



TRACY TAPPAN

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THE  
BLOODLINE  
WAR



# THE BLOODLINE WAR

BY

**Tracy Tappan**



Winner of the Independent Publishers Book Awards Bronze Medal for  
Romance



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## THE BLOODLINE WAR

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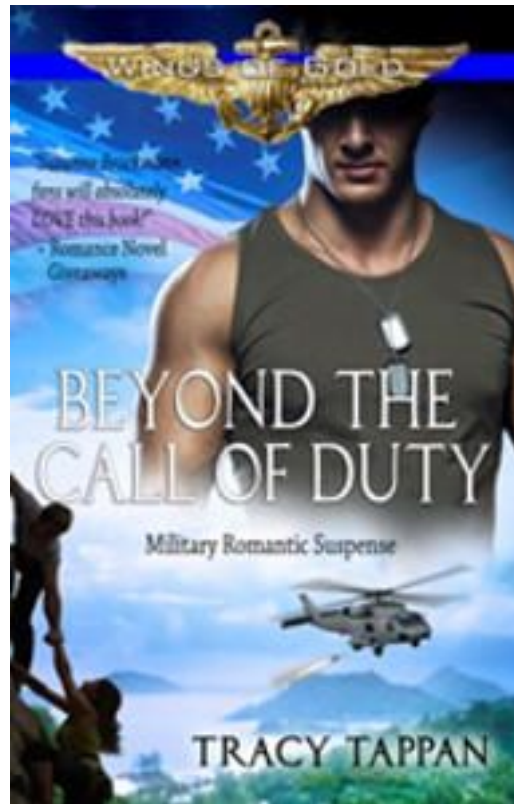
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\* \* \*



# Chapter One

THE HOUSE LOOMED OUT OF the darkness like a hulking beast, its windows black eyes, the front door left gaping wide in a permanent scream. Yellow *Crime Scene Do Not Cross* tape was strung around the perimeter, announcing to the world that bad stuff had happened here, just in case anybody had missed the stink of burned flesh and the eerie silence hanging over everything. Only the occasional crackling dispatcher call from one of the police cruisers parked out front broke the stillness.

A shiver crawled up Toni Parthen's spine, and she had the embarrassing urge to turn around and run. She *really* didn't care for creepy stuff. She dutifully headed for the house anyway, cutting through the red and blue police lights flashing rhythmically across the brick walkway. A uniformed officer was posted at the front door.

She lifted the ID badge hanging around her neck and showed it to him. "I'm your blood expert out of Scripps Memorial. Dr. Toni Parthen." A *real* doctor of hematology, not a mere intern, but still a lowly Fellow. Which meant that when the San Diego Police Department needed a blood specialist, she was the one who got yanked away in the middle of watching *How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days* to whatever gory scene needed her scientific expertise.

The officer glanced at her badge, then down at the medical bag she was carrying, and then inevitably – she nearly sighed – his eyes landed on her boobs. The Girls were bundled up in a winter coat, nice and tight against the cold January weather, but they were of a size that defied concealment.

She cleared her throat, quashing the urge to quip, *Eyes up here, pal*.

“Uh ... yeah, go on in.” To his credit, the officer blushed a little. “They’re waiting for you upstairs.”

She entered the house, passing through a dimly lit foyer and a deserted, well-kept living room. The stink of burned flesh was stronger in here, like a cannibal barbecue gone terribly wrong, and her esophagus tightened. God, but she hated forensics. She arrived at the bottom of a flight of stairs and stopped. Waiting for her at the top was a man with a badge on his belt and a gun in a shoulder holster.

She exhaled sharply. “Crap, not *you*.” The night just got worse.

Detective John Waterson arched a single brow at her, one corner of his mouth climbing upward. “I’m going to stand here and pretend I’m *not* insulted by that, if it’s all the same to you.”

Toni rolled her eyes. “No offense intended, Detective, but your cases stink.” Waterson and his partner, Pablo Ramirez, were on the Occult Crimes Unit, and their crime scenes always ran high on creepiness. Too high.

Waterson’s smile widened, the curve of his mouth masculine and sexy, his amazing blue-green eyes warming with amusement.

Trumpets went off in her head. And here was the real reason she didn’t like working with this man: John Waterson was hot.

Dressed in cowboy boots, blue jeans, and a dark brown long-sleeved shirt that was folded up at the cuffs to reveal strong forearms, he had the tall, athletically lean build of a swimmer or a tennis player. He had ... yes, a very nice mouth, despite the fact that an unlit cigarette was dangling from his lips. He was handsome, self-assured, probably in his early 30’s, like her, and in possession of that most alluring of all qualities: intelligence. She was drawn to John in a way she’d never been with any other man. But herein lay the trouble: John was, in point of fact, a

*man*, and she'd given up on interacting with their gender—other than professionally—a long time ago.

Sighing, she trudged up the stairs. Nothing else for it. She was here on business. A low rumble of voices was coming from somewhere, a softly crying voice. *Wonderful*. “All right, what am I in for?”

Waterson's eyes danced. “Feeling a bit squeamish again, are we?”

Heat rose into her cheeks. She wasn't squeamish about most things – she was a doctor, for Pete's sake – but she hated the aforementioned creepy stuff. No doubt the result of her older brother dragging her to too many horror films when she was a kid. She narrowed her eyes on Waterson. “Last case we worked on, Detective, some cult freaks had stripped *all of the skin* off the corpse's body.”

He held up a hand. “It's nothing like that this time, I swear.” Fishing a pack of matches out of his breast pocket, he went on to explain, “A couple of bad guys climbed in through the bedroom window of the fifteen-year-old daughter and tried to snag her.” He opened the pack and tugged out a match. “Her father heard her screams, rampaged in with a shotgun, and filled one of the perps with a load of buckshot.”

She groaned softly. “Lovely.”

“Don't worry.” He struck the match and held the flame to the tip of his cigarette. “The scene is surprisingly *unbloody*. That's why you're here.”

She plucked the cigarette out of his mouth and mashed it into a plant. “You do know that you're the only person left in California who smokes, don't you?” She headed down the hall and entered a room that was clearly a girl's, and a girl who for once hadn't gone the way of the Goth: lacy lampshades, white eyelet bedspread, posters of Taylor Swift, Taylor Lautner, and, *ah*,

second place to Matthew McConaughey: Brad Pitt. Against the backdrop of all this innocence, the black-clad body sprawled out under the window was a grotesque stain.

Two other men were in the room. Pablo Ramirez, a Padres baseball cap perched backward on his head, and a skinny kid – okay, an adult, but one who looked fresh out of science camp for a day of dress-up in his daddy’s navy blue suit.

Waterson gestured to him. “This is Silas Thornton, CSI.”

She nodded to the CI and moved over to the corpse, stopping at its feet to –

What the hell? She’d never seen anything like this. The guy was a wreck, half a dozen bullet-sized craters in his chest, a few more peppering his thighs, and yet ... there wasn’t a single drop of blood on him—not anywhere, for that matter. Odder still, the front of the guy’s black shirt was completely eaten away, the fabric of his pants nearly in the same condition, and there were holes dotting the carpet beneath him, as if something acidic had dripped off of him and onto it. Jesus, this wasn’t just an *unbloody* scene, it was impossibly *bloodless*.

She looked at Waterson. “The body was drained?” For what sick purpose, she didn’t want to know. Cult freaks were such psychos.

“Evidence suggests it wasn’t.”

She arched her brows at him in a *what now?* expression.

Waterson gestured, a hint of wryness slanting his mouth. “You want to take a look?”

“At what? You are aware that I deal in actual, physical blood, right, Detective? The kind of stuff that can be viewed under a microscope and put in a centrifuge?”

Another smile tried to make it onto Waterson’s mouth. “Just give it your best guess, Doc.”

Sighing, she marched over to the body and crouched down. The dead guy was young, maybe only nineteen or twenty, his features smooth and adolescent despite a stern chin and cruel-



looking lips. He had a tattoo on his face, black flames crawling up his left jaw like rotten ivy. Biting back an *ugh*, she opened her medical bag and snapped on a pair of latex gloves, then dug out a scalpel. She grabbed the body's wrist.

"Watch out," Waterson warned.

She glanced up.

Waterson nodded at the corpse's hand. "The ring on the perp's finger will give you one helluva shock if you touch it."

"You're kidding." Who in the world booby-trapped a ring? She turned the corpse's wrist to get a better view of it, catching the sparkle of a strange red crystal in the center. Shimmering and undulating, the thing looked like it was filled with some sort of boiling liquid – or as if it lived and breathed. God. This night was reaching new levels of creepy.

Steering clear of the ring, she carefully cut into the corpse's wrist. The vein was empty, not even a trace of blood in it. *Absolutely nothing*. She sat back on her heels and slowly peeled off her gloves. Weirder and weirder. "I can't think of anything that would leave a vein totally stripped. Maybe some chemical ...? But I really don't know. You need to get the body on a table and have an ME do a thorough autopsy plus a full chem panel."

The CSI pounced on that. "That's exactly what I said."

She looked at Silas. "Did you?" She shifted her eyes over to Waterson.

Waterson met her gaze without expression.

A flush of heat rolled up the back of her neck. "I see." She threw her scalpel and gloves into her medical bag and snapped it closed. "I'm sorry I couldn't have been more help." She came stiffly to her feet. "Good luck with the case." She spun on her heel and headed through the door, her strides clipped. *Of all the unbelievable –*

“Toni!” Halfway down the stairs, Waterson caught up with her. “Wait –” He took hold of her elbow.

She twisted her arm out of his hold, her pulse kicking up a notch. “Don’t touch me, John.”

Waterson stepped back, both hands raised, palms out.

“Tonight’s call was bogus,” she accused, her voice sharp with anger. “This case couldn’t be analyzed onsite and you *knew* that.”

“All right, you got me.” He dropped his hands. “I called you here somewhat unnecessarily. But how else am I going to get to see you? You won’t go out with me.”

“So stop asking!” she flashed.

Exhaling a long breath, John glanced away. He took a moment, then shook his head and looked back at her. The color of his eyes deepened. “I can’t,” he said softly.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, drawing a breath to calm herself. “Look, John, just ... please just try to understand this has nothing to do with you personally. Okay? I’ve just had a long string of bad dates, lately.”

A really long string, starting all the way back in high school with Brad Flannigan, the super-popular jock star who’d asked her to Homecoming Dance when the head cheerleader had come down with the flu. That night, he’d convinced Toni to give him her virginity, only to broadcast that fact all over school by first period bell come Monday.

Since then it’d been one after another of men who’d start out dating her for her bra size and then get scared off by her IQ size. Or who’d date her for her face, expecting her to be as “perfect” on the inside as they thought she was on the outside, then discover that she most definitely was *not*, and, God, she was so sick of being a disappointment.

The miserable dating run had thankfully come to an end last year when Robert what's-his-name, an anesthesiologist, had loudly announced in front of a movie theatre full of people that she had about as much feeling as a "Dr. House with tits." And after all the faking in bed she'd done for him, too.

Waterson's voice lowered. "I'm not like the rest of the men you've dated, Toni, I can guarantee it. I work on the Occult Crimes Unit, and I wouldn't do that if I liked normal. So, you know, you can be weird, and it's fine."

A spasm of laughter unhinged inside her chest. "That's a relief." He was probably an all-around nice guy and a great kisser, too. But if she did something stupid like go out on a date with this man, she might then do something even stupider, like crack open the door to her heart. And once again she'd just end up facing down the vast and consuming loneliness which always got worse whenever she was – paradoxically enough – with a man.

Thank God the meat wagon boys started up the stairs just then.

She and John stepped apart to allow the two men hauling a stretcher to pass. "I appreciate the offer, Detective. But I'm afraid the answer's still no."

She left the house, crossing the street at a near run. She fumbled in her purse for her keys, making a noise in her throat, then unlocked her car door with a sharp twist of her wrist. She jerked hard on the handle, throwing her purse and medical bag onto the –

"*One* date," he said behind her.

She froze, her breath catching in her throat.

"That's all I'm asking for," he went on quietly, "then I'll leave you alone forever, I swear. Is that really so unreasonable?"

She closed her eyes, the logical part of her mind saying, “No, it’s not unreasonable.” What was one night out of her life in the larger scheme of things? Except that it was painful as hell to keep discovering, over and over, that she had some uncanny knack for repelling men.

He moved closer, apparently interpreting her pause as acquiescence. A masculine hand appeared on top of her door, another one bracing itself on the roof of her car. The warmth of his male body stole up right behind her. She inhaled a slow, even breath, recognizing his scent at once, that metallic hint of handcuffs and handgun, tobacco, of course, and just a trace of Drakkar Noir cologne. Heat snaked through her limbs, a surprising jolt of yearning landing in her belly.

“I’m thinking The Fish Market restaurant would be a great place to go.” His breath caressed the back of her neck, sending a shudder down her spine. “Toni –” His hand dropped to the curve of her waist and he turned her around. “Please don’t keep us dancing around this thing that’s been between us for months.”

He dipped his head, and her heart skipped a beat when a lock of hair fell across his brow. He hesitated, no doubt waiting for her to do her usual and reject him, but .... His tempting lips were so close to hers, his body warm and smelling so damned masculine that her *nucleus accumbens* – the pleasure center of her brain – just took over and started making decisions. Her chin lifted on its own, offering him her lips.

No more dilly-dallying now. John settled his mouth on hers. She exhaled a small sigh through her nose. His lips were soft and warm and moist, and he tasted surprisingly good, just the slightest suggestion of tobacco covered up by a flavor that was all man. The kiss was light, no more than gentle and reassuring ... until she linked her arms around his neck and pressed her breasts against his chest.

A rough groan rushed out of him, and he instantly deepened the kiss, angling his head to the side and opening his mouth over hers. His arms pulled her so close she could feel his heart thundering against her breasts. Her own heart surged into a faster beat. God, he felt wonderful. Everything a man should be, strong and solid, all the things that could make a woman want. With a breathy moan of her own, she slipped her tongue into his mouth and felt his shoulders stiffen. He met her tongue hungrily with the wet heat of his own, and while their tongues dueled, her stomach did a funny gyration. She waited for that little something more ... and then there it was: a nice, slow-burning quickening, down low.

She pulled her lips away from his with a gasp, nudging him back a step before her *nucleus accumbens* could really take over and make her plop down right there on the asphalt and to hell with the show she and John would give Officer Bug-Eyes over by the front door.

John stood staring at her through the shadows, his eyes glittering hotly in the silver moonlight, his lungs working in short pants.

“Well, that was convincing,” she breathed out, her own chest laboring. She turned toward her purse on the driver’s seat of her car and pulled out a business card. She was a fool to give him her number, knowing full well that she was setting herself up for heartbreak again. But damn it, she was also a woman who hadn’t had a man’s hands on her in over a year, and that kiss had been a doozy. “This is my work number” – she held it out to him – “but it connects to a message system that texts my personal cell phone.”

He moved to take it, looking slightly stunned.

She quickly angled it out of his reach. “*Which* Fish Market? Del Mar or Harbor Island Drive?”

He blinked once, at half speed, then his lips spread into a slow smile. “Harbor Island Drive, of course, with that view of the Coronado Bay, the Beach Boys hopefully playing in the background, and us cracking crab legs.” His eyes sparkled mischievously. “I happen to think you’d look dynamite in a large plastic bib.”

“Right.” She snorted and rolled her eyes. “If that’s the *only* thing I was wearing.”

“Ho!” John clutched his chest and stumbled backward as if he’d been shot.

She laughed. *Oops. Wrong imagery, there.* She handed him the card, still laughing. He really was irresistible.

He tucked it into his breast pocket next to his cigarettes, his eyes remaining steady on hers, his mouth still too dangerously inviting.

She quickly hopped into her car and buckled up. He closed the door for her, and she unrolled the window. “I only ask that you don’t smoke around me, okay?”

He nodded once. “Fair enough.” He leaned through the window and snatched a quick kiss. “Get home safe, Doc.”

She met his eyes with a warm smile. “I will.”

He slapped the roof of her car.

She pulled away, watching in her rearview mirror as he headed over to a blue Chevy and jumped inside next to Pablo. She caught her own reflection and saw that she was grinning like an idiot. She was an idiot. An all too familiar twist of panic shot through her belly, and she shut down her smile. She needed to be prepared going into this thing for it not to work out .... For her to like him more and more, and then for him to eventually leave because that’s –

Her cell beeped the arrival of a text message. Frowning, she tugged her iPhone out of her purse and glanced at the screen.

*So how desperate is it that I'm already messaging you? I'm really looking forward to our dinner ... :o) J.*

Pleasure entered her chest. Okay, maybe this was going to be –

A horn blared a warning. She jerked her eyes up. *Oh, my God!* The headlights of another car were swerving toward her. With a gasp, she yanked her steering wheel hard to the right, her cell phone jettisoning from her grip. Her car shrieked into a sideways skid, tires smoking and screeching, and –

The cars collided.

She cried out as her body lurched forward violently. The exploding airbag punched her back in the seat and sent her head snapping against the headrest. A searing pain tore through the backs of her eyeballs. Glass tinkled, steam hissed, and ....

There was only blackness.

## Chapter Two

IT STARTED OUT LIKE A normal enough mission. Then again ... all missions do, don't they?

Jacken Brun stood braced for action next to his other two operatives, all three of them riding up the Scripps Memorial Hospital elevator in focused silence. Their fourth operative, Cleeve, had already been dropped off at Admin. There, as per their usual MO, the young computer dweeb would hack into the hospital's system and enter transfer orders for their target female, giving this abduction a nice, official stamp of approval.



On Jacken's right was Vinz Mihnea, decked out in a Brooks Brothers suit and lab coat for the role of doctor he'd be playing, reeking of Elvis appeal with those thick black sideburns. On Jacken's left was Thomal Costache in a pair of scrubs. Thomal's flattop blond hair might've made him look too much like the soldier he really was, but his face would distract from that; he had the kind of unreal good looks most women found fertility-inspiring. Having Thomal along pretty much guaranteed a whole lot of babbling, "Of course, sir. Anything you want, sir."

Jacken had no way of knowing that in less than fifteen minutes one of these men would have a knife planted in his chest. And not just any knife. A Bătaie Blade.

Yeah, *that's* what the real goatfuck turned out to be. Jacken hadn't even remotely considered that there might be competition for the woman at the hospital, especially from someone who carried a Bătaie Blade. They'd never faced opposition before, not in their six previous, immaculately executed abductions. For a short second, Jacken had worried his team had gooned something up. It'd been two long years, after all, since the data-filtering spyware they'd embedded in the laboratory computers of various hospitals around San Diego had spotted a woman's blood containing the coveted Peak 8 in it. But no. Their only mistake had been getting caught with their pants down.

The elevator dinged its arrival on the fifth floor.

Game on.

Vinz broke right and headed for the doctor's lounge, where he'd wait for the go-ahead from Jacken once the transfer orders were complete. Thomal went left, a syringe filled with 250 mgs of Ketamine tucked in his breast pocket next to a fountain pen – really a mini camera and microphone – and headed for his destination: Room 506, temporary living quarters of their target.

One Dr. Antoinetta Parthen.

Jacken found the nearest deserted waiting room, and stationed himself there – as good a place as any to conceal himself from the general public. Sunny Californians seemed to get all jumpy around the distinct Rambo vibe he gave off. He bought a Styrofoam cup of coffee from the vending machine, planted his butt on an uncomfortable couch, then set his laptop on the coffee table and flipped it open.

The main screen instantly lit up into three smaller screens: video inputs from each operative's fountain pen camera. Two quadrants were on top – one for Vinz, one for Cleeve – and a half-screen on the bottom for Thomal. From this point on, Jacken would serve as the team's communications center. Even though his men could hear and speak to each other through earpieces, he was the only one who could see the whole picture.

Cleeve's voice crackled into his ear. "Transfer orders are in, *cha-ching*." The kid angled his fake fountain pen toward his face and tossed Jacken a pleased-as-punch smile. "Who d'ya love, huh?"

Jacken twisted his lips. That was damned fast. "I owe you a beer at Garwald's Pub, runt. Now shut up and get out of there. Vinz – show time."

"Aw, man, I just grabbed a jelly donut." The image in Vinz's quadrant changed, a long hallway appearing, at the end of which was a nurse's station.

Jacken sipped his coffee as he marked Vinz's progress; Thomal's, too. The lower screen showed that Thomal-the-male-nurse was just arriving at Antoinetta's room. Passing by the door, Thomal continued down the hall about ten more feet and stopped beside a gurney.

Jacken narrowed his eyes at Thomal's half-screen. What the hell was the man doing?

“Good morning, I’m Dr. Bernard,” Vinz was saying to a busty nurse with the name Barbara Hollowitz stamped on her ID tag.

“Um, Jacken,” Thomal said in a low tone. “The subject’s awake.”

Jacken furrowed his brow. “At 3:45 in the morning?”

Vinz cleared his throat pointedly. “Yes, Miss Hollowitz, I see by the patient’s chart that Dr. Parthen has a concussion and is being awakened periodically according to proper procedure.”

“Ahhhh,” – Thomal elongated the sound in understanding – “that explains it. You want me to go in there and charm her, chief?”

Jacken plunked his coffee cup down. “It’s why I put up with your annoying personality, Costache.”

Thomal half-stifled a laugh. “Well, no prob on this one. I caught a whiff of the lovely Miss Parthen on the way past and ... damn, she smells hot.”

The busty nurse tsk-tsked sympathetically. “My, Dr. Bernard, you’re certainly getting an early start this –”

“Just get moving before I call in Arc to replace your ass.” Arc was Thomal’s older brother, taller and longer-haired but with the same blond “dreamboat” attractiveness. He was currently hanging out in the downstairs parking garage with the other backup team members, probably chewing gum and playing hacky sack, not a worry in their heads about this mission. Jacken grunted. “He’s better looking than you are, anyway.”

“That hurts me, man.” Thomal strode into Room 506, switching to a cheery, “Good morning, Dr. Parthen.” He moved over to Antoinetta’s bedside, giving Jacken his first glimpse of her: the soft lines of an elegant profile, shimmering strawberry blonde hair spread out across the pillow.

The muscles in his stomach tightened. Even with her image pixelized by the computer screen – not to mention she probably wasn't at her best in a hospital – she was a knockout.

Then things got moving. He shifted his gaze back and forth between screens as he kept track of his two main players, the babble of multiple voices filling his earpiece.

“... sure you'll find everything complete, Miss Hollowitz,” Vinz assured the nurse, “with the transfer request ....”

“... change in doctor's orders, Dr. Parthen,” Thomal was saying in a chipper tone. “He'd like you to get some solid sleep now.” Thomal's hands reached for Antoinetta's IV.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Antoinetta interceded.

“If you'd sign here, Dr. Bernard,” Nurse Hollowitz crooned, “then we'll just head down to Room ....”

“I have a concussion, Nurse. I'm not supposed to sleep deeply.” Antoinetta's voice turned authoritative. “I'd like to see your badge.”

*Ah, shit.* “You need to throttle back, Vinz,” Jacken hissed. “The target isn't knocked out yet.”

Vinz's voice suddenly mellowed into warm honey. “You know, Barbara, that's a very beautiful necklace you're wearing. Do you mind if I take a closer look at it?”

Jacken saw Thomal plunge the syringe of Special K into Antoinetta's IV tube.

“My God!” Antoinetta blasted. “What did you just give me?” She started to yank the IV needle out of her arm.

Thomal grabbed her wrist.

A loud *crack* rang out as she slapped Thomal across the face with her free hand. “Let go of me!” She reached for her needle again, and they started to struggle.

“Oh, ho, my fun meter is pegged now,” Thomal panted out.

“ ... a lovely stone, Barbara. Is it an opal ...?”

Jacken gritted his teeth. “For Chrissake, Thomal, is this what you call charming the target? Get moving!”

“Ah!” Thomal exhaled, straightening from a limp Antoinetta. “Target is sacked out, gentlemen.”

Jacken released a pent breath. “You hear that Vinz?”

Apparently, yes. Vinz’s video image started down the hall again. “Well, I should probably see to my patient,” he said to the nurse, both of them entering Room 506. “Don’t want to get stuck in San Diego rush hour traffic if – oomph!” The picture in Vinz’s quadrant fell to the floor, blanking to fuzzy snow. A second later, the nurse screamed once, then went abruptly silent.

Jacken stiffened on the couch. *What the –?! “Costache!?”* he barked.

But the image in Thomal’s quadrant was jiggling wildly, the sounds of scuffling and cursing exploding into Jacken’s earpiece. *Holy shit!* He jumped over his laptop and the coffee table in one leap and ran from the waiting room, moving down the hall with absolute silence in his heavy boots. Pressing his back flat against the wall just outside of Room 506, his breathing tight, he peered around the jamb.

A low curse snarled past his lips. Vinz’s body was sprawled out on the floor in a stain of spreading blood, a knife sticking out of his chest, that busty nurse flopped over the top of him with her ass in the air. Two other men were in the room, both large, both dressed in the type of metal-accessorized aggressive black leather usually saved for BDSM parties. One had a shaved head with black flame tattoos curling up from his temples to the top of his skull. The other guy had spiked black hair and the same tattoos, his climbing the length of his neck.

It was this asshole, Spike Boy, who was clutching a blue-faced Thomal by the throat.

Louder alarm bells went off in Jacken's head. Whatever power these men were wielding was something outside the norm. Thomal was one of the fastest of his kind, and Jacken had never seen anyone get a firm grip on the man unless he allowed it in training.

Hissing under his breath, Jacken reached to the back of his belt and eased a long knife out of its sheath. He stepped through the doorway and, keeping to his maxim of *fuck up an enemy first, ask questions later*, he threw the weapon with a sharp snap of his wrist. Aiming for a point as far away from a collision with Thomal as possible, he sent the blade thwacking into the meaty part of Spike Boy's shoulder.

With a scream, Spike Boy stumbled backward into a medical cart, sending metal drawers clattering, scissors, gauze, forceps tumbling to the floor. Thomal crumpled out of the man's hands, and then Spike Boy himself dropped.

Jacken turned on the other one, Skull—just as that peckerhead let fly his own knife. Jacken hit the deck and rolled, hearing the knife swoosh just past his head, then thunk into the floor. A moment later, it exploded, geysering up ragged pieces of linoleum. Holy Christ. Only one type of knife exploded. A Bătaie Blade! Who the hell *were* these assholes? There wasn't time for a Q&A. Powering to his feet in front of the bed, Jacken plowed a hard right cross over the mattress into Skull's face, landing the punch dead center. Skull's head snapped back, the bones in his nose splintering beneath Jacken's fist. The man hit the wall, bounced forward, then grabbed Jacken by the shirtfront.

Jacken shouted as Skull hauled him off the floor with impossible strength, tossing all 215 pounds of him over Antoinetta's bed and into the far wall. His shoulder rammed out a hole in the drywall, the plaster blasting apart into a dense white cloud around him. Landing unsteadily on

his feet, he struck out blindly and missed, his head spinning. His upper gums throbbed ruthlessly in primitive reaction to the violence.

Spike Boy was on his feet now, too, Jacken's knife still sticking out of his shoulder, white liquid oozing from the wound. White ...?

Spike Boy slammed a fist into Jacken's gut.

Air whooshed out of Jacken's lungs. Jesus Christ, these guys were strong. "I need backup!" he yelled, hoping like hell Thomal's fountain pen would pick up his shout, his own mic being inconveniently attached to his laptop back in the waiting room.

Skull and Spike Boy exchanged looks.

"Bloody fuck!" Skull whirled and snatched up Antoinetta.

Jacken bolted forward, but Spike Boy's fist flying into his peripheral vision stopped him. Ducking the punch, he came up with a brutal uppercut that evidently sloshed Spike Boy's brain in his skull; the asshole made a second trip down to the linoleum, this time in an unconscious heap.

Jacken grabbed Antoinetta out of Skull's arms, pulling so hard he fell backward onto the bed with her.

Skull jumped on top of him, toppling Antoinetta to one side of the mattress, her body wedging against the bedrail. Skull grabbed Jacken by the collar and cranked back a fist.

Two things pinged Jacken's senses in rapid succession: one huge holy-shitter was that Skull's eyes were as black as his own. Not just very dark brown, but as black as if the pupils had eaten up the irises – and only one breed of man owned black eyes. Second, Skull stank ... like corroded metal or transmission fluid. Not at all like blood. Not at all like the way he should've smelled with the black eyes of an Om Rău.



Jacken dodged the punch Skull threw at him. Skull countered by trying to put him in a headlock. Jacken grappled with the man, grunting and cursing, their arms and legs tangling. Muscling Skull underneath him, Jacken hit the fucker hard enough to split the skin on his knuckles. Skull rolled Jacken back over, both men landing on Antoinetta's feet, and punched Jacken in return, a ring on his finger tearing a line of flesh out of Jacken's cheek in a streak of pain.

Jacken snarled, grabbing Skull by the throat and –

“Well, heck, looks like I'm missing all the fun.”

Jacken and Skull stopped fighting and snapped their eyes up to the door in unison. Relief jackhammered Jacken's heart. Nyko!

His older brother was standing in the doorway, looking super bad-assed *huge* with his tall, broad, muscular body filling the entire frame. Eyes as cold and dark as black glaciers peered out from a tumble of shaggy black hair, and a savage array of black interlocking teeth tattoos ran the length of his forearms and ringed his neck. Nobody would guess that on the inside Nyko was pure marshmallow, because on the outside, he looked one hundred percent psycho serial killer.

*Thank crap for that.* “About damned time,” Jacken growled.

Eyebrows lifting, Nyko started into the room, but made it only one step inside when there was a blur of motion off to the left.

From out of nowhere, Skull suddenly had a pair of medical scissors sticking out of his neck, a disgusting gurgling sound coming from him.

Thomal stood next to the bed, a nasty sneer on his face. “Sorry, guys, but I owed these bitches a spanking.”

A white foamy substance like shaving cream oozed from Skull's wound. Some of it blopped onto Jacken's chest and began to eat through his shirt. "Jesus!" He heaved Skull off, letting the man crash unaided to the floor, and shot to his feet, tearing his shirt off and hurling it aside. "What the *hell*?"

Nyko shook his head, his expression troubled as he crouched down next to Vinz and checked for a pulse. Nyko rolled the nurse off the fallen warrior, her removal exposing a unique sunflower burst of blood on the wall.

A startled curse came out of Thomal's mouth.

Nyko carefully pulled the knife out of Vinz's upper chest and held it up with one hand, the other jammed to Vinz's wound.

The hilt was carved with intertwining black flames, not like the interwoven black teeth they were used to seeing on their pain-in-the-ass Om Rău neighbors' knives, but still with the boiling red crystal on it that marked it a Bătaie Blade.

"Yeah, I saw it," Jacken said grimly.

Thomal hissed a breath. "What the hell are these jagoffs doing with an Om Rău blade?" The man already looked like warmed-over shit, both eyes red from blown capillaries and dark bruises forming around his throat.

"Maybe because they *are* Om Rău," Jacken returned.

Thomal's blond brows arched high. "The only Om Rău in existence live next door to us."

Jacken tossed Nyko a roll of gauze. "These slimeballs have black eyes, Bătaie Blades, tribal tattoos, and were strong as fuck."

"They also bleed acid," Thomal pointed out.

“Then we need to look into the possibility that they’re a different genetic branch of Om Rău.”

Nyko looked up from bandaging Vinz. “A branch that just so happens to be after our women, too?”

Thomal made a guttural noise in his chest, his protective hackles going up.

Women like Antoinetta carried a bloodline that was key to the salvation of their race. Jacken and his men of the Warrior Class protected and guarded any they found like the rare and precious commodity they were.

“We’ll debrief further when we get back to Țărănă.” Jacken grabbed a bag and started shoving Antoinetta’s personal effects into it. “We’ve got to get out of here. Sunrise is riding up our asses, and we don’t want to get stuck in the safe house with Vinz needing to see Dr. Jess right away.” He looked at Nyko. “What’s the SITREP?”

“No more bad guys are en route,” Nyko replied. “I put the backup team on the stairwell to keep an eye on that. Couple of nurses heard some noise coming from this room, but Arc is pulling a flirt ’n divert.” Nyko pushed to his feet, tossing Vinz over his shoulder as if the warrior weighed no more than a CPR dummy. “Still, we should get going PDQ.”

“Agreed.” Jacken reached for Antoinetta. “Let’s get our target safely down to—Whoa!” He jerked back a step.

Thomal stepped up beside him. “Told you she smells really good.”

*Really good?* That was a massively enormous understatement. He hadn’t been able to tell before, what with so much of Vinz’s blood masking her scent, but ... *Jesus*.

Thomal glanced at Jacken’s bare chest. “You sure you want to be the one carrying her, chief?”

Jacken exhaled a short breath. Right, the feel of this woman's fragrant body pressed close to his, with only her thin hospital gown as a barrier between them, would probably make it right to the top of the Bad Idea Column. "You take her," he ordered.

But as soon as Thomal scooped up Antoinetta and settled her snugly against his chest, Jacken had the sudden, savage – and totally irrational – urge to tear out Thomal's perfect blond entrails.

## Chapter Three

"MURK AND REN BODGED UP the mission."

Raymond stopped writing in his ledger and looked up, squinting through the glare of his desk lamp at the young blonde woman standing just inside his study, a clipboard propped on her hip.

She was dressed like a blooming tart, as was her habit, wearing four-inch pointies on her feet and a miniskirt not much wider than a belt. Her blouse showed as much cleavage as it did midriff, displaying a jeweled belly button ring, along with a black flame tattoo that curled from her navel down into parts unknown. Well, not entirely unknown from what he understood of his daughter's escapades when she went out pubbing with the girls.

"I beg your pardon," he asked coolly, even though he'd heard her.

Pandra hesitated, spinning the immortality ring on her finger with her thumb, the eerie red stone reflecting light like blood flecked with diamonds.

The blasted thing was more often a curse than a salvation these days, all of the progeny seeming to think they had *carte blanche* to rampage around like bloated bulls.

"Murk and Ren failed to nab Toni from the hospital."

Raymond narrowed his eyes, anger burning through his head and into his nostrils. *The* most important part of his plan was the attainment of Toni Parthen, and after that, her brother, Alex. Murk and Ren were fully aware of that. “I see,” he replied acidly. “And what, pray tell, occurred?”

“I don’t know all the crack,” she said, “but the gist is that our lads got into a punch-up with some other blokes, who ended up nicking Toni from –”

He slammed to his feet, knocking the metal arm of his desk lamp into a crazy swing. “*Other men* have taken her?” A wave of his power burst off his body and thumped into Pandora.

She staggered backward a couple of paces, her black eyes flaring wide.

He took an immediate breath and composed himself, locking his power into a low simmer. There was no need to be uncivilized, no matter how extreme his anger. “Where are Murk and Ren?” Those two needed to give him a full report on this catastrophe, posthaste. He felt a muscle in his jaw flicker as he added, “In jail, I presume?”

“Um ....” Pandora moved forward to her former position. “No. They escaped before the police arrived.”

“I see,” he drawled. “So the lads were too frightened to face me and went on a bender instead. Why am I not surprised.” He crossed to his cherrywood sideboard and poured himself a Courvoisier. Mouth tight, he stared down at his drink, the cut crystal of the double old-fashioned glass biting into his palm.

The devil take Murk and Ren. Raymond had been preparing for this next step for *twenty-six years*. He and his partner, Boian – the last two pure Fey men on earth – had kept their Om Rău female, Yavell, churning out children during that entire quarter of a century and more, sometimes one baby a year, usually one every two years to prevent her womb from clapping out

completely. Now they had eighteen progeny between them, and more planned for the future. But this year, the year Ren and Murk, born eleven months apart, came of age at twenty-six, was the year to set his scheme in motion.

*If* women with the correct bloodlines could be acquired.

More easily said than done, apparently, what with the way their missions had been going pear-shaped of late. First, Teer and Dace had failed to obtain that fifteen-year-old girl, and now Murk and Ren had made a dog's dinner out of nabbing Toni. Taking her should've been a dross of a task, as well, since she'd been nearly unconscious in a hospital bed. When the detectives Raymond kept on permanent assignment watching Toni had informed him of the poor girl's unfortunate car accident, Raymond decided straight away that this was the perfect time to take her. And now Murk and Ren had bodged it. By God, Raymond would be a bloody codger before he saw his first grandchild born.

He looked up from his drink at Pandora again, the skin across his cheeks taut. "What do my detectives have to say about this? I imagine my chaps saw something."

"Yes," Pandora said. "I checked with Mr. Perkins and Mr. Rathburn before coming to speak with you."

Raymond arched a single eyebrow. *Smart girl*. "And?"

Pandora glanced down at her clipboard. "Perkins said there were seven men total at the hospital, although it appears only four actually got into a row with Murk and Ren; one man was dragged out injured and unconscious, I imagine due to our lads. Two men," she glanced up "— and here's the important part — had black eyes and tribal tattoos." She lowered her clipboard. "By the way Perkins and Rathburn described the tats, they sound like the same as Mum's."

Raymond snorted elegantly. "That would make the two men Om Rău."

Pandra shrugged noncommittally.

Raymond frowned over that. “Yavell is supposed to be the last of that breed.” The rest of the Om Rău race, it was rumored, had killed each other off. Hardly surprising, that. They were such ghastly creatures.

“I can’t be sure, of course. I didn’t see the tats myself.” Pandra shifted from foot to foot.

He took a sip of his drink. His daughter’s feet must be near wrecked in those ridiculous shoes.

“Murk and Ren will have to confirm it.”

“Well, I shan’t be waiting for those two dimmocks.” He set down his glass. “Best I go have a little chat with your mum.” Lord, the very thought soured his stomach. He preferred to have contact with that woman only when it was his turn to impregnate her, and that was about as much of a lark as doing the business with a leaf shredder. And probably gave him about as many injuries. “Am I correct in assuming that your neglect to mention Toni’s whereabouts indicates that no one has the remotest idea where she is?”

Pandra fidgeted again; maybe she was wearying of her role as the bearer of bad news. “Perkins said he and Rathburn followed the getaway van for a good half hour, but the blokes eventually lost them.”

*As I suspected.* He was surrounded by incompetents. He headed for the study door. “When the lads get home,” he told his daughter as he passed her, “send them to me straight away.”

Pandra blank-faced the request.

She must have realized that the poor chaps would be enjoying one of his more inventive castigations.



KIMBERLY STĂNESCU JAMMED HER THUMB into the remote control button, flipping channels quickly and aggressively, her jaw set. She wasn't watching anything on the television, just waiting for her husband to *finally* get his butt home. Outside her living room window sunlight was fading into dusk – or rather, the huge stadium lights mounted on the cave ceiling that passed for this underground community's version of sunlight were dimming.

At last! She heard the distinctive clomp of her husband's Timberland hiking boots on the walkway outside.

The front door swung open and Sedge came inside, tossing his duffle bag negligently into a corner of the foyer. "Hey," he said.

She hey'd him back, flipping to the next channel with a hard jerk of her hand.

He paused a moment. "Is something wrong?"

"Really?" She slammed the remote onto the coffee table. "You're going to ask me that after you've just come home from *kidnapping* another woman?"

"Jesus, please don't start, Kimberly, okay?" He moved through the foyer into the kitchen. "Today's mission sucked and I feel like crap." Opening the refrigerator, he pulled out a Heineken. "Vinz got stabbed, you know."

She surged to her feet and marched into the kitchen after her husband. "Yes, I do know." It'd been one of those moments of sheer, unadulterated terror when she'd opened her front door and found Roth Mihnea, the leader of the community, standing on her doorstep with a grim look on his face. She'd thought Roth had come to tell her that it was Sedge who'd been killed. Which would've fit in perfectly with her life to date. Because things were going about as right for her as if she'd spent all of her days spilling salt, breaking mirrors, and walking under ladders.

She plunked her hands on her hips. "If you're waiting for me to feel sorry for Vinz, then you're going to stand there till you petrify, Sedge. Because here's the thing. Vinz wouldn't have been injured in the first place if you warriors hadn't been out kidnapping another woman!"

Sedge didn't respond. He twisted the Heineken cap and she heard it *sisss* open.

"Damn it, Sedge, I can't believe you took another one! Have you heard nothing I've had to say about this?" How ridiculously naïve she'd been to think that Gwyn Billaud, the woman who'd been taken after her, would be the community's last kidnap victim. How completely idiotic to assume that anyone in this barbaric town had actually listened to Kimberly or learned one single thing from forcing Gwyn down here into danger and then *losing* her.

"Oh, I've heard," Sedge returned, tipping the beer to his mouth and drinking it down.

She seamed her lips together. *Well, that's just great.* She loved it when men chugged beer around her. It was, like ... memories galore. "You men of the Warrior Class think you're such heroes, saving your people from possible extinction with what you're doing. But do you know what you really are? Criminals! No better than a bunch of thugs."

Sedge lowered his beer and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yes, thank you. You've made that abundantly clear in the past." He set his beer on the kitchen island. "This is the same argument we've been having for two years, Kimberly, and it gets us nowhere. There's nowhere *to* go with it. I wish there were, but I'm in an impossible situation here. I have a job that requires me to follow orders, so I follow them, but that means I end up doing something you hate." His gaze darkened. "That I hate."

She curled her hands into fists. "If you hate it, then stand up to Roth."

Sedge shook his head. "You know I don't have the power to change anything around here. But even if I could get Roth to stop sending warriors topside on kidnap missions, how in the

world is that going to help you, Berly? It won't. *Nothing* will change for you. You're stuck down here with me, no matter what." The muscles around his throat tightened and a raw thread of pain entered his voice. "I know you're miserable. That's more than clear. I wish I could send you topside daily to your lawyer job – you have no idea how much I want that – but security issues make that impossible. Too many comings and goings risk exposure, and Roth is really paranoid about it. You know that, Berly, okay, so .... I'm truly sorry for how unhappy you are. I mean that from the depths of my heart. But I don't know what I can do about it."

She just stared at him, her chest hitching as she fought back tears. It was more or less the same speech she'd heard for the two years of their marriage, and, as always, Sedge was right. There wasn't anything he could do to free her, barring killing himself. She was well and truly trapped, and the worst part was that she'd colluded in her own entrapment by marrying him. Worse still, her marriage had handed a victory to Roth, who'd abducted her down here for the very purpose of hooking her up with one of the men. It was the stupidest thing she'd ever done in a long list of stupid things in her life, letting herself fall in love with Sedge.

He wasn't even particularly her type. She didn't like big men, not since her ex-boyfriend, Tim, anyway, and Sedge was huge, nearly six foot four and as wide as the side of two barns. His long mane of blond hair, spread in thick waves across his shoulders, only served to enhance the sheer breadth of him and emphasize his muscular power.

But behind all the muscle he was sweet and doting, and had a pair of puppy-dog brown eyes that spoke of a good soul. Those qualities in themselves had been difficult enough to resist, but men of his kind also fiercely protected their women, and the allure of the safety Sedge could provide her had ended up proving too tempting. Unfortunately, she also hated herself for that. In her logical mind, she told herself she should be strong enough to look out for herself – she was,

damnit! She didn't need a man! Of course, this fueled the conflict inside her head which invariably had her performing a push-pull dance with Sedge that was far from healthy. She knew it, saw herself doing it, but just couldn't seem to stop.

"There's got to be something meaningful you can do down here," Sedge insisted. "Then –"

"Ha! Like what? Build rock gardens?" She braced her hands on the kitchen island and leaned toward him. "Do you know what I did before you people stole my life? I worked for the Peace Corps for two years before I went to law school. After I graduated, I was in-house counsel for an environmental group, saving trees and ocean and air, and right before you kidnapped me, I'd just won a case where I helped to uphold the First Amendment rights of the United States Constitution." She straightened and threw out her arms. "I used to save the world, Sedge. After that, what the unholy hell do you think I can find to do in this stupid little town that would feel meaningful?"

Sedge bowed his head. "Tell me," he implored hoarsely. "Just tell me what I need to do to make you happy, and I'll do it. Anything."

She took a step back from him, torn between how moved she was by his obvious love for her and yet how clearly ineffectual he was at making her happy. She felt nearly consumed by an acute disappointment in her husband, because she believed he really would stop the kidnappings if he weren't so damned indoctrinated into the community's system of sole leadership.

And really, why *would* anyone question King-frigging-Roth? Why should *he* question it, when he never suffered any of the long-term consequences of his fucked-up repopulation program? Sure, the abducted women were upset and angry when they first got dragged into the town of Țărâna, but the dawning amazement of finding a community where they could truly belong, when most had faced nothing but rejection in their former lives, and the supremely

gorgeous and attentive men who were wandering the streets around here, were pretty damned powerful tools for winning them over. All the women caved eventually.

Just as she had.

Her face flushed with heat. Well, not this time. Acquisition number seven, whoever that new kidnap victim might be, was the last straw. “You want me to find something meaningful to do around here? Well, all right. I’ve got something in mind.” She spun around hard on her heels and marched for the stairs. She was damn well going to save the new woman.

“Ah, hell.” Sedge raced up the stairs after her. “Kimberly, please, you’ve got to stop stirring the pot around here.”

She kept trudging. “Somebody’s got to.”

“You’re going about it all crazy, Berly.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I mean, Jesus, you tried to get equal rights for the Stânga Town kids.”

“You bet I did. Your system of hierarchy around here is prejudicial and asinine.”

He threw out his arms. “You complained that there wasn’t a health inspector for the *two* places in town there are to eat out.”

“Three,” she shot back. “Besides Garwald’s Pub and The Diner, you can buy snacks and drinks at the movie theatre. And Roth hired one, didn’t he?”

“For the love of God, you lobbied for a longer lunch recess for the school kids.”

“So?”

“They’re *preschoolers*,” he told the side of her face as she came to the top of the stairs; she was refusing to look at him. “The stuff you do doesn’t make any sense. It’s completely off the wall.”

She planted herself in their bedroom doorway, her hand on the doorknob. “Oh, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet, buster.” She slammed the door in her husband’s face.

## Chapter Four

TONI PEELED OPEN ONE EYELID, swept the room with a glance, then closed her eye again. *Wonderful*. She was hallucinating. Damn, she’d known something like this was going to happen the moment that strange male nurse had come into her hospital room. *Strange*, not as in strange-looking. No, actually he’d been gorgeous: stylish flattop blond hair, cheekbones that could cut steel, and a double scoop of sculpted butt that even hospital scrubs hadn’t been able to camouflage. But strange in that he hadn’t known what the hell he was doing.

*Change in doctor’s orders*, he’d said, *get some solid sleep now*. Ludicrous. She knew her doctor, for Pete’s sake, and Steven wouldn’t have altered her treatment plan without first discussing it with her. Not only that, but what kind of change in orders would knock her out right before she was supposed to be discharged?

She’d just been tee’ing up for a good harangue when Incompetent Nurse ... Nurse Goodbody or ... Ratched, or whoever he was, had sedated her. And now whatever medication he’d given her had screwed up her poor concussed brain. When she’d cracked open her eyelid just now, she’d found herself not in her hospital room, but in some extravagant bedroom decorated in Louis XVI furniture... which just upped the weird factor even more because if she was ever going to hallucinate, she imagined it’d be in Country French.

Not that she had any idea what it was like to trip out. She wasn't straight-laced or anything, just focused and determined. She'd had to be to get where she'd wanted to go in life; the bio undergrad program at UCSD had been brutal, and med school at UCLA even harder, but she'd graduated at the top of her class in both.

Her mother had responded to these achievements by dubbing her a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, D-cup'ped, over-achiever. Basically, *straight-laced* in mother parlance, although Toni didn't do more than secretly roll her eyes over it. Comments from her mother came few and far between these days, and Toni didn't want to risk putting any more distance between them than already existed.

Odd thing about her mother. Shannon Parthen had been a fantastic parent when Toni and her older brother, Alex, were growing up. Toni's Mom and Dad got divorced when Toni was about six, and after that—no doubt *because* of that—Shannon had thrown herself into the job of motherhood with all her heart. As soon as Toni had gone away to college, though, it'd been like, *bam!* No need for further involvement now that her daughter was launched into the world. A grown woman. Raised.

Although the truth was, none of Toni's female relationships had ever been all that close. Single girls were threatened by her looks, homemakers treated her like an alien from the Planet Zorg because she was thirty-two and still didn't have any children, and professional women were ... well, threatened by her.

Boyfriends hadn't exactly proved fertile ground for intimacy, either.

So it was her brother, Alex, who got an earful of her woes whenever she had them. In fact, she really needed to talk to Alex about that cabbage-headed maneuver she'd pulled by giving her



phone number to Detective John Waterson. She'd hadn't had a chance to talk to him before the accident and –

The soft chiming of a clock brought her back to her current situation. She snapped her eyes open, both of them this time. *Damn. Same Louis XVI head trip going on.* Right. She needed to get her fuzzy brain on task here.

Sitting up slowly, she swung her legs over the side of the mattress and sat on the edge of the bed. A wave of dizziness overtook her, but it passed quickly, leaving a dull ache behind her eyes. She waited another minute, but the swanky bedroom refused to change back into the hospital room at Scripps. Crap, this was real.

She looked around and found the clothes she'd worn into the hospital the night of her car accident neatly folded on a bedside table, piled next to one of those fancy white-and-gold French Contessa-style phones. And her purse? She reached out carefully to look through her belongings. No purse; no cell. *Perfect.* She eyed the Contessa phone. There weren't any numbers on it, but, well .... She picked up the receiver.

There was a soft *hum*, then a woman's voice came on the line. "Operator."

*Operator?* Weird. Had she somehow landed herself in a hotel? "Um ... hello, yes ... uh ...." How did one go about asking *Where am I?* without sounding like a complete nincompoop? "Could you dial a number for me, please?" Her brother was probably the best option. "It's a 619 area –"

"Ah, Dr. Parthen," the operator interrupted. "It's good to hear you're awake. I'll send the doctor in to see you right away."

The ...? *Wait* – The line went dead.

She pulled the phone away from her ear and eased the receiver back into its cradle. *Doctor?* Was she at a –? She shot to her feet, her heart thundering. Dear God, whatever drug Nurse Fine Ass had given her had put her into a coma and now she was in some high-class treatment facility for ... for *how long*?! Holy crap!

Her head started to spin, and she gripped her forehead, forcing herself to take slow, even breaths. *Okay, calm down, Toni. Be logical.* She wasn't hooked up to an IV or a feeding tube, and her muscles were in working order. Weren't they? She took a few experimental steps. *Yes ... yes.* Okay, then.

There was probably a simple explanation for this.

She spied a set of long, gold velvet curtains across the room. The San Diego skyline would be just outside that window, or some landmark which would clear up this *where am I?* mystery, and then she could stop worrying. She walked over and parted the curtains.

*Bong.* She could almost hear her own jaw drop.

A sliding glass door led out onto a wrought iron balcony ... and that's where all semblance of normalcy ended. About twenty feet beyond the end of the balcony were prison bars. Each steel post was about as big as a birch tree, no more than a couple of feet of space between them, and appeared to surround the entirety of whatever building she was in. As ease of escape-ability went, the place ranked about a Houdini.

Beyond the prison bars was the real freak-show. Rock above, rock below ... she was inside a cave! And a cave that'd been converted into a small town. At the beginning of a long street that continued into the distance she saw a coffee shop called Aunt Ælsi's, a clothing store named The TradeMark, and around the corner and just visible from the building she was in, there was a movie theatre where Transformers blinked on the marquee, with plenty more of the same, plus

people bustling about, doing their everyday business. This was unbelievable. She dropped her forehead into her palm. How concussed was her brain, anyway?

Jesus, knowing her luck, she was probably –

Male voices approached her door. She whirled around, her heart speeding again. The raucous voices grew louder, laughing about somebody named Cleeve, then passed her doorway and faded. She dove for the nightstand and started hauling on her clothes: bra and panties, a pair of navy slacks, a turquoise cotton blouse, and Italian leather flats. She'd be damned if she was meeting some stranger, regardless if he or she was a doctor, in a show-your-crack-to-the-world hospital gown. This place was giving her a major case of the creeps.

She finished dressing and darted her gaze around, searching for a hair brush or comb. Nothing. There wasn't time to go hunting for one, either. The lock clicked and the door swung open.

She didn't know who she'd expected to come striding in, but somehow it wasn't this tall, lean gentlemen. He was elegant and stylish, if a bit too "cleanliness is next to Godliness" in his hygiene standards. His black hair was groomed down to the last follicle, and his Armani suit had been pressed to within an inch of its life. His age was indeterminate. There seemed to be a wisdom and maturity in his turquoise eyes that suggested substantial life experience, yet there wasn't a single wrinkle on his face.

"Oh, you're on your feet," the man observed delightedly. "Splendid." He crossed to her, holding out his palm. "I'm Dr. Jess."

She didn't shake his hand, instead pointing to the balcony window. "Excuse me, but where am I?" So much for pleasantries.

“Yes, I imagine you have many questions. If you’ll come with me, the head of the department will explain everything.” The doctor offered her a close-lipped smile.

That was probably meant to reassure her, but it didn’t. A guy who gave a girl a big, toothy grin, now *that* was a man who could be trusted. “Head of *what* department?”

Dr. Jess moved to stand by her bedroom door. “I’m sorry, I know this must be unsettling, but the head prefers to give these explanations himself.” He politely waited for her to precede him, that enigmatic smile still on his face.

She exhaled sharply. *Unsettling* was putting it mildly. She didn’t trust this Dr. Jess, but what choice did she have but to meet this “head” if she wanted to find out what was going on. “Very well.” She crossed through the bedroom door and into a wide, balconied hallway thickly carpeted in burgundy Berber.

Dr. Jess moved past her and led the way down an even wider staircase.

*Wow*. Whatever this place was, it was clearly backed by a great deal of money. It was almost overwhelmingly palatial and lavishly decorated, with large oil paintings on the walls, mostly landscapes, life-sized Greek and Roman statues, and gold-fitted, shiny wood banisters. At the bottom of the stairs, they cut through what could only be The Grand Entrance Hall. The floor of the room was tiled in checkered mauve and white marble, with potbellied brass vases standing sentinel next to soaring white marble pillars, a sparkling gold-and-crystal chandelier lording over the entire room.

Dr. Jess took her down another smaller staircase, this one leading into a long hallway lined with doors. Passing one of the doors, she heard male voices again, their bantering and cursing punctuated by the distinct *thud* of fist meeting flesh.

She slanted a look at Dr. Jess.

He smiled pleasantly at her.

They came to a large set of double doors at the end of the hall. Dr. Jess pressed an intercom button. “Dr. Parthen and I are here, sir.”

“Ah, excellent,” came the affable reply. “Come in, of course.” A buzzer sounded and the double doors *snicked* open.

Dr. Jess again politely stood back for her to enter first. She stepped into a room that appeared to be a combination library and office. Tall mahogany bookshelves lined three of the walls, and an arrangement of plush, dark leather chairs of the kind one might find at an Oxford men’s club was set around a coffee table of polished oak.

All of this received no more than three seconds of her attention. As magnificent as the décor was, her eyes couldn’t help but rivet on the two black-haired men across the room.

One was rising from behind a desk, unfolding himself to a height of well over six feet. He was dressed with understated wealth, pleated gray silk slacks and a v-necked cashmere sweater in cobalt: a completely respectable look that should’ve offered reassurance, except that there was just something about this man. Something ... that whispered danger.

Yet, even *he* only received about one second of her attention. As much as this man demanded notice, the man who was standing statue-still off to the side of the desk, his hands clasped behind his back in a stance that pushed his enormous shoulders forward and made them look even more enormous, demanded it more.

He was, without doubt, the most frightening man she’d ever seen outside of the movies. No whispering here; this man’s danger came at a person like a wrecking ball. He was dressed in clothes directly out of a Gangstas Я Us catalog, steel-toed biker boots with thick silver buckles at the ankles, black leather pants that hugged a pair of powerfully built thighs and lean hips, and a

black lycra T-shirt that similarly clung to his torso in a way that displayed every delineated muscle the man owned, of which there were *a lot*. The scary dude look was made complete by a pair of dark sunglasses that hid his eyes, and a jaw so hard she'd bet she could take a crowbar to it and never crack a smile out of him. Maybe someone had already tried that maneuver; there was a line of scabbed flesh streaking the man's cheek.

"Dr. Parthen, welcome," the man behind the desk said in that same affable tone she'd heard over the intercom. "My name is Roth Mihnea. I'm the leader of this community. Please, come and sit down. We have much to discuss."

*Community?* Had she ... oh, crap, had she been committed to a mental hospital by mistake? Jesus, she'd probably completely wiggled out on Nurse Bun's drug and...

But then ... these men didn't exactly look like psychiatrist dweebs, did they?

Roth Mihnea indicated one of the antique black Renaissance chairs set before his desk and smiled. No big, toothy grin here, either.

She rounded on Dr. Jess. "What's going on here?"

The doctor's expression turned sheepish as he shut the double doors, and she heard another *snick*. This time it was the lock reengaging.

Adrenalin surged through her body, tripping her heart into a runaway beat and suffusing her flesh with heat. She was usually pretty quick on the up-take, but it was only now reaching her concussed brain that perhaps she'd been knocked unconscious for reasons other than incompetence.

## Chapter Five

“AM I BEING HELD AGAINST my will?” Toni asked tightly. Probably a *real* stupid question, all things considered.

“I should think not,” Roth answered mildly. “We’re hoping you’ll willingly help us, Dr. Parthen, once you’ve heard of our plight.” Roth’s smile remained in place. “I admit that drugging you and then abducting you is hardly likely to have put you in a helpful frame of mind. I do apologize for that. But this is a top-secret community, and such methods were necessary to maintain security.”

*Top secret? As in ...? What? A research institute for nuclear weapons ...? Chemical warfare ...? Cloning ...? Stem cells? Again, she didn’t think so. Whatever else these two men might be, they definitely weren’t think-tank dweebs, either. She rapidly ran through a list of other possibilities, her mind landing on the most probable, at least based on the presence of Hard Face over there, who looked every inch a “goon” bodyguard, and the Drug Lord security system. These guys were Mafia. An icy prickle raised the fine hairs on her skin. Oh, shit.*

“I understand how disconcerting this is,” Roth inserted into her elongated silence. “Please, Doctor, I just ask that you listen to what we have to say. If you don’t agree to our offer after that, then you’re free to go.”

Did she have another option? Most likely not. But she wasn’t going to let herself get in a panic about it. A member of the “family” was probably a hemophiliac or maybe had a Myeloproliferative disorder, and she’d been brought in to offer a second opinion for Dr. Jess’s diagnosis. Whatever the case, the sooner she cooperated and treated the patient, the sooner she could get out of here.

“All right,” she said, moving over to the Renaissance chair Roth had indicated and sitting down.

“Thank you.” Roth sat down, too, a hint of relief showing on his face. “Let me start by explaining our need for secrecy. This community is home to a very special race of people, Dr. Parthen. All of us who live here” – he made a wide gesture – “must remain in hiding because we have a unique genetic ... variance, if you will, that the outside world doesn’t understand or accept.” He folded his hands over his desk blotter, his long, tapered fingers braiding. “We all have unusual bone marrow, you see. Ours makes predominately white blood cells and very little red. This condition has its advantages. We have heightened powers of healing and, as such, a much longer lifespan than people of your race, but it has also left us with our curse: a blood-need, we call it, which requires us to get our red blood elsewhere.”

“Oh?” Toni kept her expression neutral. What hay cart had this man fallen off of? There was no bone marrow disorder that functioned that way.

“Unfortunately, as will often happen with people who are different and misunderstood, we’ve suffered extreme prejudice, thought of as diseased and dangerous, rather than simply ... unusual. Our kind used to prevail in Romania, but our enemies spread lies about us over a hundred years ago – 1877, to be exact – which led to a wave of mass hysteria and killings.”

Toni frowned. Romania? Not Italian Mafia?

“We were hunted savagely and without mercy, nearly all of our kind slaughtered. This forced us to flee our homeland and go into hiding or else be wiped out.” Roth’s knuckles whitened briefly.



Toni shifted in her seat. Something about this didn't ring true. She couldn't imagine any group being persecuted to the point of forced seclusion and near extinction, not in this day and age. The ACLU would have a fit.

"By the time we finally made it to California," Roth continued, "and were safely hidden away here in this secret underground community, our numbers had dwindled severely. We tried to rebuild our people, but reproducing within such a small gene pool eventually took its toll. Our bloodlines weakened to the point that we ceased being able to produce viable offspring." His voice quieted. "That was thirty years ago. After more than ten years of these stillbirths, I finally forbade any more procreation within the race. We tried reproducing with the general population, but once again that brought us nothing but stillborn children. It seemed we were truly lost." Roth's eyelids swept down, as if concealing a private pain.

She waited, then exhaled silently. "I'm sorry, Mr. Mihnea, but I'm a bit confused. Is this a genetic problem you're having, or a blood disorder?" She switched her gaze between Roth and Dr. Jess, who was seated in the Renaissance chair next to hers. "Because as terrible as I feel for your predicament, genetics isn't really my forté."

"Ah, but Dr. Jess here knows a great deal about our genetics." Roth brightened. "The good doctor finally found a solution to our problem. You see, in the process of mapping the blood components of both the general population and our kind, Dr. Jess stumbled upon a rare element in the makeup of some of your race which would mix well with our DNA. Reproducing with this unique offshoot of people allows us to have children with all of our characteristics, and with renewed vitality, health, and strength. Peak 8, he called the element, named for its placement on the blood graph."

Toni nearly rolled her eyes. Jesus Christ, the man had a gift for talking around an issue; she still had no idea what he wanted. “There’s no technique for mapping blood that would result in anything called Peak 8, Mr. Mihnea, at least none that I’m aware of.”

“Not with your methods, no. Dr. Jess’s analyses are unique.”

She shot a narrow glance at Jess. Just what sort of doctor was he, anyway?

“Peak 8,” Roth went on, “is representative of an element from a very ancient lineage, Dr. Parthen. In an earlier age, both of our cultures used to interbreed with a now-extinct race called Dragon. *Not* because they’re actual dragons, of course,” he hastened to add, “but because the people of this species were born with an extravagantly winged creature of brilliantly colored scales on their backs, almost like a tattoo. Of a dragon.”

She smiled thinly. Right. As far as weird went, they’d sort of just left the playing field. “Okay,” she went along, “did someone contract hepatitis from one of these dragon tattoos, is that what you’re getting at? Or HIV, maybe, because if that’s the case, then —”

“The tattoos are hereditary, Dr. Parthen, but that’s hardly the point.”

“Then what *is*?” she snapped. She was getting really sick of *The Munster Family Story Hour*. “I’ve been waiting forever for you to get to the punch line.”

Roth sat back in his chair and drew a deep breath. “You have this special ancestry I’ve just described, Dr. Parthen. *You* carry the Dragon bloodlines we so desperately need bred into our population.”

“I —” She slammed her mouth shut, then opened it again. “I *what*?” What was this guy talking about? “I most certainly do not, Mr. Mihnea.”

“I’m afraid you do, doctor.”

“I’m a hematologist, for Pete’s sake. I think I’d know if I have a blood anomaly.”

“You just haven’t been able to see it with the type of tests you use. With the right analyses, you could.” Roth pushed his chair back and opened his desk drawer, taking out a manila folder and placing it on his blotter. He pulled a sheet of paper out of it. “Here’s the blood graph Dr. Jess drew up on you based on the CBC Scripps ran while you were in the hospital. It clearly shows Peak 8 as a part of your makeup.” He set the graph on the edge of the desk facing her.

She glanced dismissively at the unfamiliar hills and valleys spread out across the page. “I’ve never seen a chart like this before in my life.” Her patience growing thinner by the minute, she made a flip gesture at the paper. “For all I know, you generated this using an Etch A Sketch. Not only that, but my CBC wouldn’t exactly have been available for public scrutiny.”

“Dr. Jess would be happy to show you how he performs his tests. I have no doubt you’ll find his methods adhere to all of the most rigid scientific standards.” Roth pulled out another sheet from the folder: an 8x10 photograph. “You also have the mark.” He spun the photo around and set it next to the graph. “Although you had it lasered off several years ago.”

She looked down at the picture of her bare back, and gasped. It was from her confidential medical records!

“It’s a dragon’s foot, you see.” Roth pointed to the left side of her spine, where a brown, irregular blotch marred her skin. “And claws: if you look closely, you can see them. The mark isn’t made up of colorful scales as it is with our race, and the majority of your dragon is missing, but that’s typical for someone of your —”

“It was a *birthmark*,” she cut him off coldly. This conversation was rapidly moving from ridiculous to downright irritating.

Roth retracted his finger and slowly arched his brows. “Precisely.”

“Oh, for the love of God.” She pressed two fingers to the middle of her brow. She might as well stick her head in a car door and slam it a couple of times rather than try to make this man see reason. “Okay. Fine. For the sake of argument, let’s just say I can suspend disbelief and *common sense* long enough to accept the idea that I have some fantastical ancient ‘dragon’ blood anomaly. What’s your point?”

“My point, as I said from the beginning, is that we need your help.” Roth spread his hands. “You’re the only type of woman the men of our race can have children with.”

“Children? You mean for ...” Her breath hissed out of her in sudden understanding. “Oh, my God, you want to ... you want to have a baby with me!?”

“Well, not me in particular.” Roth chuckled, sounding embarrassed. “Actually, I’ve selected three –”

“Him?!” She pointed at Hard Face, alarm burying her anger as she imagined that brute pushing between her thighs.

Roth coughed lightly. “No, not Jacken, either. Actually, I’ve selected three men from our Warrior Class for you to choose from.”

She gripped the armrests of her chair, panic pushing acid into her throat as another realization hit her. “And if I refuse,” she whispered horribly, “I’m not free to go, am I?”

Roth’s gaze dropped briefly. “You’ll adjust and eventually be happy, I assure you. The others have.”

She sucked in an appalled breath. “You’ve done this to other women?”

“There are five other Dragon females,” Roth informed her. “Women who’ve found men to love here, who have homes of their own, fulfilling careers, and a caring community to raise their children in – everything we’re offering you.”

Her heart was pounding so hard she was starting to feel sick. Jesus Christ, somebody needed to put Haldol, Thorazine, Navane, or any of the choicer antipsychotics into the water supply around here. This man Roth was a bona fide lunatic.

“You’ll meet the others soon,” he said. “They’ll be of tremendous help to you during your adjustment. They know exactly what you’re going through right now.”

She shook her head numbly, as if the mere act of moving her head from side to side could deliver her from this nightmare. She couldn’t believe this was happening. “My God,” she rasped out, “who *are* you people?”

Roth held her gaze for a long moment. “Our race is called Vârcolac, Dr. Parthen.” He came to his feet and strode to the middle bookshelf where a crystal decanter sat. He poured out a measure of Scotch, then crossed back over to offer it to her.

She remained very still, swallowing with a hard *click* of her throat. The amber liquor sparkled through the cut glass. Roth’s eyes turned to gray smoke.

“People of your race devised the name vampire for us.” He smiled at her, his expression making a valiant attempt at sympathy even as he showed her a set of pointed canines. “But we’re Vârcolac.”

## Chapter Six

JACKEN KEPT HIS EYES LOCKED on Antoinetta Parthen through his sunglasses, every muscle in his body held rigid as he waited for her to flip her lid, pretty much par for the course when a new acquisition heard the V-word. If she kept to the usual script, there’d be a whole lot of screaming

and hysteria coming out of her any minute, *definitely* begging, then after that, the worst part. She'd start to cry.

Only Hannah, the very first Dragon woman they'd ever brought into Țărănă, hadn't had a total meltdown. But then Hannah was a librarian with a master's degree in fables and myths, and she'd been instantly captivated by them. It hadn't hurt that she'd also been instantly taken with Nice Guy Vârcolac, Willen Crișan, the two of them falling in love in that cupid's-arrow-in-the-ass kind of way. In the six years since the repopulation program at Țărănă had been set into motion, Hannah and Willen had already had three kids and another was on the way. Everyone loved Hannah, although she'd misled them all into thinking that their acquisitions would always run so smoothly. They hadn't.

Ellen and Beth had come next, numbers two and three, one right after the other. Both had been very pissy about being ripped from their lives and forced into the program. Considering that they had a solid point there, they'd adjusted reasonably quickly. Ellen was a dentist who'd become fascinated by a whole new species of dentistry, and Beth was a fashion designer who'd opened her own clothing store, The TradeMark, and become *the* word on all matters of style in Țărănă. She'd hooked up with Arc Costache, and they now had two kids, while Ellen had somehow cracked the surface of brooding Pedrr and landed him, also getting herself a couple of squirts.

Then had come number four, Magnolia, aka Maggie, a pampered former Southern belle and trained horticulturist, a totally useless profession in a cave, and a year later, number five, Kimberly, a workaholic, ladder-climbing, and also useless – at least to this particular community – lawyer. Both had been real trouble cases when it came to adjusting.

Luken, an indisputable *saint* of patience, had finally calmed down high-maintenance Maggie enough to get her underneath him and pregnant. Which had left Kimberly. Who knew Sedge would end up taking care of that little problem. But one day the badass Mixed-blood Warrior had jacked her up against the wall outside of Garwald's Pub and balled her brains out. Presto! Problem solved. No kids out of those two, yet, though.

The community had been way ready for another easy case like Hannah when number six had come along: sweet-as-chocolate pediatric nurse, Gwyn, who'd immediately taken to the eight Mixed-blood children in Țărănă. Gwyn had definitely been on the road to adjusting well, but ....

Jacken's stomach wrenched on a pang of regret. No one would ever know how that might've turned out.

Gwyn was the only acquisition who'd been stolen by their nasty Om Rău neighbors.

Șarvan had been in charge of guarding Gwyn that fateful day, but the dingus warrior had let himself get distracted flirting with Trinnía, the community hairdresser, who was, granted, a total babe. To add insult, Trinnía was also a fellow Vârcolac, which meant that they'd both been breaking all kinds of fraternization laws with their bonehead actions. Meanwhile, Gwyn had darted off to chase after one of the children who'd headed into Stânga Town, Țărănă's slum. She'd come too close to the Outer Edge, the main entrance to the Om Rău Hell Tunnels, and been grabbed.

Jacken had fired Șarvan's ass and tossed the fuckup in jail for a week. But that couldn't bring Gwyn back. Nothing could. Not when it was impossible for a Vârcolac to enter the extreme heat of the Hell Tunnels.

Losing Gwyn had been Jacken's worst day as a warrior, not counting those six other days when he'd had to abduct an innocent woman, knowing full well how much he was about to

screw up her life. Each time he did that, the part of him that believed in protecting women, not messing them up, suffered a blow. In his mind, there had to be a better way to bring these Dragons into their community, but when he'd questioned Roth privately, his boss had been snappish on the subject.

“What would you have us do, Jacken? Just ask them?” Roth had flung a hand out. “Yes, let's imagine a delegation of our race shows up on a Dragon woman's doorstep and says, Excuse me, Miss So-and-So, would you mind giving up, (A) seeing your family on a regular basis, (B) your career objectives, and (C) any love interest you might currently have? And, oh, yes (D) would you also mind living underground, in permanent hiding, so that you might have babies with a vampire? I wonder what she would say? Or, no, perhaps I already know.” Roth exhaled impatiently. “We have to get the women down here to win them, Jacken. There *isn't* another way.”

And Roth had the final word in these matters.

Besides, Jacken wasn't in any position to make demands regarding Țărănă's way of life, having lived here these last thirty-seven years subject to the generosity of the community. Besides, Roth had a point. People pretty much shut down at the first mention of the V-word, and wouldn't give them chance one.

So, yeah, now here they were with number seven: recent acquisition, Antoinetta Parthen, doctor of hematology and all-around hot chick.

All Dragons were blonde and incredibly beautiful, a fortunate side-effect of their Dragon bloodlines, but Antoinetta was exceptional. Her hair was a flaxen waterfall streaked with fire flowing just past her shoulders, her eyes sapphire gemstones, and her body was a heart attack, the kind of leggy and busty combination that required a nearby drool cup to handle. On top of



that, her scent was ... had a .... Jesus, there was an added sweetness to her fragrance that had him working as hard to keep his pants on as his fangs choked back.

She was an unmated female, yeah, and all unmatings gave off a strong scent, a kind of a primitive pheromone which to a Vârcolac male smelled like she'd spritzed herself down with Eau de Screw Me.

Human females were more aromatic than Vârcolac females, and the Dragons were downright heart-stopping. But smelling this woman was like freebasing adrenaline and lust in one big fucking eight ball. He'd bet sweet blood like hers coated the tongue like a velvet orgasm. Squeezing his eyes shut behind his sunglasses, he pictured Antoinetta with her head thrown back, the graceful curve of her throat exposed, inviting him to take his fill. Or the creamy length of her thigh laid bare to him. Yeah, taste her essence, then go straight for the femoral ....

Jacken clenched his teeth, grinding them together until the bones in his head sounded like rocks tumbling down a cliff. He would *never* taste this woman...not in any way, ever, so he needed to shut his brain the hell up and pay attention. Not that there was anything much to pay attention to. Dr. Antoinetta Parthen had been silent for quite some time now.

He knotted the hands he had clasped behind his back into fists, and looked from Roth, who was seated behind his desk again, to Jess, then over to Antoinetta. The wait was killing him. *Damn it, do something already, lady.*

And then she did.

To his utter shock, she came out of her chair, snatched a letter opener off the desk, and pointed the nasty end of it at Roth. Jacken stiffened as the expression on her face clicked from shocked horror to hostility as fast as someone pushing the button on a slide show.

“You’ll excuse me if I must decline your invitation, Mr. Mihnea,” she said between gritted teeth. “But having turkey basters filled with “vampire” sperm stuck up inside of me isn’t particularly my idea of a good time.”

Roth looked mortified by the very idea. “I *assure* you, Doctor, that’s not at all what –”

“Don’t move,” she commanded sharply.

Roth stopped coming to his feet and sat back down, placidly placing both hands palms down on top of his desk. “We have no intention of hurting you.”

“You don’t move, either.” She aimed fierce blue eyes at Jacken, obviously sensing that he was about to go Medieval on her ass. “I know how to use a knife,” she warned, switching her grip on the letter opener with a flip of her wrist, now holding it in perfect throwing position. “And I’m telling you, if you take one step toward me, I’m going to plant this thing in your chest.”

He sneered at her. What a crock of shit. Just because the lady could probably wield a scalpel didn’t mean she could go *Kill Bill* with any blade she happened to pick up.

“P-please,” Dr. Jess stammered, his face white. “I think everyone just needs to –”

“And that would kill you, right?” She laughed, a bit of hysteria edging the sound.

Well, hell, looked like Jacken was going to get that meltdown he’d been waiting for, after all.

“I mean, you being a ‘vampire’ and all, and this being the proverbial stake in the heart. Or are you a zombie?” She backed up a step, keeping everyone within her sight line. “Maybe The Creature from the Black Lagoon, or – or, wait! – The Terminator. Yes! You look that part, don’t you?”

Roth shot him a droll look. “Well, this is new.”

“Put the letter opener down, now,” Jacken ordered her, pitching his voice to a lethal tone. “If I have to take it from you, Dr. Parthen, I can guarantee you won’t like my methods.” He came out of his stance, his arms swinging forward and his legs spring-coiling in readiness.

Antoinetta let out a startled cry, her eyes widening on his forearm tattoos. “Holy crap! You’re one of those cult freaks!” Leaping at Jess, she seized the doctor by the top of his hair and cranked his head back, setting the tip of the letter opener at his throat.

Jess squeaked in alarm.

Roth roared to his feet as if he’d been goosed in the ass by an ice pick. “No!” he shouted. “Please, I beg you to take care, Dr. Parthen.” He held out a staying hand. “Blood is sacred to us, and if you draw Dr. Jess’s that ... that will be an act of claiming him.”

Unfortunately, in her humanness, she couldn’t give Roth’s warning the weight it warranted. “Then I *suggest*” – she dug in the tip of the opener deeper to emphasize her point – “you unlock that door and let me out of here right now!”

“Dear heavens!” Roth gestured emphatically at Jacken. “Stop her before she does something irrevocable.”

Finally, *action*. Jacken stepped forward –

It might not be said he could move as fast as a Dragon warrior, but he could definitely get his ass in gear when necessary. Fast enough, at least, to stupefy the hell out of Antoinetta. Her eyes rounded when she found him suddenly standing right in front of her, his fingers wrapped around her weapon hand. Locking eyes with his target, he forcibly pulled the letter opener clear of Jess’s throat.

The doctor scrambled out of the way, smoothing a manicured hand down the front of his silk paisley tie.

Antoinetta's blue eyes blazed furiously, the heat of her gaze sending blood pounding against Jacken's temples and into his ears. He applied steady pressure to her hand, but she wouldn't give up the letter opener. *Stupid woman.* He twisted her arm down and behind her, then realized his own stupidity when the move brought her jerking up against him, her full breasts squashing into his chest. An electrical charge went through him, a burning heat landing right in his groin.

Antoinetta's cheeks flushed a brilliant red, the plump softness of her breasts rising and falling unsteadily against the underside of his pecs.

His balls tightened at the feel of her. Her powerful scent tunneled into the ventricles of his brain. A noise came out of him, a deep, guttural *something*. It rolled up from his gut and rumbled from his chest, sending a warning vibration through his fangs. Antoinetta clearly found the animal quality of it convincing. Her arm went slack. He took the invitation and tugged the letter opener from her grasp, then stepped back and jammed it into his belt. Without missing a beat, he grabbed her by the shoulders, propelled her back over to her chair, and ass-planted her into the seat.

Air spilled out of her in a heavy rush, her cheeks leaching of color as her eyes went stark with fear.

Yeah, he'd guess it was finally sinking into her brain pretty damned firmly that she was completely at their mercy.

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