone to my ear. "Hey Whitney."

"What the heck is going on?" Whitney demanded. "Suddenly Noel transfers to West and Valerie's back together with Fane...has the world gone mad?"

"Fane's with Valerie again?" I know I broke up with him, but how could he go back to the vamp tramp so quickly? I thought Fane liked me. I had even believed he loved me. Fool. Love was a joke.

Whitney sounded confused. "Did you guys break up or something?"

I swung my legs out of bed and stood. "When you say together, did you just see them together or were they..."

"Making out." Whitney didn't say it with nearly enough disgust.

"I'll call you later," I said abruptly and snapped my phone shut.

When I slammed it down, I aimed for the bed so it wouldn't break. I threw open my closet doors and began rummaging around for something to wear, selecting a pair of dressy jeans and black V-neck. I grabbed my phone and dialed Noel.

"Hi, Noel. How was your first day at West?"

"Sucked." She laughed a second later. "Sorry, bad word choice."

"Want to grab a coffee? Or herbal tea, if you prefer."

That got another laugh out of Noel. "Yeah, I really do. I'll pick you up."

"I'll be here."

Stranded. At least I had no shortage of new friends with cars.

I brushed out my hair and worked it into a long braid before going downstairs.

I found Mom in the kitchen.

"Noel's picking me up," I said.

Startled, she looked up from the page of a magazine she was reading slouched over the kitchen counter with a soda at her side.

"What about your cold?"

"I feel better now."

"I don't think you should be going out when you haven't been feeling well."

"Mom, this is really important."

"What's so important that it can't wait until you're better?"

"Noel just transferred to West, and I'm going to transfer tomorrow. I want to ask her some questions."

Mom straightened in her chair. "Transfer!"

Maybe I should've had this talk with my mom yesterday, but I was asleep all day.

"But...but...it's your last semester," she said. "Why do you have to transfer?"

"Fane, Mom. I can't go to the same school as him. I don't want to see him ever again." Not exactly. It would just *kill* me to see him with Valerie.

Mom considered this and relented somewhat, but not entirely. "But all your friends are at Denali and the semester's already started. You'll have to catch up in all your classes."

“I know it’s a surprise, but I need a fresh start. I know I can do better if I get away from the distractions plaguing me at Denali.”

Her expression softened.

I smiled and pulled my trump card. “Besides, Dante and I had a long discussion about it on the way to Fairbanks. He believes it’s just what I need to get my life back on track.”

“Oh,” Mom said. “I’m sure Dante’s right. He has a good head on his shoulders.”

I gave Mom a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be home soon—need to get ready for my first day in a new school. Will you drive me?”

“Of course, I will.”

“I still have to figure out how I’m going to get to and from West.”

“I can drive you as long as you need—the whole semester if you need me to.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

I grabbed my coat from the closet and headed outside to wait for Noel.

I started walking down the hill. Halfway down, Noel’s old Volvo chugged up beside me. She stopped, and I got in just before the tires spun in place. Noel backed up slowly into an empty driveway then pulled forward, pointing the Volvo back down the hill.

I watched Noel drive for a moment. She looked so short behind the wheel.

After a few moments of silence, I shook my head. “So you’re an informant. I had no idea.”

“Don’t feel bad. It’s not your job to know who informants are.”

“Did you suspect I was an assassin at any point?”

“I had my suspicions...especially after you pulled out that dagger.”

I fought back a grin and ended up losing. Noel laughed.

I asked my next question. “So that whole song and dance about Henry the mega suave biter was a lie?”

“Not exactly. I sort of stole that story from Whitney and added my own embellishments, but Henry really did bite me. He just wasn’t my first.”

I swallowed. “What was your first bite like?”

“It nearly killed me.” Noel watched the road as she talked. “It turns out my transfusion didn’t take. When the vampire got his teeth into me, he kept drinking. He wouldn’t stop. I lost consciousness. I didn’t wake up again until I was back on the cutting table. The agents had to patch me up and give me a second blood transfusion.”

“Assholes,” I muttered.

“They didn’t know,” Noel said quickly. “They rescued me—twice. Agent Melcher was there both times looking out for me when anyone else would have let me die without a second thought.”

“What about your parents?”

“We don’t talk,” Noel answered abruptly.

She slowed as she entered a sharp turn.

I stared out the window at the bare limbed trees.

Noel took a deep breath. “I should have died at the end of sophomore year. You and I are their newest recruits, you know.”

I turned in my seat toward her. “We are?”

“You even killed my vampire for me—the rabies vampire. He was the one who nearly drained me.”

I shuddered. “So you had your own experience with the lunatic.”

“He was almost the end of me.”

“Then I don’t feel so bad about staking him.”

“You should never feel bad about killing a vampire. They’re evil...well, most are. Not all. Marcus isn’t evil. Nor is Henry or Gavin. Or Fane.”

I sat up. “You aren’t required to report every vampire you find out to the agents, are you?”

Noel looked over. “They only care about the violent ones, or so I assume. It wouldn’t help the cause to destroy the ones that get us closer to the real dangerous targets.”

I relaxed. Only slightly. I wasn’t entirely convinced that Melcher and Crist didn’t wish to obliterate all varieties.

“Are you disappointed?” I asked. “I mean that you’re an informant and not a hunter.”

Noel’s voice lifted. “I love being an informant. I love doing my part to make the world safer. A lot of vampires, it goes to their head. You know, immortality. They don’t play by society’s rules anymore. We’re like the vampire police recruited to keep order in the world.”

“Hmm.”

“And I did have one advantage,” Noel said. “I already knew about vampires before I was recruited. This chick I met had just let me in on the whole secret and wanted me to go with her to a party so we could get bitten together.”

“But you didn’t?”

“Not that time. I chickened out. It comes as a shock the first time you see it. Anyway, I didn’t get another chance to try before...before...you know, I was recruited.”

“You mean before you went into critical condition?”

Noel was quiet.

“How did it happen?”

She slouched further down in the driver’s seat. “Trust me. It’s not something you want to know about.”

“But I do.”

Noel remained quiet.

“I mean, unless you don’t want me to.” Which, judging from her continued silence, must have been the case. It was odd. I didn’t recall hearing anything about a sophomore nearly dying the year before, whereas my accident was the talk of the school.

It was easy enough to change the subject.

I leaned over. “Did Melcher tell you that an informant was killed in Fairbanks?”

Noel’s mouth hung open a moment. “No. Did a vampire get them?”

“Yeah, and now he’s looking for me and Dante.”

Noel stepped on the brake a bit roughly at the next stoplight. “What happened?”

“We did a job in Fairbanks recently, and someone at the party mentioned us to the dead vampire’s friend.”

“What’s his name?”

“Renard. Supposedly he’s headed this way. Maybe he’s already here.”

“Should you be going out?”

I gave a half shrug. “It’s not like he knows my name or anything.”

“I’ll keep my eyes and ears open.”

“Thanks.”

I stared out the window.

Noel cleared her throat. “Sorry you had to break up with Fane.”

“It’s for the best,” I said halfheartedly. “Although I’m still trying to figure out why Valerie gets to be with him.”

“And go to Denali.”

“Valerie’s a bitch.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice.”

“You know we’ll be school mates again soon?”

Noel jolted up in her seat. “We will?”

“Tomorrow, I’m enrolling at West High.”

“You are? That’s great. Why? I mean, I’m so happy, but why are you transferring? This is your senior year.”

“I can’t go to Denali anymore. Not with Valerie moving in on Fane. I’d end up doing something stupid like attacking her in the halls. Anyway, my old friends have dropped me.”

Noel considered this and nodded slowly. “I guess it’s time we both started fresh.”

“Does it take you long to drive to school?”

“I’m rooming with a couple girls near school. They’re early twenties, work most evenings. They leave me alone.”

“Are your parents not in Anchorage?”

“They are.”

“Did you turn into a wild child after the transfusion?” I asked.

“Something like that.”

Noel’s voice was barely above a whisper. I had to strain to hear her.

I nodded. “I had a similar experience, only in my case, it was a parent who left the house—my father.”

Noel perked up. “Really?”

“Yep. He’s still MIA.”

“Maybe it’s selfish of me, but I’m really glad you’ll be going to West,” Noel said.

“Thanks.” I shrugged. “School’s school, I guess.”

“And now it’ll be easier to spend time with Marcus.”

“Who is this Marcus you keep mentioning, anyway?”

Noel grinned. “A vampire. A really hot one. He’s not dangerous or anything.”

“Has he ever bitten you before?”

“I wish. Anyway, you just have to meet him and see for yourself.”

I wasn’t particularly in the mood to meet any more irresistibly hot vampires. Pit me against the nasties. That dynamic was cut and dry. Literally. At least those ones didn’t rip out your heart.

Champagne And Blood

It was a surreal sensation, walking through the halls of a new school. I remembered what a nerve-wracking change high school seemed like during the first days of freshman year. Now it was not so much a big step as new territory.

I managed to get into a fifth period film elective with Noel so at least I'd see one familiar face during my day.

Mom invited Dante over for dinner after my first day at West. He brought over a bottle of sparkling apple cider, which my mom drank instead of soda. She hummed as she filled three champagne flutes and handed them out.

"So your classes are all right and the students seem cool?" Dante asked.

"Roger that, Dante."

Dante smacked his fist on the table. "That's the spirit!"

"Yeah, yeah, but enough about me," I said. "How's your semester going at the ol' U of A?"

"I have a good mix of easy and difficult classes. Need to allow time for the extracurricular activities." Dante winked.

Mom giggled as though we were all in on the joke. "Do you get called to duty very often?" she asked.

"Not that much, though this is turning into a busy year. The agents are sending me to Kotzebue this weekend."

"What's happening in Kotzebue?" I asked.

"There's a rabid vampire terrorizing the village."

"Do you need my help?"

"Much as I'd like it, this mission's simple. Anyway, it's your first week at a new school."

"I wouldn't mind," I said. "It's not like I get to travel anywhere else. Might as well get a glimpse of the back country."

"I wouldn't worry about that too much."

I shrugged. "Well, best of luck saving the town of Kotzebue. Don't forget to pack your mukluks."

"Right, I'll bring you back some seal meat."

I smacked Dante's shoulder, and he smacked me back. Mom grinned. I hadn't seen her this happy in too long.

Parts of me felt content. Other parts felt broken. The most important lesson I'd learned over the past couple months was to be strong. Sometimes, that meant laughing with company even with a heart split in two.



"Pssst," Noel said the next day in film class.

I raised a brow. She was seated beside me, and class hadn't started yet, so there was still a lot of noise as students walked in and settled into their seats. She must've been in a good mood because she wasn't all hooded as she tended to be when she was acting moody.

"Marcus is having a party Saturday night. He mentioned there are a couple vamps in town from Fairbanks who might show."

My heart began thumping.

“No one by the name you mentioned, but maybe I can find out something from these other two—Greg and James.”

I tapped my pen over my notebook. “It’s worth a shot.”

I’d finally get a chance to meet Marcus.

Maybe Fane would show up.

Scratch that. That wasn’t the reason I lied to my mom on Saturday afternoon about sleeping over at Noel’s so we could stay up late working on a film project.

It would have been so much easier if I had been teaming up with Dante. Mom would have handed us party hats and said, “Have a good time. Stay out as late as you want.”

I didn’t have time for my mom’s hang ups. I had responsibilities. Besides, maybe with a bit of sleuthing, Noel and I could figure out where Renard was holed up. That would show the agents just how valuable we newbies could be.



I don’t know what Marcus did for money, but bank robbery wasn’t out of the question. He had a tall two-story townhouse overlooking the inlet, and everything from the floor to the furniture to the décor to the lighting was magnificent.

Noel and I entered through a massive hand-carved wooden door with a panel of etched glass on each side and walked in over large slabs of sand-colored stone. I felt like Dorothy walking down the yellow brick road.

“Is this like the VIP Vamp party,” I whispered to Noel. “You didn’t prepare me for this.”

Noel smiled. “How could I?”

There was a large open layout from the entrance to a kitchen that looked down into a massive living room several steps down. Artwork hung from the walls, and statues sat on pieces of furniture that were just as beautiful and unique as the objects they supported.

“Joyeux, Noel! There you are.”

A man in a black and white floral silk shirt and white pants walked over and kissed Noel on each cheek. His hair was luscious. It flipped off his forehead and tapered off under his ears.

“Hello, Marcus.”

He looked me over. “And who is this?”

“I’m a new student at West,” I stammered. “But not...new. You know?”

“What is your name?”

“Aurora.”

Marcus’s eyes lit up. “Noel and Aurora. I like this. My dark haired duet.” He reached out and took some of my hair in his hand.

I glanced sideways at Noel.

“Nice, very nice, but I do not like this scarf. You must not hide your neck. There is nothing as beautiful as...the neck.”

I stared transfixed into Marcus’s pale blue eyes as he spoke.

He turned back to Noel. “It is good you brought her here. Now make sure she has a good time.”

“Yes, Marcus.”

Once he’d moved away and I was able to breathe again, Noel took my arm. She led me to the kitchen. The cabinets were made of solid oak with custom iron handles. No two were the

same. All of the appliances were stainless steel surrounded by granite countertops. Champagne flowed from a small silver fountain on the counter.

This was more like it.

I'd take the high-class assignments over boarded-up shacks in rundown neighborhoods any day. I couldn't imagine anyone foul enough to be friends with Ivo turning up to this grand affair. Guess I'd just have to enjoy myself and see if I could pick up any information.

"Champagne?" Noel asked, looking at the empty glasses on a silver tray beside the fountain.

"I don't know. My last experience with champagne was a bit rough. Then again, I did drink an entire bottle in one sitting."

A lean young man with tight abs and thick dark hair walked into the kitchen. Noel's eyes lit up when she saw him. "Henry!"

So this was Henry. He embraced Noel.

"Henry, I want you to meet my friend, Aurora Sky."

Henry turned to me with a devilish smile and extended his free hand to not exactly shake, but grasp, mine for several beats. "Any friend of Noel's is a friend of mine. Welcome, Aurora."

"Thanks."

"Aurora just transferred to West as well," Noel added.

"Wonderful, then my girl here is in good company." Henry broke away from Noel to grab two champagne glasses. "May I?" he asked, filling each glass in the fountain.

"Thank you," I said after he handed me a glass.

"What's this, Henry? Trying to keep all the beautiful ladies to yourself?" An equally dashing boy strolled into the kitchen. His hair was light brown and streaked with gold highlights.

I was beginning to understand how Whitney and Hope could willingly allow themselves to be bitten.

Henry grinned. "Gavin, meet Noel's friend, Aurora Sky. She's new at West."

"A pleasure," Gavin said, eyes sparkling like the champagne in my glass. "We are very happy to have you at our school."

"How about we give Aurora a tour of the palace?" Henry suggested.

"Good idea." Gavin held his arm out for me.

I took it. Might as well get a lay of the land. Henry did the same for Noel. So they were ridiculously charming. Big deal. They'd had centuries to practice.

Henry led us across the stone steps that connected the door to the kitchen and living room. "These stones were imported from Jerusalem."

I looked down. "You're kidding."

Henry grinned. "Come see the upstairs."

The upstairs to Marcus's palace was accessed via a spiral staircase with wood steps. Its iron railing curled and twisted like meticulously planned doodles from the posts to the steps. I pulled my arm out of Gavin's to walk up single file.

There was a view of the living room from the balcony at the top of the stairs. Henry led us into a guest room with a bed high off the ground, the mattress level with a large window. "Marcus believes that if one has an ocean view, he should be able to see it from his bed."

"Makes sense," I muttered, staring around the room in awe.

The space was covered in art and curiosities on all sides. You'd think it would look cluttered, but the effect was fascinating. Statues sat on the floor beside upholstered armchairs and chaise lounges. There was a large turtle, his back made out of green tiles, and a three-foot statue

of a faun like the one in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* standing beside a stained glass lamp. A hand-carved wooden lion sat at the head of the bed looking into the room.

I no longer felt like Dorothy. Now, I was Lucy stepping through the wardrobe into Narnia.

“Wait until you see the shower,” Noel said. “It has its own room.”

I just laughed.

Henry led us to a glass wall enclosing a walk-in shower with a rainforest mural inside done entirely in tile. The shower could easily fit ten people.

My eyes were bugging out of my head. “Wow.”

“Yeah,” Noel said.

“Want to see the rest of the rooms?” Henry asked.

I nodded.

The next door we came across was shut with a silver bat dangling from the doorknob.

“That means do not disturb,” Gavin said. “There’s one for each guest room should you ever need it.”

My cheeks heated instantly. I looked away.

Henry swooped in and took my arm. “Come on, there are plenty more rooms to see. This place is like an after-hours museum. Lucky for us, Marcus is fond of company. You’ll find the gates to the palace are almost always open.”

I glanced at the artwork on the walls as Henry escorted me into another guest room. This one was painted and decorated in various shades of orange. There was a hand-sewn bat pillow propped on a low seat, his flat felt wings spread over the chair. He looked straight ahead with orange glass eyes.

“This is the October room,” Henry said.

I craned my head around the room. I had to ask. “How did Marcus get to be so rich? Don’t tell me he’s been saving for several centuries?”

Henry laughed. “No, nothing as mundane as that. All this is paid for by his benefactor, Richard Nielsen, of Nielsen’s Fine Art Gallery.”

I should have been revolted. Instead I smiled and nearly laughed. “You mean Marcus is a kept vampire?”

Henry chuckled. “Marcus enjoys the good life.”

“And his lover is human, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“He doesn’t care that Marcus is a vampire?”

“He cares a lot. It’s an added bonus, in fact.”

I screwed up my face. “So he likes all the bloodsucking and biting?”

Henry looked me over carefully. “A lot more than you, apparently.” He took my arm and led me back to the door. “What Richard really likes is a man who won’t age and a man who can’t get sick.”

I looked away. “Oh.”

“We’ll be down in a moment,” Gavin said as Henry and I started out of the October room.

I glanced back. Noel was conveniently inspecting figurines on a Creamsicle-colored shelf.

“Don’t worry,” Henry said. “I’ll show Aurora the way back.” He turned to me and smiled. “It looks like you could use a refill.”

I glanced at my half-empty champagne glass. I hadn’t drunk that much. How could I with my mouth hanging open in awe of the place?

“Sure,” I said.

When I looked back over my shoulder, the silver bat hung from the doorknob of the October room.

“You are curious,” Henry said to me smoothly. “And yet cautious. I’ll be honest. It makes me want to bite you even more. You should not be here until you are ready.” He whispered inside my ear. “The others aren’t as considerate as I am.”

Shivers ran down my spine.

Henry released my arm at the foot of the spiral staircase. “Enjoy the party, Aurora Sky.”

Part of me wished Henry would escort me downstairs. Why did vampire boys have to be so much cooler than normal boys like stupid Scott Stevens?

Dante had said the first bite was better than sex. Maybe it was vampire sex that was better.

On that thought, my cheeks heated. I looked over my shoulder in time to catch Henry slipping inside the October room.

Why was it I wished I could trade places with Noel right then? Maybe it had something to do with the two hotties who would soon be sinking their teeth simultaneously into her neck.

I shook my head violently to clear the visual.

Fine, back down to the party I went. I was just the assassin here. I didn’t get to engage in love bites with devastatingly hot vampires. Nope, I got the meanie, nasty, psychotic sickos who ripped through my flesh like rabid wolves and bled all over my clothes.

Remind me what the perks of my job are again?

By the time I’d made it down to the first floor, I’d emptied my champagne glass. I took it inside the kitchen and held it under one of the spouts spurting bubbly.

“Hi there,” a woman with platinum blond hair said. “I haven’t seen you before. I’m Rachel.”

“Hey. My name’s Aurora.”

The woman smiled. “Well, Aurora, it’s nice of you to join us.”

People certainly knew how to mingle here.

“Let me know if anyone bothers you.”

“Um, thanks.” Was this woman a vampire? I didn’t see any bite marks on her neck. Vampires really ought to stick out more.

“Don’t mention it.” Rachel smiled and walked out of the kitchen.

I followed her out and leaned against a wall overlooking the living room. Now me, I wasn’t a mingler. I was more of the type to stand nervously in the corner thinking about how I didn’t know anyone.

“Hi there.” A man in his late twenties joined my side. Like all the other males partying at the palace, he wasn’t bad to look at. “Are you friends with Marcus?”

“We just met.”

“Same here. I’m William, by the way.”

“Aurora.”

“That’s a pretty name.” He smiled and tilted his head toward the living room. “My girlfriend goes way back with Marcus...centuries back.”

I turned and looked at him closer. “Your girlfriend’s a vampire?” Was it Rachel? How many inter-species couples were there at this thing? Maybe dating Fane wasn’t such a big whoop after all—apparently, everyone was doing it. I scanned the women in the crowd. “I haven’t met any lady vamps.”

William chuckled. “No, you don’t come across too many fanged females. Quite the pity.”

“How long have you been together?”

“About a year.”

“And you’re not worried about what will happen when you get older and she doesn’t?”

William smirked. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“Shouldn’t someone your age be living in the now rather than worrying about the future?”

“It’s never too soon to think about the future.”

“Life’s short. It could end at any moment.”

I glanced into the living room. My eyes rested on Marcus. “Or it could go on and on.”

William followed the direction of my eyes. “For the chosen. As for the rest, what does it matter when they die?”

I shrugged. Sounded sort of dark.

“Would you like to meet your first lady vampire?”

“Sure.”

“She’s outside having a smoke. Do you smoke, Aurora?”

“No.”

“Ah, of course not, you’ve got your future to think about.”

I guessed it wasn’t Rachel, then, because she was standing beside a telescope at the window with another blond woman.

“Do you have a coat?” William asked.

I shook my head. “I left it in the car.”

“Then we won’t stay outside long.”

William hurried me along the front path. “She’s smoking by the street,” he said. “House rules.”

I rubbed my arms. At least I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt. “You know, maybe I should meet her when she comes back inside. That’s the trouble with being human,” I attempted to joke. “We’re susceptible to the cold.”

“She’s right up here,” William said. “Hey, Wendy,” he called. “Where are you?”

The name set an alarm off in my head. Before I had a chance to panic, William turned and looked directly at me. “There you are.”

Catch And Release

Stupid, stupid, stupid. How could I be so stupid? Sure, let's follow the stranger outside to the secluded street. And seriously? Who really wanted to meet a female vampire when there were so many hotties posturing like statues inside the palace—that place where there were actual people to shout out to for help?

A rusted Buick idled on the road. Two doors opened up front and a couple of scuzzbuckets stepped out.

"This her?" one asked.

William nodded. "We've found ourselves an assassin, boys."

I turned to run, but William grabbed me by the hair and yanked back. My entire head felt like it'd been whacked against a wall. Tears leaked out the sides of my eyes. I kneed him in the groin. Did that work on vampires? Thankfully yes. He grunted and let go of my hair.

One of William's henchmen wrapped his arms around me from behind. I stomped on his foot. He shouted. The third one smacked me across the face so hard I fell back and landed on the ground.

Two of them grabbed me and dragged me to the car while a third opened the back door. I was shoved inside. A scuzz got on either side of me. William jumped into the driver's seat.

I looked from side to side. "So which one of you is Renard?"

William laughed from up front. "I'm Renard."

"Of course you are," I said bitterly.

"You're not the only one who can come up with a phony name, *Wendy*."

"How did you know who I was?"

"Your friend Janine was very forthcoming...once I broke both her arms."

I tightened my hands into fists. "You're disgusting!"

"*I'm* disgusting?" Renard asked. "What do you call what you did to Ivo and Patrick?"

"Justice."

"Hmm. Justice. And that is what's coming to you, Aurora Sky."

If I weren't so focused on my impending death, I would have told him to bring it. Death was one thing. It could come swiftly; I knew from experience. A drawn-out torturous death was another matter altogether.

If I weren't squeezed in so tight between the two thugs, I might be able to reach under my jeans for my knife.

"You know, I think I left my purse at the party, so if I could just pop back in and retrieve it then meet you fellows back here."

"Funny," Renard said. "Thomas told me the boy was the funny one. When is Dante showing up?"

"He's not."

The vampire to my left grabbed me by the throat. I choked as his hands squeezed.

Renard looked in the rearview mirror. "Wait until we get her to the shack. *Then* we'll see to it she starts talking."

Shack? No! I'd rather die at the palace than inside a shack. Hell, I'd rather die behind the wheel of a car.

Renard drove down Minnesota Boulevard. There weren't many vehicles out, but a few. I looked over at a group of high school boys cruising beside us. Couldn't they see a kidnapping was in progress? They looked over briefly then sped ahead of us.

Unlike Thomas, I wasn't hooded. There was no need to hood me. Why had Dante covered Thomas's eyes to begin with? He probably hadn't made the decision to off him at that point. Unlike my situation. No mystery there. I'd be tortured, interrogated, and killed. At least the blood suckers wouldn't get a drop out of me.

The shack turned out to be a foreclosed house in a dark neighborhood. A realty sign was posted in the front lawn. The garage door had been left open. Renard pulled in. James got out and pulled me with him. The other vampire quickly joined us and grabbed my other arm.

Renard led us into the house through a connecting door inside the garage. It was cold and empty inside. Renard turned an overhead light on inside the hardwood living room and stepped in the center.

Switch plates were missing from the outlets. Beyond Renard's shoulder, I could see into a kitchen. It was missing all its appliances, as though the previous owners took everything they could with them besides the actual house.

"So this is a vampire hunter," Renard said, looking me over as he paced.

"She just looks like a girl," the vamp on my right said.

"She is just a girl."

I glared at him.

"A girl with very bad blood."

Renard stopped in front of me. "You think my kind shouldn't walk the earth, but the way I see it, you're the atrocity. We've been around for centuries. How long have you genetically altered freaks been around? Couple decades? You were created in a lab. We," he said, stretching out his arms, "are the chosen ones selected by nature to live for all eternity."

Renard smacked a fist into his hand. "Now, when is your freak friend going to show up at Marcus's party?"

"I told you, he's not."

Renard glanced at his cohorts. "Aurora, you've probably been wondering exactly what happened to Janine. We'll show you...starting with your arms."

Renard's goons closed in on me before I could reach for the dagger. They each took an arm in a bone crushing twist.

"Wait!" I shouted.

I needed to stall. I needed my arms back so I could grab my knife.

"Yes?" Renard said.

"I—I don't know exactly when he's coming. He likes to make a late appearance."

Luckily, Dante was safe in Kotzebue with his run-of-the-mill rabid vampire. Kind of missed those kind right now.

"What's the plan, Renard?" James asked.

"Greg and I will head back to the party to get the boy. You'll stay here and guard her until we return."

"And what should I do with her while I wait? Break every bone in her body?" James's grip tightened on my arm.

"No, I have a better idea. Bring her here, boys."

They each gripped an arm and dragged me over to Renard.

"If her blood is toxic to us perhaps our blood is poisonous to her."

We have the same blood, you fool! I felt like spitting the words at him, but that was classified. Renard looked more intent on brutality than information. At least that much was going for me. He didn't want to interrogate me —just rough me up. Lucky me.

Renard pulled out a knife.

Damn, that was my move.

Renard stepped toward me. "Then again, we could just slit her throat."

The eyes of his cronies lit up like ghoulish orbs in their sockets.

"Do it, Renard!" James yelled. "Gut her like a harpy."

I thrashed under their grip until I saw the flash of the knife's blade just under my eyes. My body seized up in terror.

"You'll have to excuse my associates. They have no imagination." Renard sliced open his wrist in one swift movement, grabbed me by the back of the head, and thrust his bleeding arm inside my mouth.

My instinct was to bite him in self-defense. I did so without thinking. When I bit down, I heard him laugh and, too late, felt the first gush of blood spurt inside my mouth. I gagged in an effort not to swallow, but the blood was already trickling down my throat.

Renard retracted his wrist and opened his mouth over mine. He covered my lips in a wet, grotesque kiss before pushing me backward. The room turned over as I fell. I couldn't move to brace myself. I was locked up, as unbending as a pine tree crashing to the ground.

My tailbone connected with the hardwood. Pain shot through my pelvis. My heart burst into a rapid succession of pattering, as though trying to punch its way out of my chest. I opened my mouth to gasp, but nothing came out. Fear. Adrenaline. They powered my performance. It needed to be convincing.

Every part of me shook: my arms, my legs, my hands, my feet.

No one said anything for several minutes.

When the shaking showed no sign of subsiding, James turned to Renard and asked, "Can we kill her now?"

"No." Renard never took his eyes off me. "We leave her like this."

"Squirming on the floor?"

Renard's eyes widened like a sinister grin over his face. "Suffering. We'll give the boy a preview of what's in store for him—a little taste of their own medicine."

I made sure to keep my body in a fit of motion. My tailbone throbbed from when I'd landed against the floor. Moving around didn't help any.

Renard watched, rapt, for several minutes before bending down by my side. I couldn't see what he was up to with my head back, eyes on the ceiling.

Then I saw his hand reach over my face toward my neck. He grasped a fistful of my scarf and yanked, causing the fabric to tighten around my neck then succumb to his brute force.

Renard straightened up and held the scarf up in one hand. "Got myself a trophy, boys." He wound it around his neck and tossed one end of the scarf over his shoulder. "What do you think?"

"I think we should drain her," James said eagerly.

"I meant what do you think about the scarf?"

"It makes me hungry. It's such a waste that we can't drink her."

"She sort of reminds me of a fish flopping around inside a boat," Greg said.

"Maybe a splash of water would help her." James disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a bucket of water. He dumped it over my face.

I sputtered in addition to twitching.

The vampires erupted into laughter. James looked down at my face. He moved to my side, pulled back his leg, and kicked me with all his strength.

“Don’t bother!” Renard snapped. “She can’t feel a thing right now.”

James shrugged and moved away. It was only voices again somewhere by the window.

Renard was wrong. I could feel pain. I felt pain shooting at my side like a stick of dynamite thrust through my ribcage erupting into hundreds of agonizing sparks.

“Is she still twitching?” I heard sometime later.

Greg got in my face moments later. “How long does this last?”

“She can’t speak, moron.”

Why hadn’t Renard left yet and taken one of his sidekicks with him? I had a much better chance of taking down one vampire than three. It would come down to combat this time. Suddenly I wished I’d put more effort into kickboxing class.

Renard snapped his fingers. “Time to hunt down the boy.”

“Double or nothing?” Greg said and the three vampires laughed.

“Sure you can handle the assassin?” Renard said. “She looks pretty scary shaking on the floor.”

“I think I can manage,” James said. If only he hadn’t grabbed Renard’s knife.

Now I had to take on an assailant with a weapon.

Renard and Greg clomped out of the house. An engine revved inside the garage. Tires screeched onto the street.

The moment we were alone, James circled me with the knife as though he were a vulture preparing to swoop in at any moment and pick my bones clean.

I reached slowly down my leg, sliding my fingers under my pants and closing my fist around the hilt of the dagger.

The shaking stopped. I jumped to my feet, done playing the victim.

James’s eyes widened. His surprise didn’t stop him from lunging. I jumped back, but not before the tip of his blade slid into my abdomen.

I screamed.

Getting bit hurt. Stabbing was a different kind of pain. Quicker. Colder. Deadly.

I put a hand over my stomach and looked at James.

When he smiled I realized, *this is real; he’s going to try and kill me.*

I could lead him in a circle around the room like I had with the rabies vampire, or I could get this over with once and for all.

I let out a battle cry and charged. My shoulder rammed James in the chest as I twisted sideways upon impact. He stumbled back several steps.

Before I could lunge in for the stab, James rushed me. I crouched at the last second. *Wham!* James tripped over me, hit the ground, and dropped his knife. I grabbed his leg with my free hand as he scrambled after the blade.

He kicked backwards landing a blow over my windpipe. I dropped my dagger.

My stomach stung. My tailbone ached. I couldn’t breathe.

James snatched his knife and scrambled back. I clutched my neck with both hands until James grabbed my arm and sliced open my wrist. I didn’t feel it at first. I was still trying to breathe.

James grabbed my other wrist and made his third cut.

A cry gurgled in my throat.

If only I could pull the same maneuver as Renard and thrust my wrist inside James's mouth. It was worth a try.

I held my wrist out and rasped, "You know you want it."

James looked from my bleeding wrist to my eyes. "I might not be able to drink your blood, but I can still drain you dry."

He stabbed me in the thigh. I cried out.

I reached around frantically for my knife. My fingers grasped the hilt. Black dots floated over my vision. I dragged my body over the floor, smearing a red trail across the hardwood. The dagger scraped against the ground with every push.

I was going to die in a pool of my own blood, wasn't I?

If I died, Fane would never know why I broke up with him. I didn't care if he was a vampire. I did it to protect him.

Fane.

I called out to him in my head. Desperation made me hope for the impossible. Fane was the last person who'd be out looking for me.

James inched his way over, a sadistic smile over his face.

When I'd backed myself against the wall he crouched beside me. James touched my neck with the tip of the knife. "Is this where he bit you? Is this where Ivo took his last drink?"

His breath reeked. If I hadn't been kicked in the throat I could have breathed through my mouth rather than my nose.

James leaned forward with the knife, pushing the blade into my neck.

The scream that came from my throat, ripped my air ways back open.

James flinched at the shrill noise and dropped his knife in surprise. There was no time to think. I pitched myself forward and plunged my dagger into his chest. James's body crashed to the ground beside me.

I relaxed my hold on the dagger. My eyes fluttered shut. I slumped against the wall, listening to the sound of my own breathing.

So this was the end? I would die in a shack after all. Hopefully death claimed me before Renard returned.

The front door burst open. It was thrown so hard it crashed against the inner wall.

Noel spoke first.

"Aurora, oh my God!" She crouched by my side.

At first I thought I imagined the second voice.

"Aurora?"

My heart fluttered. Fane. I got to see him one last time after all. I tried to smile.

"She's been stabbed," Noel said.

Fane's face appeared over me. "Jesus Christ!"

He disappeared quickly. Fabric ripped through the room. Fane returned with blue strips of cloth and held one at my neck.

"Tighten these around her wounds," he instructed Noel. "If you need more, check the duffel bag on the kitchen floor."

Fane pressed the fabric tightly to the wound on my throat. "We need to get her to a hospital."

"No!" Noel cried.

Fane scowled.

"The hospital can't help her," Noel said. "I need to get her on base."

“Too far,” Fane said. “I’m less than a mile away. Go buy bandages and disinfectant and meet me there: 880 Alder Circle. Here, take my wallet. Go!”

Fane looked down at me after Noel left and scooped me into his arms. I rested my head on his shoulder. The temperature outside was only slightly colder than inside the house. Fane reached for his car door handle while holding me against him. He laid me gently on the back bench in his car.

He didn’t say anything during the drive. It was as though he believed I couldn’t hear. Or maybe he didn’t want to talk to me. Noel must have enlisted his help out of desperation, which meant he knew what I was. If he was upset with me before, he had to downright hate me now.

“Come on,” he said, urging his car along as he drove, but the tank moved at its slow, smooth pace.

I drifted out of consciousness until the car choked to a stop in Fane’s driveway. Fane jumped out, came round to the back, and gathered me into his arms.

He kicked at his front door. Joss opened up and was nearly knocked over as Fane entered with me.

Joss hurried after us. “What’s going on?”

“She’s been cut in five places.”

“What happened?”

“Vampires got her.”

“What the deuce? Did they drink from her thigh as well?”

Fane laid me on the couch gently. “They didn’t drink her. They found out she’s a vampire hunter.”

Joss’s eyes doubled in size. “And you brought her here?” He stormed to Fane’s side. “Francesco, she has to go.”

“She’s not going anywhere until I see to her wounds.”

“But why?”

“Don’t ask me that,” Fane said somberly.

He crouched by my side, checked the wound at my neck, and reapplied pressure. His hands shook as he unzipped my jeans. Fane pulled my top up halfway. Our eyes met.

There was a knock at the door.

“Who’s this now?” Joss asked.

“Come in,” Fane called.

Noel hurried in with a plastic shopping sack.

“Who’s this?” Joss repeated.

No one answered.

“I have gauze and Hydrogen Peroxide,” Noel said.

“Good. Clean out the wounds on her stomach and thigh. I’ll take care of her wrists and neck.”

Noel paused to look at Fane.

His eyes narrowed. “Noel, I’ve got it.”

They pulled the rags off. Noel swabbed at my stomach. My eyes fluttered.

Fane stopped wrapping one of my wrists and placed a hand on my cheek. “Stay with me, Aurora.”

He held my gaze for several beats before returning to my wrists.

Once the blood was cleaned up, Fane wrapped my wounds in gauze.

He peeled back a large square bandage for my neck, pressing firmly as he smoothed it over my raw skin.

Noel looked me over. "Aurora, are you okay?"

"No," Fane said. "She shouldn't talk. Tell me who else was behind this and where I can find them."

Noel wrung her hands. "It was a vampire going around calling himself William at Marcus's place. He came alone, but I saw him leave with two others in a tan Buick. I called Marcus when I got the bandages, and he confirmed that they had just returned to the party. He said that the guy calling himself William is wearing the red scarf Aurora had on earlier."

Joss huffed. "Marcus."

Fane tensed his jaw. "Does Marcus know Aurora's an assassin?"

"No."

"Good. What does this William look like?"

"I believe his name's really Renard. He came after Aurora after she..." Noel glanced from me to Fane. "Offed an acquaintance of his in Fairbanks."

"Bloody hell," Joss said.

Fane stood. "I'll be back."

Joss stepped in his way. "Don't do this, Francesco."

Fane glanced back at me. "As long as this guy's breathing, Aurora's not safe."

Joss moved in step with Fane as he tried to sidestep him. "I won't let you do this."

Fane slipped around him. "Take care of her."

I reached a hand out to stop him, but no one saw. Fane slammed the door behind him.

"Hell! Bloody hell! Bloody hell!" Joss bellowed. "He's going to get himself bloody killed. And for what purpose? To save a bloody vampire hunter." He turned and looked at me. "Is she truly one of those newfangled vampire hunters?"

Joss looked at Noel suddenly. "Are *you*?"

"No," Noel said. "I'm an informant."

"Bloody brilliant. Francesco leaves me behind with an assassin and a spy."

Noel shrugged.

"Can't you get her out of here?"

Noel's forehead wrinkled. "I need to get her to one of our doctors. Could you help me move her to my car?"

"You want me to touch her?"

"Her skin can't infect you."

"I'm still not getting anywhere near her."

"Come on," Noel said, losing patience. "I need help."

Finally I managed to sit upright. "No," I croaked.

Noel and Joss looked at me.

"I have to help Fane."

Noel's face loosened up. She came to my side. "Aurora, we have to get you on base. You've lost a lot of blood. You may need another transfusion."

"Oh, great," Joss said. "Fill her up with more of your toxins."

"No," I said.

"Can you get up?" Noel asked.

"Blood."

"What?"

If I shared the same blood type as vampires, wouldn't it stand to reason that consuming human blood would rejuvenate me?

"Bring me blood."

Noel looked at Joss as though he might be able to decipher my request. "I don't understand."

Joss studied my face a moment. "I believe your friend is requesting blood."

"You mean she wants to..." Noel's eyes widened.

Joss looked at us both darkly. "Drink blood."

❄ 26 ❄
Cravings

Joss turned and disappeared. He reemerged with a tall clear glass. No porcelain mug masking the contents. He handed it to me from two feet away and retracted his hand once I took it. He and Noel watched me.

Here went nothing.

I took the first sip. My brain told me to gag, but I didn't. I took a second sip and then a third. The taste was exquisite, like a thick milkshake triggering an instant boost. I guzzled down the rest. The blood coated my throat and slid down my esophagus.

I could feel it flowing through my veins, filling me with life and vitality. My heart beat out a blissful rhythm. I licked the last of it off my lips.

I stood. "Noel, take me back to Marcus's house."

"Aurora," Noel said slowly. "You just drank blood."

"Self-administered transfusion," I said.

I didn't want to think about what it meant. Not now. Not with Fane's life at stake.

I zipped my pants up. "Let's go."

Noel glanced at Joss.

"He's not coming," I said.

Noel's Volvo was parked on the street. I climbed in and stared out the windshield at the silent neighborhood. "How did you find me?"

Noel started the car. "I followed you."

"You didn't want to make a night of it in the October room?" I had no right to sound annoyed, but that's how my tone came out.

"I thought Henry was going to stay with you. When he came back to the October room I worried. It was your first vampire party. I came downstairs to check on you and saw you leaving with some guy I'd never seen before. So I followed you."

Tears gathered in my eyes.

"Thank you," I whispered.

Noel nodded.

"Aurora, I'm sorry I told Fane. I didn't know what else to do."

"You did the right thing. Does anyone else know? Henry? Marcus?"

"No, of course not. Marcus thinks Renard was stalking you."

I shuddered. "He was."

"Right, but not for the reasons Marcus thinks. Unfortunately, it happens even under normal circumstances. A vampire obsesses over a human, stalks her, kills her... that's why the agents need us."

I touched the bandage on my neck.

Noel cleared her throat. "How are you feeling?"

"Better... now."

Noel didn't mention the blood again.

"Why are you going after Fane?" she asked. "Can't he handle himself? I mean, he's a vampire."

"But he's not a killer. I am."



Noel pulled up to Marcus's townhouse slowly. She dropped her head.

"I can't go in with you, Aurora."

"I know." I started to get out and stopped. "Thanks again. For following me. If you hadn't I'd be dead."

Noel smiled. "No problem. Do you still need a place to crash tonight?"

I shook my head. "No. See you at school?"

"Yeah."

I waved as Noel drove off. I took a deep breath and headed for the door to the palace. I didn't know what I'd expected inside. Blood and mayhem, maybe. But everything was the way I'd left it before the abduction. Guests milled around the living room in cozy clusters, drinks poised in one hand.

Once I walked through the front door, Marcus came over to greet me as though it was natural that I should return bandaged at the throat.

I followed him into the empty kitchen. He took a bottle of whiskey from a cupboard and pulled out a crystal drinking glass.

"Something to dull the pain?"

"No, thank you."

Marcus poured a small amount of whiskey into the glass and tossed it back.

I ran a hand along the smooth granite countertop. "Where's Fane?"

Marcus licked his lips in one slow, languid motion before answering. "You should have told me that you were with Francesco. I'll admit, I didn't want to bite you before, but now that it is forbidden..." Marcus's grin widened.

"Where is he?"

Marcus poured another splash of whiskey into the crystal glass and pushed it toward me. "Disposing of some trash."

My breath caught. "Renard and Greg?"

Marcus screwed the top on the whiskey bottle and returned it to the cupboard. "No one abducts a guest from my home. Not without consequences."

I pushed away from the oven. "I need to help him."

"He has help."

"No, I need to take care of it."

Marcus looked me over and chuckled. "You are unusual, Aurora, but I like unusual. It's already taken care of."

"What do you mean?"

Marcus reached toward me. I flinched, but he was only grabbing the whiskey glass. He swirled it in his hand.

"I have a special room. I call it my music room. Only certain types are shown the music room. Those who misbehave. Renard and Greg got the personal tour earlier."

My mouth hung open. "You mean...? You?"

Marcus lifted the glass to his nose and inhaled. His lashes fluttered and lips puckered. "I do still enjoy a killing on occasion. When they deserve it, of course."

I willed myself not to shudder. One day, I might be asked to the music room. I supposed the only notes one produced in there was a high-pitched shriek.

"And the bodies?"

Marcus's lip curled. "A dirty task...disposal. Francesco, Henry, and Gavin are taking care of it." Marcus finished off the whiskey.

"I should go."

"Stay. They will be back shortly."

I looked at the floor then at Marcus. "I'm sorry for the trouble."

Marcus's eyes sparkled. "So polite. I like this."

He reached for my hair and let it slide across his open palm.

"Thing of beauty; heart of darkness. I see you." He stepped closer. "I see you, Aurora." His voice evened out as he moved away from me. "You should come by more often. The door is always open to you."

I waited inside the kitchen. I wasn't in the mood to sit in the living room with the crowd of revelers. Marcus killed Renard and Greg. It was a relief. They were dead. I didn't have to do it. Fane was safe.

I tapped my foot on the oak floor. The sound was drowned out by real footsteps. Relief flooded me when Henry walked in.

"Aurora? What are you doing here?"

I lit up as though witnessing the return of an old friend.

He looked at me rather peculiarly. "Noel said you were one tough cookie. I figured you'd be at the hospital or at home."

"Is Fane with you?"

"Ah." Henry smiled. "I can't believe you and Noel failed to mention you were with Francesco."

"Is he coming inside?"

"He and Gavin are parking the car."

"And the bodies?"

"We made an afterhours visit to the dump." Henry nodded at the bandage around my neck. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine, thanks to Fane and Noel...and you, Marcus, and Gavin, it turns out."

Henry chuckled. "They chose the wrong girl to mess with. How did you know those hooligans, anyway?"

"I ran across them in Fairbanks," I lied. "Let's just say they didn't like being refused a bite."

Henry looked me up and down. "That must be awfully good blood to come all the way down from Fairbanks."

"The way I see it, they didn't have much else going on in their lives."

"Touché."

From the corner of my eye I saw Fane and Gavin passing the kitchen. Before disappearing behind the next wall Fane stopped suddenly and turned. I gripped one of my wrists in my hand. Big mistake—it disturbed the wound. I released my wrist at once.

Fane swooped into the kitchen. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

"You shouldn't be here at all. You should be resting, recovering."

I didn't like the way he lectured me in front of Henry and Gavin.

I lifted my chin. "As you can see, I'm fine."

"You're not fine. They nearly killed you."

Did Fane really think I wanted to be scolded right now? Hot tears stung my eyes. I brushed past him.

“Where are you going?”

“Home!”

Fane caught up to me on the stone entryway. “Oh really, and how are you getting there?”

“I’ll walk.”

Fane grabbed my arm and pulled me to him roughly. My heart beat wildly.

He grumbled. “I don’t know whether to strangle you or shake the sense back into you.”

“I think I’ve had enough strangling for one night,” I retorted.

I glanced at Henry and Gavin. They stood just outside the kitchen, watching us.

I lowered my voice. “Please, Fane. Just get me out of here.”

Fane lifted his chin at Henry and Gavin. They nodded back.

I followed Fane out to his car.

“They think we’re together,” I said once we were inside.

“That’s the assumption,” Fane replied. “I didn’t correct them. I suppose it’ll be easier for you to infiltrate the enemy camp if you have an excuse to keep their teeth out of you.”

“I don’t consider them enemies,” I said.

Fane gripped the steering wheel. “And me?”

“You saved me.” I swallowed. “But it doesn’t matter how I feel about you.”

Fane sighed. “At least now I understand why you broke it off. You were never with Dante, were you?”

“No.”

“Good.”

I scratched at a tear on the passenger seat. “What about Valerie? Did you get back together with her?”

Fane didn’t answer.

I looked at him. “Did you?”

Fane sighed. “Aurora, I buried two men tonight.”

“They weren’t men.”

“Oh, that’s right. And neither am I.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Look, maybe we should discuss this another time. Let’s just get you home.”

“I don’t want to go home.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“With you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Fane tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “Fine. Just for tonight.”

We rode out the remainder of the drive in silence. Joss was so relieved to see Fane back unharmed that he didn’t stop to question my return.

“I’m fine, really,” Fane said as Joss pestered him to sit and relax.

“I’ll get you some blood,” Joss said. “Don’t worry. I didn’t let her drink it all.”

Fane looked at me suddenly. “*You* drank blood?”

“Guzzled it down like a nomad come across water in the desert,” Joss confirmed. “Be right back with a warm mug.”

I lowered myself onto the cushion beside Fane and placed my hands inside my lap. I stared at my fingernails, acutely aware of Fane studying me.

“Funny thing about blood,” he said slowly. “It has the ability to revive one almost instantly...or such is the case with vampires.”

Lucky for me I had access to the antidote. I planned on remaining human for the rest of my natural life. Maybe Melcher would let me have a double shot after everything I'd been through. Couldn't be too safe.

I stood. “Mind if I get some rest?”

Fane gave me a dark look. “Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to wait until sunrise?”

I stared at him so long my eyes went out of focus.

Finally he sighed and said, “Down the hall, second door on the right. You can use my bed. I won't bother you.”

Once inside Fane's bedroom, I stripped down to my underwear and slid under his covers. Despite his taunt about sunrise, I did sleep—I slept wrapped in the scent of him. It was a pale second to Fane's actual arms, but it was all I had.

Sometime very early in the morning, I awoke with a sore throat. I eased out of bed and began opening Fane's dresser drawers until I found a T-shirt. Once I'd slipped it over my head, I tiptoed down the hallway.

Fane was asleep on the couch. His chest rose and fell steadily beneath a blanket. My eyes rested on his mismatched lips. No more kisses. Not between a vampire and a hunter.

I needed a drink of water. But upon entering the kitchen, I went to the fridge, not the sink. The blood bags glowed beneath a single light bulb. I stood there, staring. The cold air seeped over my legs in a cool caress.

“Looking for something?”

Fane's voice startled me out of my trance. I hated the way my gasp made me sound as though I'd been caught red handed.

“I thought there might be some juice in the fridge.”

I stared at the floor until I noticed Fane was barefoot. My eyes traveled up his black cotton sleep bottoms to his naked torso.

Forget about the blood. He looked delicious in the dark.

The Cheshire teeth came out once more as Fane smiled and looked me in the eye. “I've seen that look before.”

And suddenly I felt like we were finishing a decade's old conversation. The first time Fane said it I desperately wanted him to complete his thoughts, but then Valerie dragged him away. The second time he'd brushed it off.

Now I willed him not to continue, but I could tell from the smile on his face that nothing would give him greater pleasure than to pull the rug out from under me.

“You died in that car accident didn't you?”

I squeezed my lips shut. Fane pushed the fridge door closed with one hand. He took a step closer. Much too close. His lips were inches from mine when he lifted my chin with his fingers.

“I've seen that look on the dead.” Fane stared into my eyes. “That vacant, hollow look when life ends yet continues forever.”

What if the antidote had failed? What if I'd lost too much blood and somehow the virus had kicked in?

I pulled away. “No,” I said, shaking my head. “I'm not a vampire.”

Fane's smile widened.

I'm not.



About the Author

Nikki Jefford is a third generation Alaskan, living in the Pacific Northwest, who has a slight obsession with death and cheating it.

If you would like to receive an email alert when Nikki's next book is released, [sign up here](#). Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at any time.

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Nikki's the author of:

The Spellbound Trilogy

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Aurora Sky: Vampire Hunter

[Aurora Sky: Vampire Hunter \(Aurora Sky: Vampire Hunter, Vol. 1\)](#)

[Northern Bites \(Aurora Sky: Vampire Hunter, Vol. 2\)](#)

[Stakeout \(Aurora Sky: Vampire Hunter, Vol. 2.5\)](#)

[Evil Red \(Aurora Sky: Vampire Hunter, Vol. 2.6\)](#)

Bad Blood (Aurora Sky: Vampire Hunter, Vol. 3) (Releasing Summer 2014)

Hunting Season (Aurora Sky: Vampire Hunter, Vol. 4) (Releasing Fall 2014)

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