

The Iron in Blood

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CHAPTER 1

Rebecca

I'm not a believer. I'm pretty sure I never really believed in Father Christmas or the tooth fairy or any number of magical creatures that litter childhood like so much detritus from earlier darker wierder times. Let's face it, the idea of a tiny person sneaking about taking children's teeth while they sleep is just creepy. I've never been a member of any of the current world religions or their derivatives either. I don't believe that invisible pixies populate gardens, or that aliens spend their time cruising the skies looking for the worlds' most intellectually challenged individuals to deliver messages of goodwill and try out their latest in probes. And I'd certainly never have dreamed of believing in vampires.

I do read books, though, and watch movies, and I've noticed that one of the common theories about vampires is that it's a condition that is somehow transferable between two individuals, like some kind of freaky infection.

Turns out vampires do exist. But they're born, not made.

The story of how I ended up, not believing in vampires, but knowing without a doubt that they live and breathe, started a couple of weeks before my eighteenth birthday. I was walking home from school at about three one gloomy Thursday afternoon, watching the familiar cracks in the pavement glide by below my feet, when the sound of a car engine being revved made me glance up at the car hurtling towards me. I guess I should have known that it would never be able to stop on time, but I just stood there watching it, right up until it clipped my left leg and sent me flying through the air.

I landed painfully on the road, and slid for a few feet, adding various unbelievably painful grazes to my growing list of injuries. I lay there on the tarmac, stunned by the unfamiliar pain shooting through my body, while people started gathering around me, shouting for help and collectively dialling 999 on about eight mobile phones. A skinny woman wearing a purple jumper loomed over me, and pushed me back down every time I tried to sit up. I lay on that road, embarrassed and aching, and hoping against hope that nobody I knew would ever find out about this. Teenagers hate fuss, and I hated it more than most.

Next thing an ambulance had arrived – a huge yellow blob-shaped vehicle with a blue light flashing away on top of it. Two paramedics jumped out of the front of the vehicle, one really short with a big pervy grin, and one really tall with a vaguely sour expression. I wondered briefly if I was going to be continuously sliding down an incline between the two of them as they carried me into the vehicle, but fortunately they came equipped with a stretcher that was balanced beautifully on nice even wheels. They made sure I was breathing and conscious, and then they asked me loads of awkward questions before they

lifted me carefully onto a hard board, and strapped the world's most constricting torture device around my neck. They picked up the board, yep, definitely an incline; and slid it onto the stretcher, where it turns out I had a great view of the tall guys nostrils. As they shut the doors behind me I tried to see what had happened to the guy that hit me with his car, but he was nowhere to be seen. The police later told me that he had driven off without stopping, and as nobody had gotten his number plate, the likelihood was that he would get off scot free.

They were wrong.

Angus

I remember that first call from my brother. I had arrived back at the hotel I'd been staying at for the past eight weeks. It was five in the afternoon, dark already and cold, and I'd just finished tracking down a man I'd been looking for for the past three days. He lived in a medium sized town about fifty miles from where I was staying, and I intended to pay him a surprise visit the following day. England is a beautiful country steeped in history and tradition, but it was also home to the type of man that I liked to, er, find. Hence my presence in the country when Marcus phoned.

When he told me that a match had been found, at first I did not believe him. He and Fergus had been searching for decades, and had so far turned up nothing. I thought he was playing some sort of joke. He has a tendency to do things like that; his sense of humour can be a bit peculiar. I suppose it may have a lot to do with him being the ultimate academic, plus the fact that he and Fergus lived in almost complete isolation from other more normal people. But when he repeated his statement, and I heard the suppressed excitement and elation in his voice, I knew that he was telling the truth, and I was pleased for him. And for Fergus. They had both worked so hard on this project, Marcus the geneticist, and Fergus the computer whizz. Thirty years spent sweating away at a seemingly impossible task that had been left to us by our equally frustrated father, and they had just achieved the second major breakthrough. The first had been when Marcus had isolated that little group of genes that separated us from the rest of humankind, that collection of base pairs that sat lurking in our DNA and that was ultimately responsible for both our strengths and our strangeness.

Marcus and Fergus had decided that I would be the retriever and general facilitator, mainly because I happened to be in the same country as the person with the alleged match, but also because I did not stand out in a crowd quite as much as they did. There was not much of an age difference between the three of us, unless you counted a few minutes. Besides, our father could never remember which of us had been born first, consumed as he was by the grief of losing our mother. Nonetheless, Marcus and Fergus had always behaved as if they were the older brothers, and ordered me about accordingly, and I had gone along with it. It had seemed too much effort to argue, and I had been far more interested in learning to use my own specific abilities.

As Marcus read out a name in a slightly breathless voice, I felt our narrow world changing and expanding, like a giant stone wall had unexpectedly morphed into an open window, and we were stood surveying the possibilities that lay beyond it. We weren't alone anymore. A seventeen year old girl was responsible for that revelation, and suddenly I felt very protective towards this young woman whom I had not even met yet. It didn't occur to me to write her details down. There was no point, really. I always remembered everything people told me. It was one of my *talents*.

Rebecca

That board was unbelievably uncomfortable. As the ambulance jolted and swerved its way through traffic, my discomfort grew, until I wasn't sure which was worse – the pain from every bony prominence in my body pressing onto that board, or the pain of my actual injuries. It was a tight call.

After what seemed like hours we finally arrived at the hospital, where I was finally rolled off that board, while someone prodded my spine for signs of injury. The neck collar was also removed once I was able to convince the slightly sceptical A&E doctor that I had absolutely no pain whatsoever in my neck. I rotated it madly and lifted my head right off the mattress to show him how little it hurt. He grinned at my efforts, and gave the nurse the collar. I wondered briefly if it would need to be incinerated. It deserved nothing less, in my opinion.

The doctor then asked me what had happened, so I told him I'd been hit by a car. He nodded like this happened all the time. I looked around the crowded A&E department. It probably did happen all the time here.

Then he asked me where it hurt, and I pointed to my left knee, which had by now swollen to the size of a small rugby ball. He pursed his lips, said, "Hmm," and mumbled something about x-rays. Then he listened to my chest and pressed on my abdomen, ordered a few blood tests, and left. A nurse appeared within seconds and asked me if I would mind if she took a few blood samples to send to the lab to check that I hadn't lost too much blood, and to cross match my blood type just in case I needed a transfusion. I thought that was reaching a bit, but I consented anyway. She also wanted to know if I wanted her to contact anyone to let them know where I was, and if I wanted anything for the pain.

I told her yes and no. Yes to the painkillers – now that I was off the board, the pain had become concentrated in my knee, which had begun to throb excruciatingly, and painkillers seemed like a wonderful concept right now. No to the contacting of relatives idea. My mother was a drug rep, who spent most of her time on the road in between visits to doctors and related medical professionals. She was also likely to panic if she heard that I was in hospital, and she always drove erratically when she got excited and I was afraid she would end up in here on a board too. My brothers were either at school or in college, and neither drove yet, so calling them would be a bit pointless. I decided to call my mother once I'd been x-rayed and sorted out and discharged. Then she would have no reason to panic. Hopefully. The nurse looked a bit doubtful, but I was seventeen, and Gillick competent, so I was able to make my own decisions with regards to medical treatment. My GP had explained all about that when he was trying to persuade me to go on the pill a few months back. I told him that I did not have a boyfriend, but he seemed reluctant to believe me. I bet in his mind all seventeen year olds are rutting like rabbits.

Twenty minutes later, and the painkillers were mercifully starting to work. The nurse had said that they were stronger than ordinary paracetamol, and I believed her. My head seemed to have detached itself from the rest of my body, and I felt very relaxed. The doctor returned to tell me that I had fractured my patella, and mentioned something about a cast, before running off to answer a call for a doctor in resus, wherever that was. I remember lying there wondering what exactly a patella was, and not really caring too much that I didn't even know if it was anywhere near the knee. I would google it when I got home.

Forty minutes later I phoned my mother from one of the pay phones in the waiting room. I tried to explain what had happened while I balanced awkwardly on two crutches and one good leg. The injured leg was encased in a hot, heavy cast, and felt like it didn't really belong to me. The phone was jammed between my left shoulder and my ear.

"What's a patella?" she wanted to know.

"It's a bone in the knee," I told her confidently, hoping I was right. Like I said, my mother has this tendency to panic, and I'd become used to behaving as if nothing serious was happening, just to prevent her from hyperventilating and having one of her "turns". My mum was a deeply caring woman, who had never quite recovered her equilibrium after my dad died nine years ago. I think she was terrified of losing one of us too, and any suggestion of trouble involving any of her three children sent her thoughts spiralling into a vortex of fear that she struggled to get back from. We had adapted to this, and we led fairly secretive and seemingly mundane lives as a result.

"I'm in Leicester!" I heard the alarm creeping into her voice, so I hurriedly told her that I would call a taxi, and meet her at home, and that there was no need for her to rush back. I briefly explained about the cast and the crutches, and said that my knee felt a lot better, which was sort of true and sort of not. It was starting to throb again. She seemed to calm down slightly, and reminded me that she would reimburse me for the taxi, and then she made loud kissing noises down the phone, said goodbye, and hung up. I smiled. Mum was mental, but I loved her to bits.

Angus

She'd already left by the time I phoned the hospital. I prevaricated and told them I was her father, and they eventually gave in and told me briefly that she'd fractured her patella, but that it wasn't a bad break, and would heal by itself within about six weeks. I thanked the nurse that I had spoken to, and hung up. Seconds later my mobile phone rang. It was Fergus, and he was calling to relay some information that he had obtained illegally by hacking into both the NHS database and the hospital's computer system. I grinned. I wasn't perturbed at all by the way in which he had achieved this. It was not so much a case of the ends justifying the means, although that did play a part. It was just that most ethical dilemmas had been dismissed from our consciences many years ago. They had been overwhelmingly irrelevant to our lives back then, and they still meant very little to us. Not being orientated with the world's moral compass had become a habit, I suppose, and I myself had done much, much worse than this before.

"I'm sending it to your phone now," he said, and rang off. Fergus the conversationalist.

I waited two minutes before I heard the phone buzz, and checked my inbox. As I read through the few details that had been so expertly stolen by my brother, I became aware of how little we knew about her. Name, date of birth, address, previous A&E attendances (one for a broken finger two years ago, one for a foreign body ear aged 3). Assorted bits of useless information, like date of last tetanus shot, and name of GP. Not a lot to work with, but enough for now. I wondered idly what she looked like.

Rebecca

Crutches are hard work. You'd think they would make life easier; I believe that's what they're supposed to do, but no. I was stuck at home for three days following the accident,

trying to get used to the things so I wouldn't fall over and kill myself as soon as I went back to school on Monday. I was hampered by a five ton cast that extended from around my ankle to just above mid thigh, and it itched. Still, it could have been worse. As soon as my codeine induced fog faded, it occurred to me what could have happened, and I went into a kind of delayed shock. Admittedly, it was pretty minor; I am not one for histrionics – I don't see the point, but I came to realise how lightly I'd gotten off. And then I started being angry with that idiot that had hit me. He could have killed me, and he would probably have driven away then too.

Mum seemed to take it well at first when she got home that evening, but when I went up to say goodnight to her later, she was sobbing quietly. I felt awful, even though I knew it was not entirely my fault. I hated to see my mother cry, especially since crying was something I seldom did.

"You OK, Mum?" I asked lamely, knowing that she wasn't really.

"I'm fine, baby," she said, smiling ruefully through her tears. "I'm crying from relief more than anything else. How is the knee?"

"Not too bad."

"Don't forget to take some of those painkillers before you go to bed," she reminded me for the tenth time.

"I won't," I said, leaving the sentence ambiguous for a reason. I was tired of the hazy head feeling and the pain seemed to be settling. I'd be OK tonight. I'd take the tablets when I got the pain again. As I left my mother's bedroom I marvelled at how it was that some people could cry so easily, while others couldn't. I wondered if there was something wrong with me.

Angus

I drove past her address twice that Friday morning. It had taken an hour or so to get from the hotel in Oxford to Banbury, a medium sized town that squatted over the M40 just as the South East became the Midlands. She lived in a semidetached house in the middle of a long row of similar properties. Relatively new builds, it looked like. Maybe ten years old, but already showing minor signs of wear and neglect that seemed to pervade so called middle income areas. I found Rebecca's house easily. Neat garden, peeling paint on the window sills, elderly Peugeot in the driveway. The second time I drove past I examined the surrounding houses. No for sale or for rent signs. People must like living here. Interesting, but potentially problematic.

I'd been thinking about how to approach the situation ever since Marcus had told me that they'd found a match. Straightforward abduction was certainly an option, but it would inevitably lead to complications. Police involvement, media, that kind of thing. Not that that would necessarily stop me. I had abducted people before – it wasn't hard. I guess you could say that it's another one of my talents. It's just that the people I usually abducted, well, their opinions of me were more or less completely irrelevant. This girl, this Rebecca Harding, she was different. It was part of our vague plan that she become one of us, and the smoother the integration, the better. It would be counterproductive to have an infuriated or severely depressed girl on our hands back home.

I decided to move my base of operations to a nearby hotel for a few days. Oxford was too far away to be driving back and forth each day. I also needed to discuss a few issues with both of my brothers. It had been blind luck that I had been in the same country as this

girl, but things needed organising now. I had considered various options for surreptitiously inserting myself into Rebecca's life, and becoming a neighbour seemed the most practical solution. It would mean that I would be able to keep an eye on her too. Fergus would have to buy one of these neighbouring houses for me. It wasn't likely to be difficult to persuade him to do it. He would relish the challenge.

I booked myself into a generic hotel above a pub a few miles from Rebecca's home, and phoned Marcus and Fergus at the lab, where I knew they would be at this time, and most other times too. Marcus was and had always been obsessed with his lab and his research, and Fergus had set up a wall of computers inside it so he could keep an eye on his brother, or so he said. I reckon he liked the company, though he'd never admit it.

"Angus!" Hearing my name always came as a bit of a jolt for me. I often wondered why my father had named us as he had, besides the fact that we'd all been born in Scotland over half a century ago. He had told us that he wanted our names to be similar, so that we could have a kind of collective identity. Pretty bloody ironic under the circumstances, really. Being fundamentally and extraordinarily different to everyone else and alike only to each other was a given for us. It was our affliction.

CHAPTER 2

Rebecca

Those crutches were trying to kill me. I abandoned them after a couple of days and managed to get about in a kind of hip grinding straight legged stagger. My brothers thought it was hilarious to watch me trying to negotiate the stairs to my bedroom, and laughed a little too loudly for my taste. Fortunately Joe was away at a friend's for most of the weekend, but I had to contend with Mark giggling and my mother trying not to smile.

Then I thought about trying to negotiate all the stairs and passages at school, and I shuddered. The school I attended had more than its fair share of bullies, and my own personal nemesis was an oversized thug called Shanice. She infested my life with her greasy hair and her sneers and her motley collection of equally dysfunctional friends, and was one of the main reasons I was looking forward to the next academic year. Shanice would be leaving then to go and work in some factory or shop or live off the welfare system. I didn't really care what she did, as long as I didn't have to look into those piggy eyes ever again. Unfortunately that beautiful day was a good few months away, and until then I was stuck with her.

I have to say, I was really not looking forward to Monday morning.

Angus

I spent the weekend doing a bit of investigating of my own. Fergus had given me a broad description of the car that had hit Rebecca, which he'd probably hacked from the police database; and then a list of matching cars in the region, starting with the ones reported stolen, and then those with a male teenager in the family, and then the rest. It took me four hours to find the hit and run driver. Turns out he had had an argument with his partner and had driven off in a blind rage after smacking her around a bit.

I'd actually narrowed the list of potential suspects down to fourteen likely candidates, and twenty six more possibles. I visited each in turn, pretending to be looking for someone

called Jack McShane, an entirely fictional character of my own making. I had asked for the same person at twelve different residences when I stumbled upon my target. I knew it was him as soon as he opened the door, and I felt the tangle of his thoughts sliding over the rage and frustration and meanness that was his mind. That was another of my talents, you could say – an ability to sense the general gist of someone’s thoughts without actually reading them in detail. It was a useful ability in situations such as these, where finding the correct quarry was not a straightforward “follow the clues” exercise.

I looked briefly at the cowering woman in the background, with a fresh black eye and a small baby clutched in her arms, and I made a decision.

In situations like these, where the man’s infraction was easily reported and proven, given the necessary resources, and which was punished by the laws of the country, I usually simply contacted the police and gave them the information needed anonymously, and made sure that they followed it up. But in cases where the law did not recognise the crimes being committed, I intervened. Wife beating was not usually considered a crime until the woman broke out of her prison of abuse and fear and reported it. I disagreed. I glanced again at the small vulnerable frightened mouse of a woman and her helpless baby, and I knew that this teenage thug needed a bit of corrective manipulation. It would give me something to do to pass the time.

I picked him up the next day.

Rebecca

Sunday was a strange day all round. Big brother Joe was away someplace, so it was just me and Mark and Mum, who always cooked a vegetarian roast dinner for us on Sundays. She was rubbish at it, and usually turned out yellowed vegetables, crunchy roast potatoes and lumpy gravy, but we never complained. I cooked weekdays, or the boys would heat up some microwave meal and present it with a flourish, but Sunday was Mum’s day, and she took it seriously. Taste buds adapt, eventually.

Our street was not a bad one for the area. The occasional gang of feral teenagers would come wandering down the road, hurl a few stones and be obnoxious to any passersby, but they would soon get bored and amble off again. So when the commotion kicked off across the road, everyone came out into their front gardens to see what was happening.

The house that appeared to be at the centre of all the attention was more or less diagonally across the road from our place. It was occupied by a middle aged woman and her thirty-something son. They were a creepy pair. She had bright yellow hair and the deep wrinkles that you get from smoking too much, and a mouth like an upside down ‘u’. He always looked like he needed a bath, with his lank greasy hair and stained clothes. I never got close enough to him to find out, but he looked like he would smell funny, kind of musty and stale. They were both outside in their rubble-strewn front garden. She was yelling at a man carrying a settee into the removals van that was parked half-on-half-off the pavement. I was impressed. I had never seen anyone make so much noise with a lit cigarette dangling out the corner of their mouth.

“Looks like they’re moving,” said Mark.

“Good,” said Mum.

And that was that.

Angus

It took me a while to explain to Mr Hit-and-run why he was tied to a chair in the middle of a conveniently deserted warehouse. He didn't believe it at first, that someone would take the time to kidnap him because he'd run over some girl. When I told him that I didn't like wife-beaters either, he looked positively stunned.

"We're not married!" was his excuse. That said it all for me.

Make no mistake. It's not that I don't enjoy violence. I do. I was designed for violence, for tearing and crushing and snapping flesh and bone. So if I can control the brute in me, the seething rage and hunger that threatens to erupt every living minute of my life, if I can control that, then mindless idiots like the one whimpering in front of me had no business assaulting a defenceless woman because he was *upset*.

I reached out and tasted the texture of his thoughts. I smelt the fear in his sweat. This one would be easy.

About the time Marcus was setting up his lab and doing various degrees in genetics and physiology, I set out to explore the potential that my father had seen in me just before he died. I discovered that I was able to delve into the minds of people, to pick out the essence of who or what they were. I could sense fear, and anger, and greed, and lust, and hatred; although I couldn't actually read people's minds or hear what they were thinking, I could get a sense of their thoughts and feelings. And one day, as I was dealing out my own form of justice to an unrepentant paedophile, I realised that I could modify that essence, those emotions. Inserting anything into a human mind was almost impossible under normal circumstances. The rapidity and randomness of their flickering thoughts made it almost impossible to get through. It was like trying to penetrate a firewall.

That day I discovered that there was one thing that slowed thoughts and concentrated the mind, allowing me to drive a specific concept or set of values into that briefest of gaps. *Pain*. Severe pain crystallised thought, and the amount of hurting required depended on the individual. Pain is always subjective. That paedophile had required hardly any. Some needed a lot more to render their thoughts motionless.

I broke Mr Hit-and-run's left femur with one hand while I searched for that elusive gap. It shimmered briefly into existence, and I thumped a silvery wedge into his mind. He would never knowingly hurt another living thing again. I cut the restraints that held him, and carried him to a nondescript white van parked just inside the massive doorway. I'd leave him near a deserted road, and then call emergency services anonymously. They'd find a bewildered man next to a road, he wouldn't remember what had happened, or how he got there, and they'd assume that he was just another hit and run. Ironic, really.

Rebecca

The racket died down at about 6 that evening. It had been dark for an hour already, and cold even for January, so nobody had bothered to hang about outside to watch the show. I went out at seven to escape the stifling warmth that my ever shivering mother claimed she need to survive the long winters. The frost was already settling on the grass out front, and it crunched underfoot as I walked to the low brick wall that surrounded most of the house. I leaned against the wall, and closed my eyes, enjoying the relative silence and the biting cold on my skin, pretending for a few moments that the houses and all the people on this crowded island had vanished, and that I was utterly alone, breathing the icy air and hearing my heartbeat rushing in my ears.

“Rebecca?” My mother. She never called me Becky or Bex, and I was grateful for that. I did prefer the long version of my name, but I wasn’t fussy. I’d answer to anything, really.

“I’m out here.”

“Come in, baby. You’ll catch a cold out there.” My mother firmly believed that getting cold caused all manner of illnesses. I’d explained to her about viruses and bacteria and all that. Made no difference. It always amazed me that someone who hated and feared the cold so much insisted on staying in a country renowned for its rubbish weather. I’d asked her about it before, and she’d said that she didn’t want to uproot us all just because of the weather. It seemed as good a reason as any other to me. And my “roots” were pretty weak, as roots go. I didn’t have any close friends; just acquaintances that I made conversation with at school to keep up appearances. The only ties I had were to my family. They were all I needed, I guess.

Angus

Marcus phoned late Sunday night to let me know that he’d confirmed the match with the blood sample that he’d somehow managed to acquire. Deception, probably. Marcus and Fergus could both get the biggest sceptics, the most narrow-minded bureaucrats, to glug down any story they chose to feed them. You could call it a kind of vocal charisma. Or long distance hypnosis. I was admittedly fairly good at convincing people to do what I wanted, but those two were devastating. Especially face to face. It occurred to me that they would probably be able to persuade Rebecca Harding to abandon everything she knew here and go with them just by looking at her. A small part of me suppressed that thought with what could have been jealousy or possessiveness, or maybe a bit of both. I wasn’t sure. These feelings were alien to me, so I ignored them. I’d already decided that I’d approach this rationally, explain the whole situation to the girl, hoping that she would understand and accept what I had to tell her. Give her a chance to come to terms with everything under her own steam. But if she said “No,” there was always plan B.

Fergus had miraculously managed to purchase a house across from Rebecca and her family. The occupants had been persuaded to leave fairly abruptly, and he informed me that it was standing empty, and ready for me to move in at any time. He sounded smug. I grinned, and considered about wiping the smug look off his face, but it was a fleeting thought. I would have to deny myself that satisfaction until my task here was accomplished. Growing up with two brothers and a distracted father meant that we had spent most of the time fighting, testing our strengths and each other’s weaknesses, and the urge hadn’t really dimmed as we had aged.

Marcus was the intelligent one, frighteningly so, able to read thick textbooks in hours, and not only remember their contents, but also comprehend every single concept contained between those intimidatingly numerous pages. He had about fourteen degrees, some of them achieved simultaneously, three or four at a time. Freaky by anyone’s standards, even ours.

Fergus was slightly different, also gifted, but a bit like a kid with ADD. He was unable or unwilling to concentrate on one thing for long periods of time, and his flitting intelligence found a friend in the tangled workings of computers and the internet. No task was too complicated for him. He was probably the most accomplished hacker in the world, too good to even be detected. Humility was not one of his talents, though, and he laughingly resisted all my efforts to teach him.

I was different to both of them, both in appearance and intellect. They were pale, with silvery blonde hair and startling grey eyes. I was just as pale, but my hair was much darker, almost black, and my eyes were brown, nondescript, really, which was why it was decided that I should become the reconnaissance expert. I wasn't as extraordinarily gifted intellectually as my brothers were; my intelligence was apparently well above average (Marcus had tested us all a few years back – no prizes for guessing who got the gold star), but my strengths lay elsewhere. I could read people, of course, and after that occasion with the paedophile, I guess I could write them too, in a manner of speaking. I was strong and fast, but we all were, though I did have a bit of an edge on my siblings. A lot of an edge, really, but they didn't like to admit it.

My unique talent lay in hunting. Not the shooting defenceless animals type of hunting; anyone with a firearm and half a brain could do that. I hunted people, tracking down men and women who did not want to be found for whatever reason, and who often went to great lengths to *not* be found. I seemed to be able to anticipate their actions, and the direction that those actions would take them. Kind of like a mixture between a profiler and a strategist. I'd been employed by various organisations over the years, the GSG 9 in Germany, the SAS here in the UK, and the FBI eventually. I had made it a rule never to stay in the same place for more than five years, and always used a new identity forged by my hacker brother. Each establishment taught me new skills, but the work was seldom very challenging, and I'd started drawing unwanted attention to myself by having a better solve rate than most. And there was always the frustrating problem of "proof", and "beyond reasonable doubt". I didn't need these to make a decision about whether someone had perpetrated a crime. I looked at their minds and I *knew*.

My father had conditioned us more or less from birth to shy away from attention of any sort. It's a hard habit to break, so when the FBI started giving me commendations and asking all number of questions, I left, and started tracking people on my own. Bad people, unspeakably bad people, who eluded police through contacts and cunning and often sheer luck. Sometimes I was able to reprogram them, but if I couldn't, if the hurting was too much even for me, I killed them and discreetly disposed of the remains. Marcus often asked me why I did it; how I was able to stand in judgement of these people, when so many others wouldn't. I told him that someone had to do it.

Everyone needs a hobby.

CHAPTER 3

Rebecca

Monday morning. I had dreaded this day since my accident five days earlier, and its inevitable arrival did nothing to lessen that dread. The cast encasing most of my left leg had started to crumble slightly around the edges, so I wandered around the house shedding Plaster of Paris flakes. Some of them went down the inside of the cast and added to the cacophony of itches and prickles marching up and down the skin of my leg. The cast, despite all its crumbling, felt like it had doubled in weight, but I had been practising with the crutches, and was able to swing myself around without endangering lives, including my own.

I modified my school uniform with a pair of Joe's black track bottoms, and a thick black sock encasing my left foot, and examined the effect in the mirror. White shirt, tie, dark

green jumper. I glanced at my face. I looked tired, grumpy and slightly scruffy. Never mind. Dressing up had never really been my thing. I tied my hair back and went to have breakfast.

Mark was already at the table, calmly eating Cheerios with a fork. He was, as usual, dressed way before anyone else, except Mum, who had left for work thirty minutes ago. Mark was the good-looking one in the family, with wheat blonde hair and sky blue eyes, but he didn't care. He lived inside his own head most of the time, preoccupied by his own thoughts. I often wondered what he was thinking, that could keep him so fascinated and so detached from the world around him.

"Why are you eating Cheerios with a fork?" I just had to ask.

"Am I?" Mark looked at the fork, surprised, and then he shrugged. "Seems to work OK." That was a typical Mark conversation. Bizarre, peculiar, and not quite right, but not completely wrong or obviously mad either. Mark walked a fine line sometimes.

"I see those people from across the road are completely gone now. There's even a sold sign stuck to the wall." The sign was new and shiny and looked like it didn't want to be there. The top right hand corner had already detached itself from where it had been tacked to the crumbling brick and was waving slightly at the gusts of wind that teased it.

Mark grunted. "Good riddance."

I raised my eyebrows. "I didn't know that you knew them?"

"I didn't."

I left it at that, and went to pour bran flakes into a bowl. Ten minutes later, and Mark was standing outside waiting for Harry. Harry lived a few blocks away, and the two fourteen year olds had drifted into the habit of walking to school together. I don't know why, they hardly ever seemed to speak to each other. I propped a book that I was reading for the second time open with a tin opener, and ate my breakfast at a leisurely pace. I read loads of books; for me it was a way of escaping the cocoon of unnecessary anxiety my mother wrapped around us. As if any anxiety could ever be considered *necessary*. But my mother seemed to worry most when you wouldn't think she had a reason to worry. I didn't want to add to all of that by actually having a social life, and I don't much like other people, so it's not a strain to avoid them. Weird, I know, but I like books.

Today I was reading slowly, enjoying the words as they rolled off the page. I wasn't worried about getting to school on time. I glanced down at my cast, my iron clad excuse.

Angus

I was at the house by eight in the morning. I stood outside for a few seconds, absorbing the general air of neglect and crumbling mortar that surrounded the place. I went inside and dialled Fergus.

"This was the best you could do?" I teased him. "It's a tip."

"So?" Fergus, buoyant with his success. "What do you want now?"

"A cleaning service, to start. And renovators. Today."

"Hmm. Fussy. I'm on it." He hung up.

I wandered around inside. I knew the cleaners and renovators would be arriving soon, but I didn't feel like going back outside and loitering. I didn't mind the cold or the wind, not at all, but I might draw attention to myself. I wasn't ready for that yet. I don't think I ever will be.

So; sitting room downstairs, also a kitchen and a tiny utility room. The sitting room had yellowing walls, dark pink carpets and numerous stains on the walls. The carpets looked

newer and more garish in patches where the furniture had stood. Dirt had improved things, apparently. There was a page from a magazine taped to one of the walls with discoloured sellotape. It showed some woman in what looked like a pink velour tracksuit and gaudy make-up. She was eating an ice cream.

The kitchen was filthy, each available surface crusted over with unidentifiable residues. The cupboards were covered in beige and brown linoleum. The floor was green and sticky. It reeked. I decided to go upstairs to escape from the sights and smells that assaulted my senses. It wasn't much better; there were two bedrooms and a small bathroom, which was filled with cracked tiles, faded wallpaper, and mould. Lots of mould. The bedroom that overlooked the front garden was slightly larger than the other, and didn't have the same sweaty socks and dirty body stench. The wallpaper was pink with green and yellow stripes. I was starting to detect a theme. I wandered into the smelly sock room and opened a grimy window. Wide.

Something caught my attention then. I smelled pain and fear, but it was not human. I glanced around the room, trying to pinpoint the origin of the smell. It didn't take long.

A battered looking cardboard box sat in a corner, untidily, as if it had been thrown there. Inside a small, dirty white kitten looked fearfully up at me. It moved its head and front paws slightly, and mewled weakly. Its hind limbs seemed useless. Dried diarrhoea encrusted its thin hindquarters.

I stood looking at the small creature curled up in its cardboard box, in its own filth and pain and misery, and I felt the rage howling in the recesses of my soul. I fought to suppress it, grinding my teeth and clenching my fists at my side. It took at least five minutes to bring myself under control, and then I was able to consider the problem at hand, if not dispassionately, then at least more levelly.

As I saw it, I had two options. I could simply reach down and snap the creature's neck, ending its agony quickly and easily. Or I could try to help it. I looked into the innocent blue eyes of the little cat, and dismissed the first option. I had a duty to humanity, even if I barely represented it myself. This animal had known nothing but the cruelty of people. It was time for it to taste the kindness.

Decision made, I bent over and gently lifted the box, and carried it downstairs and outside, trying to minimise the jolting of my steps to prevent inflicting further discomfort.

I stood outside next to the car I'd bought a few months earlier, wondering where the nearest vet was. I was debating whether or not to call Fergus again, or to do some research on my iphone, when a simpler solution presented itself.

"Excuse me," I called to the blonde teenage boy leaning against the wall of the Harding residence. "Where can I find a vet that's open?"

He looked up at me, surprised.

"There's one a few miles up the road. It should be open now. It's got an emergency surgery too." He had a deep voice for his apparent age, and he spoke articulately. "Why?"

"I've just bought this house," I inclined my head towards my latest purchase, grimacing slightly. "And I found this in one of the bedrooms."

The teenager raised his eyebrows. He glanced at the house. "A bit of a fixer upper."

I smiled wryly. "Yes, I know."

He pushed himself away from the wall and crossed the road, obviously curious to see the contents of the box. The kitten squeaked at him as he peered inside. His face darkened and he made a decision.

“Well, I can’t direct you there, because I’m rubbish at directions, but I can show you where it is. You can drop me at school afterwards, if you want. I’ll hold it,” he added.

“Thanks.” I nodded, and handed the box over to him while I unlocked the car. He took it carefully, as if it were a precious gift, and waited for me to open the passenger door for him. He slid in one movement onto the front passenger seat, where he placed it on his knees before buckling his seatbelt.

“Nice wheels.”

“Thanks,” I grinned at him. I liked powerful cars, but not the ostentatious ones. I was somehow pleased that he recognised the monster that lay beneath the unobtrusive metallic shell. I started the engine, and it roared into life. The CD player came on automatically, blaring slightly. I liked loud music while I drove. I turned it down.

“That’s my sister’s favourite.”

I froze for a second, slightly stunned by the casual reference to someone who had become so profoundly significant to us over the past few days. Then I felt absurdly pleased that she liked the same music that I did. I shook my head, and pulled out of the parking space and onto the road.

“I’m Mark,” he glanced up.

“Pleased to meet you, Mark. I’m Angus.” It was typical of me to forget to introduce myself. Human interaction was not one of my strong points. It was quite funny in an almost tragic way that out of the three of us, I would be the one who would have to become the people person. I chuckled at the thought.

“Left here, then right just after that pub.”

“OK,” I replied and we spent the rest of the journey in silence. When we arrived at the Hillcrest Veterinary Surgery, Mark insisted on coming inside with me. I explained the situation briefly to the receptionist, who cooed gently at the white scruffy kitten. I asked her to get the first available vet to have a look at it, and then do whatever was necessary to help it. I gave her my mobile number, and asked her to contact me as soon as she knew what the problem was.

She glanced up at me from her position leaning over the box, and raised her eyebrows. “It could be expensive.”

“Money is not an issue.”

She nodded, and carried the box into one of the consulting rooms, talking in a high pitched voice to the kitten as she left. It mewled in reply. I turned to Mark.

“Let’s get you to school.”

He nodded briefly. “Thanks.”

I dropped him outside a large brick building surrounded by a six foot chain link fence, and teeming with school kids. The sign said St Paul Secondary School. He hopped out of his seat as soon as I stopped, waved, and disappeared into the crowds. I sat for a moment, wondering what it was like to go to school, and wondering if I would have liked it. Probably not. I had never been to school, nor had my brothers. My father had wanted to minimise our exposure to normal life and normal people. I guess he must have believed that what we didn’t know, we wouldn’t miss. He had known that we would have to leave school before we all changed, and just being around other people became too risky. Mostly for other people, of course, but for us too, in a way. There’s nothing that upsets people more than when somebody gets killed. Declaring emphatically that it had been an accident wouldn’t have cut it - there would have been too much blood. People would have been angry and vengeful and we would have been locked up, if we were lucky.

I turned the car around and headed back to my newly purchased property, hoping that the cleaning staff had arrived. They had, and shortly afterwards a huge white van with the name of a renovating company pulled up. A stocky man in overalls got out, looked at the property, and grunted something to his passenger, a young man with a slack jaw and acne. Next thing the place was swarming with people. I got back in the car and went to find some breakfast.

Rebecca

I hadn't even realised that Mark had disappeared until Harry knocked on the door, looking forlorn and embarrassed.

"Mark here?" Chatty Harry.

"He went outside to wait for you." I tried to look over his shoulder, which was difficult. At fourteen Harry was already way taller than me, and bulky. He had a mop of unruly, suspiciously black hair that was combed forwards and covered half his face, and a stud in his nose.

"He must have left early," Harry shrugged, and then grinned at me. "Bye, Rebecca." He enunciated each syllable of my name separately. I smiled back, vowing to chew Mark out about sharing his annoying enunciation of my name with his friends. Harry left, and I reluctantly abandoned my book, slung my bag over my shoulder, and hobbled outside, crutches in hand. I locked the door behind me and set out slowly for school, which was a couple of blocks away, less than a mile. It felt much longer. The bell went about three minutes before I finally swung myself through the big double gated entrance on my trusty crutches. I'd started to appreciate them a few hundred yards into my journey. I was still exhausted by the time I got to school, and my upper arms were burning. I stood for a few minutes, catching my breath before heading off to my first class of the day.

I had forgotten about Mark's disappearance this morning until I saw him standing next to Harry during break. They were both leaning against the south facing wall of the school hall, eyes closed, absorbing the weak sunlight that played over their faces. I left them to their easy companionship and went to explain my late arrival to the headmaster.

I was halfway there when I almost bumped into Shanice. I had been watching the ground for cracks and crevices that could ensnare one of the rubber tips of my crutches and send me flying to land in an undignified heap in front of all these curious onlookers.

I sensed her malignant presence, stopped, and looked up into her mean piggy eyes. Shanice and I had a history that spanned at least ten years of mutual animosity. We had first encountered each other in primary school, where Shanice had tormented me relentlessly for about six months, until one afternoon I had snapped and punched her in the face, breaking her nose. I still cherished the memory. Shanice felt differently, obviously, and although she had stopped pestering me, she had developed an intense loathing of me that manifested itself in hateful stares and the occasional sneered remark. I managed to ignore her most of the time, but I had known I would be in trouble today. I was vulnerable, see, and there's nothing a bully likes more.

"Oi! Freakface!" Original, Shanice. Nice one.

I said nothing, just watched her, anticipating the blow, and wondering if I could do anything about it. I could put weight in my injured leg, but I would be clumsy, and my hands were tangled in the handles of the crutches.

"Not so brave now, are we?" she taunted me.

“Shanice Smith!” the headmaster’s voice rang out. “To class please. Now!”

The bell must have rung. I hadn’t noticed it. Shanice flushed angrily, her bloated face turning an unhealthy puce colour.

“Whatever!” she said in her whiny voice. “See you later, Freak,” she hissed at me, and then she turned and left.

“Well, Miss Harding, I can see why you were late for school today. Carry on.” Our headmaster was a harsh but fair man, but he still made me nervous, so I nodded and left as soon as I was able to coordinate the crutches. I knew Shanice had detention that afternoon, so I would be able to escape home unharmed. But I also knew I’d see her tomorrow again. I shuddered.

Angus

I was halfway through my second coffee in what was supposed to be an upmarket breakfast café type thing, when my mobile started vibrating. It was Marcus. He sounded jubilant.

“She’s one of us!”

“I know. You said we had a match.”

“No, no, that was just a blood group match.” Marcus always became impatient with us when we failed to grasp something, even when he had neglected to actually explain it properly. It was like he expected us just to know what he knew. It was flattering in a strange way, but also very frustrating.

“She has an unusual subgroup that I had Fergus flag when it came up. It’s the same subgroup that we have, sure, but I wasn’t certain that she would have any of our peculiar genes. But today I ran the second DNA comparison. She’s got all three genes, Angus.”

“Which means?” Sometimes I could be a little slow.

“She’s a *vampire!*” Marcus was really getting excited now. I looked around to make sure nobody had heard his yelling.

“God, Marcus, don’t use that term. You know Father hated it.”

“This is brilliant, I can’t believe it, it’s just fantastic.” Marcus sounded a bit hysterical.

“Explain, Marcus,” I said. “Don’t you have to be a, er, like us to have children like us?” Our father and mother had both been iron metabolisers, people who can use iron in a different way to normal people. Traditionally, I suppose we would have been called vampires, but we no longer had to drink blood to fulfil our iron needs. Iron tablets sufficed, and we had become slightly more civilised as a result. Well, Marcus and Fergus, certainly. But the underlying physiology was there, and we still really *liked* blood; we just didn’t *need* it.

Marcus had coined the new term for what we are. And even though I didn’t like hearing the word vampire out loud - force of habit, I suppose - I found the political correctness of Marcus’ term a bit offensive. Call a spade a spade, dammit. Just not where anyone can hear you do it.

“Apparently not. This is so exciting! A recessive set of genes! I can’t believe it!” Exclamation marks all over the place.

“So why doesn’t she behave like one?” I wasn’t convinced. “She’s past puberty now, surely.” When our hormone levels started changing, especially with the surge in steroid hormones, like testosterone and oestrogen, our bodies switched to a kind of a dual metabolism. So we could metabolise normal food like normal people – fats, carbohydrates,

proteins. But when we had enough iron in our systems, our bodies could use it ways we couldn't yet fully understand. Marcus was still working on figuring that one out.

Marcus was silent for a few seconds, considering the question. "Well, she's female, and they store less iron than males, and she's probably a vegetarian. She most likely hasn't had her first hit yet." Marcus' use of drug terminology was strangely appropriate. It was how I had come to think of being a vampire – I subconsciously flinched at that word again. We had a set of unique receptors which responded in an unusual way to iron, that everyday substance, like an alcoholic responds differently to a shot of whiskey than a normal person would. Except maybe an alcoholic was not the best analogy. The craving was there, certainly, but our drug did not incapacitate us. Instead it made us invincible and powerful, strong enough to break boulders, and fast enough to run alongside speeding cars. I closed my eyes and recalled the heady rush, the clarity of vision, the enhanced senses, the sensation of muscles ripping through the sluggish air, the crystallisation of all pleasure and wonder into this perfect rush of being.

Our father had explained the situation to us one day when we were twelve. The signs were all there that we were going to hit puberty soon, and he wanted the transition from slightly strange but mostly normal boy to utter freak to go as smoothly as possible, I suppose. He was a good man, my father, strong, obviously, but compassionate too, and intelligent enough to have figured out the basic metabolic reason for our unusual abilities. He had met my mother towards the end of her life, still youthful looking, another benefit of being able to use iron as we do. We heal fast, restoring aging and damaged cells rapidly, so we look as if we are just out of school, or in our early twenties, for most of our long lives. Adult, but never old.

We were the inevitable result of their union, and our birth sapped whatever life our mother had left in her, and she died a few days later. My father, to his credit, never blamed us for her death, but set about educating his three small, precocious boys, and loving us as best he could. And when we hit puberty, and our lives changed forever, he was there to guide us through the changes, and reassure us that we always had a choice. We could harness the power, or we could let it harness us and become monsters. I like to think that we did the former, but sometimes I'm not so sure.

And now Marcus was telling me that there was someone else like us out there, someone who would need guidance through the changes that she would inevitably go through, one way or another. My father had always worried that if we did not expose ourselves to the effects that huge doses of iron had on our systems, and learn to control them, that we would eventually succumb to some profound and overpowering instinct and actually kill someone and drink their blood. It made sense. There's a lot of iron in blood.

I imagined Rebecca biting someone's carotid artery, responding to some deep, unacknowledged desire, and drinking their warm blood as it was pumped directly from the heart to her open mouth. I thought of how her family would react, and flinched again. It was bad enough knowing that you are a freak without everyone else knowing it too. I would have to do something to help the girl. I wondered, not for the first time if I was the right person to do it. I considered asking Marcus or Fergus to take over the task, but a stab of what could have been jealousy made me dismiss that thought. I would do this myself, and let the dice fall where they may.

Rebecca

Mark came bounding through the door as soon as he got home. I'd arrived a few minutes earlier, and had scrambled out of my uniform, and was munching on a slice of toast in the kitchen and reading my book. It was nearing the end, and I already knew what was going to happen, but it was well written, and by one of my favourite authors, so it didn't matter.

"Met our new neighbour this morning," he announced out of the blue, saying just enough to pique my curiosity, as usual. At first I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but then I remembered the commotion across the street yesterday.

"Already?"

"Yep. He found an injured kitten, so I showed him where the vet was. Seems OK." Then he was gone, bounding up the stairs two at a time. I shrugged. I wasn't sure if it was the kitten that seemed OK, or if it was the neighbour.

"He's got a fab car too," shouted my typically male sibling from upstairs. I chuckled. Amazing how some things are important to some people, and not one bit significant to others.

Angus

The vet's receptionist phoned just after breakfast. I was driving back to my hotel. I pressed the speaker function on the phone set.

"Hello, is that Angus Byrne?"

"Yes." She paused, maybe waiting for me to go on.

"You brought the kitten in this morning?"

"Yes." I wondered, not for the first time, if I should try to be more talkative, but I had nothing else I felt I needed to say.

"Just to let you know that it's got a broken pelvis. Vet says it looks like someone's stomped on it." My knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. Another pause. "Anyway, she's going to need a few wires to stabilise the pelvic fractures, if that's OK. We can do it for you this afternoon, and you can fetch her tonight."

"What time?"

"Between six and seven pm?"

"OK."

Pause. "OK. Bye then."

As I hung up I thought of the kind of person who would stamp on a small animal hard enough to break its bones. I wondered how anyone would ever be able to justify doing something like that, and yet I knew from experience that there were people out there who hurt animals for fun. They were one of my favourite targets. Them, and the monsters who abused children.

Fergus and I had developed a kind of partnership a decade or so back, when I realised that being a legitimate policeman was not a very efficient way of fighting crime. You'd hunt for a certain perpetrator for ages, and when you eventually found them, you would have to hand them over to what was essentially a deeply flawed system, and hope that justice would prevail. Yeah, right.

So Fergus hunted the crime online, looking on sites like youtube for video footage of cruelty of any description. He would send me the footage, and whatever information he could garner from the IP address. I did the rest, finding those deeply repulsive individuals who were responsible for such atrocities, and I hurt them. Sometimes I hurt them quite a

lot. And then I would rewrite their mean little minds so they would feel physically and mental agony if they even considered being cruel in any way to anything ever again. Paedophiles were a bit more difficult to find, but find them we did, and they were the ones I usually killed. Sometimes a mind will be so dark and foul and evil that repairing it is just not an option.

As I drove, I realised that it was going to be difficult for me to keep a kitten in a hotel room. I thought of Mark, and of his obvious compassion for the little animal. I decided to ask him if he would watch the cat overnight. I could always smuggle it into the hotel, but I had something I needed to do tonight, and I didn't know how long it would take. I didn't want to leave the small feline invalid unattended in some empty hotel room. I phoned Fergus' mobile.

"What?" Fergus answered. "We're busy here, you know."

"Yeah, yeah. I need the names of those people who lived in that house you just bought for me, and their current whereabouts."

Fergus was suspicious. "Why?"

"They left something behind."

"OK, I'll do some checking up and send you the details in a few. Bye!" He was gone. I guess not being talkative must run in families.

Rebecca

The doorbell rang at half past seven that evening. I was going to get up to answer it, but my cast got in the way, and anyway Mum got there first. It was a bit of a novelty to have someone ring the doorbell of the Harding house. It sounded weirdly unfamiliar.

"Hello," said a deep velvety voice from the darkness outside. "Is Mark here?"

"Yes, of course," breathed my mother, apparently hypnotised. "Come in," she continued, stepping back into our little crowded sitting room. "Mark?" she called, just loud enough to be heard upstairs. Mark spent a lot of time in his bedroom, reading books and contemplating the world around him. I guess he liked his own company. I know he didn't like football, which was what Joe was watching tonight. I was here as a kind of moral support for my mother, who also disliked football, but who disliked being on her own even more.

The stranger stepped inside our house. He was tall and dark, and dressed in dark trousers and a white cotton shirt with the cuffs rolled up to the elbows. He held a brand new pet carrier in his left hand, and he extended his right.

"Hello," he said again. "My name is Angus, and I believe I'm your newest neighbour."

Mum shook his hand, and gushed, "Pleased to meet you, Angus. My name is Rose. I am Mark's mother. These are my two other children, Joe and Rebecca." She indicated us with a sweep of her free hand.

I stood up to say hello, curious about the man who stood towering above my mother. He turned politely to greet us, a smile forming on his lips, but when his eyes met mine he froze, and all trace of a smile disappeared. His eyes widened slightly, and his nostrils flared, and he looked both shocked and angry. I felt my face flush, and I looked at the floor, mumbling a greeting. My mother was calling for Mark again so she failed to see his expression. Joe had waved casually from his spot on the settee, and had turned his attention back to the television. I looked up at the stranger through my lashes, unsure of what it was that I had done to offend him. As I watched his expression seemed to change

within seconds to benign watchfulness. I started wondering if I must have imagined the fury I had seen on his face.

Mark hurtled down the last few steps when he saw who was at the door.

"Hey, Angus!" he called out, covering the intervening space like a rowdy puppy. "How is the patient?"

The stranger smiled warmly at Mark, and held the carrier out for him to inspect its contents. "She's going to be fine. Had an operation this afternoon to stabilise the broken bones of her pelvis, but she's already starting to move her hind legs. She's a brave little thing." As if to corroborate his version of events, the kitten mewed from inside the carrier.

"Sit down, sit down," my mother gushed again. "Would you like some tea or coffee?"

The stranger appeared to consider the question for a second or two, glancing sideways at me, before answering. "Coffee would be lovely, thanks."

He stepped further into the room, and I was struck by his apparent size. He was probably about as tall as Joe, six foot and some change, but he seemed a lot bigger. He stood, tall and confident, radiating some sort of aura of power. I looked again at his face and was struck by the pallor and smooth evenness of his skin, the symmetrical regularity of his features, dark eyes, thick dark lashes and eyebrows. He looked back at me and I felt a thrilling tightening rush of sensation in my abdomen. I looked away, confused and embarrassed.

He handed the pet carrier with its small passenger to Mark, who took it gently, and placed it on the settee between him and Joe, bending over to look inside and speaking softly to the kitten inside. Joe seemed similarly fascinated, and I watched the two large teenagers speaking in soft high voices to the little cat. I chuckled. The picture seemed so incongruous. I risked another glance at the man called Angus. He was sitting at ease in an ancient leather armchair next to the television, with one arm draped sideways along the back of the chair, watching my face closely, and frowning slightly, as if he was concentrating on some hidden thought. I felt the hot blood racing up under the skin of my face, and I hurriedly turned back to watch Mark and Joe.

Mum finally came in carrying a tray with our eclectic collection of mugs. She placed the tray on a small oak side table and began handing out mugs. It was a given in our house - if someone made tea we all got a mug of it. We drank a lot of tea.

Angus took his mug from my mother's outstretched hand with a murmur of thanks, glancing towards her briefly before his eyes settled on my face again. His dark eyes seemed to grow darker, and his brow furrowed. I felt that flipping, rushing, tightening sensation in my lower abdomen again, and looked towards the television, trying to breathe normally and not blush, all the time acutely aware and completely fascinated with this man who sat opposite me.

"I was wondering if you'd babysit the kitten for me tonight, Mark." That devil's voice, deep and rich and seductive. I sat motionless on the settee, eyes glued to the television. I was starting to feel dizzy. I never feel dizzy. Ever.

"Absolutely!" was Mark's enthusiastic reply. "Can we, Mum?" he turned to my mother, who had perched herself on the armrest of the settee, just next to me.

Mum looked a bit doubtful, until the stranger looked enquiringly up at her, one eyebrow raised. "Of course," she said. Clearly she was not immune either.

"Thank you. I would prefer not to leave her in a hotel room tonight. I have an urgent matter I need to take care of tonight." Angus drained his mug, and stood up, towering above us. "It was good to meet you all," he said. I could feel his eyes on my face again, and I

glanced up at him. The intensity of his gaze was almost shocking. Fear and excitement mingled erratically in my chest. Abruptly he looked away, shaking hands with my mother and nodding to my brothers, who barely noticed him leaving. I noticed, and I felt bereft and drained. I wanted to cry, for some strange reason.

Angus

I wasn't prepared for that.

I knew intellectually that I was possibly about to meet a female vampire, so to speak. But I wasn't prepared for that.

When I first glanced at her sitting curled up on that settee with that unnecessary white plaster cast, I was struck by her luminosity. Silvery blonde long hair, slightly darker eyelashes and eyebrows, pale flawless skin. Unremarkable in many ways, but with her it all worked together to create something that was finer and far more attractive than the individual features themselves. I shook hands with her mother, gently touching her mind and feeling the kindness and bewilderment. And then I stepped inside the house, and was battered by the heady, intoxicating scent of a female of my own species. Jesus. I have never felt such a raw, powerful need for anything in all my years. I wanted to take her right there, to taste her skin, feel her heat. I thought about how I could kill her family, I went through the process in my mind; mother first, then Mark and Joe. It would have been so easy, and so quick. Then decades of rigid self control came to my rescue, and I was furious with myself for even thinking those thoughts. I knew they would haunt me, and I used the anger to subdue my hunger for this young woman. I was only partially successful.

I drank the coffee, watching Rebecca, seeing her vulnerability, feeling the quick intelligence and courage in her mind. I sensed her confusion, and what could have been the beginnings of desire, and I felt intense satisfaction. But it was gruelling having to sit there with her so close, so alluring and so easily overcome. I waited as long as I could, and then I left. She will never know how much it cost me, to walk out of that door and leave her untouched.

Rebecca

Mark sat with that kitten for ages, feeding it milk with a teaspoon, and stroking its little head. It seemed incredible that a teenage boy who seemed to be so disconnected and disinterested in pretty much everything around him could be so fascinated with something as simple as a kitten. It was a charming little thing, though, purring and rubbing its head against Mark's fingers. I could definitely understand the attraction.

Mum seemed a bit more dazed than usual for the rest of the evening. Whether it was due to suddenly having a cat in the house, or the unexpected visit from our neighbour-to-be, she didn't say.

Joe went back to watching football on television. I sat next to him, gazing at the moving figures flickering across the screen, but without actually watching the game. I don't like football, but I didn't want to be left alone with my thoughts tonight. I tried to ignore the intrusive images of Angus the almost-stranger, but I was only half successful. And when his face shimmered across my imagination like a dark prophecy, it made me feel deeply uneasy, and disturbingly intrigued.

Angus

I drove for an hour in silence, pondering my extreme reaction to Rebecca Harding. It was hard to rationalise something like that. I felt tremendously guilty about contemplating killing her family. They seemed to be very likeable people, especially Mark. It was much easier to think now that I was out of the clutches of that heady aroma. That kind of desire was crippling, and the possibility that I would always feel that way around her worried me. I was used to being more or less invincible.

I turned my thoughts reluctantly to tonight's mission. I had two people to take care of, to reprogram. I wondered whether I would be able to somehow engineer it that they too would be abandoned, their pelvises shattered. Probably not. It would raise too many logistical problems. It was going to be difficult enough to snatch two adults from a house with another occupant, even if the third occupant was eighty-two and hard of hearing.

I gave up thinking about it. There were too many variables. Nothing was set in stone. Tonight was about reconnaissance firstly, and if the opportunity arose to take them, then I would do it. I turned the CD player on. The familiar introductory rhythm of Spaceman filled the car. I liked the Killers. I remembered that Mark had said that Rebecca liked them too. Irony, my constant companion.

Rebecca

I couldn't sleep at first, I lay tossing and turning, twisting the sheets around my burning limbs. And when I finally drifted to sleep, I dreamed of Angus - huge, vivid, terrifying dreams, and I woke that morning to the screeching of my alarm clock. I felt drained and listless, but I dragged myself out of bed and downstairs to say goodbye to my mother before she hurried out of the door. She was flitting around the kitchen searching for her mobile phone, but she stopped as soon as she saw me.

"Rebecca!" she looked concerned. "Are you OK?"

"I don't feel very well, Mum," I admitted reluctantly. I didn't want her to fret. Surprisingly, she didn't.

"Well, baby, I think you should stay home today. You're probably exhausted from going back to school so early after the accident. Go on, back to bed, and I'll call Mr Parker and let him know you won't be in today."

I was a bit taken aback. Mum always seemed so indecisive, but then I remembered how cool and calm she had been during the occasional emergency that had befallen our family. Mum only panicked when there was no real reason to do so. Even when I had been knocked down by that idiot, she had been worried, but she hadn't actually panicked. This was no emergency, sure, but I was still impressed. And relieved. I nodded my head, and stumbled back upstairs. I remade my bed, crawled into it, and fell asleep almost instantly.

Angus

Turns out it wasn't as difficult as I thought. I arrived around midnight outside the small terraced house. The garden out front was overgrown, the windows dirty with paint peeling in long untidy strips from the window sills. I sensed at once that there were three people inside, two upstairs sleeping in the same bedroom, one downstairs probably asleep on a sofa. I reached out and gently touched the mind of the closest slumberer. I'd always found it

easier to feel minds when people slept, and the enamel of their thoughts had dissolved. Tonight was no exception. The sleeper downstairs was male, by the glimpse I got of his dreams, although it was hard to tell sometimes. Must be the thirty four year old son. I probed a bit deeper, and found something that surprised me. On balance, a fairly decent soul, but very afraid of his mother, and deeply resentful of her constricting hold over him. He hated her. Interesting.

I reached out slightly further, and felt a very different mind, fuzzy and confused, and clinging to distant memories. She was terrified of her daughter, and did not want her here, but she was too scared to confront her.

I reached even further and felt what must have been the mind of the man's mother and the elderly woman's daughter. Vile revolting cesspit of a mind. There was smugness there, a sense of controlling and harshness, and a memory of satisfaction at the horror in the eyes of her son as she stood on his kitten, and pleasure as she felt the breaking of tiny bones.

I looked for a way into the house, and found it. Someone had left a window upstairs open just enough for me to unlatch it and climb silently onto the upstairs landing. I made my way into the small upstairs bedroom, and using the trail of my target's mind, I placed a muffling hand over her mouth and snapped her neck just as she began to wake up. I paused. There was no break in the rhythm of the elderly woman's snores. I lifted the woman's body and carried her carefully to the head of the stairs, where I held her upright, her head hanging oddly from her shoulders. I launched her lifeless body down the stairs, and was out through the window, and in my car before the son woke up. His grandmother slept through everything.

As I drove home I marvelled at how well it had all gone. The son would find his mother at the bottom of the stairs and assume that she had broken her neck in the fall. The police would hopefully make the same assumption. Neat and easy.

I arrived back at the hotel at about three in the morning. I don't sleep every day; sometimes I can go for weeks without sleeping at all, but tonight I felt worn-out. I fell asleep within seconds of my head hitting the pillow.

CHAPTER 4

Rebecca

I dreamed that someone had poured flame over me, and that I was trying to run away from the unseen attacker, but I couldn't seem to move my legs. I watched in horror as my feet melted into the ground, pulling me down. I struggled to pull free, but I was dog-tired, and my limbs became heavier with each convulsive tug. A shrill sound buzzed in my ears; I recognised the doorbell, but I couldn't get up, so it went unanswered, and I surrendered again into the clutches of my nightmare.

Angus

Fergus phoned at eight in the morning to tell me that the house was ready for occupation, and that he'd even taken the liberty of furnishing it. Fergus loved stuff like that; the more organising something required the better. I told him that I'd met Rebecca Harding, and he wanted to know what she was like. I thought about that for a few seconds.

"I'm not really sure, Fergus," I tried to explain. "She seems to be quite rational and fairly normal, except for the fact that she's definitely one of us. This could go either way, I guess."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I don't know yet. Is Marcus there?"

"Hey, Angus," Marcus' voice was suddenly audible. Speakerphone, obviously.

"Marcus, you were right. She's been raised a vegetarian. Loads of tea and fibre too." Tea and fibre tended to sequester any available iron before it was even absorbed from the gut. Her whole lifestyle seemed to be conspiring against her. Good for normal people, maybe, but not for a vampire. I noticed that I was becoming more comfortable with that word now that I knew there were others out there.

"She needs iron, Angus. But not too much, or she could lose control." I remembered the heady, barely controllable rush that followed a massive dose of iron, and shuddered. I sometimes struggled to control it, and I'd had five decades of practice. What chance would Rebecca have?

"How much, Marcus?" Marcus had managed to calculate our daily iron requirements. One gram per day for almost normal activity levels, two grams for massively enhanced strength and speed and sensory ability. Three grams was pushing it a bit, rendering us barely conscious in a vortex of power and vibrant intensity, and in my case, barely controllable rage. It was intriguing to see how differently we responded to our drug. Marcus would get this feverish glitter in his eyes, the pupils massively dilated so that his eyes looked black, and he would start scrawling gibberish (to me) over all available surfaces, muttering away to himself. Fergus flitted faster than ever, his hands skittering across his many computer keyboards, reams of code reflecting spookily in his black eyes. Me, I liked to break things and, before I learned to control my urges, people too.

I'd managed to tweak the dose of iron that I took on a daily basis to give me the level of physical force that I preferred. One point two grams. Equivalent to twelve tablets of ferrous fumarate, or half a human. Modern medicine saved people in ways that it didn't fully appreciate.

"I'd start her on about five hundred milligrams per day and work up from there. Hopefully the gradual emergence of her powers will help her to learn control sooner rather than later." I heard the apprehension in his voice. He wasn't sure. Great.

"OK. Thanks for the house, Fergus. I'll move in today."

"No problem, brother." Click, and they were gone.

I packed a suitcase full of my clothes, mostly dark jeans, and open necked shirts. An occasional jumper for appearance's sake only. I didn't feel the cold, but it didn't do to walk around in a snowstorm in jeans and a shirt. It attracted attention. I booked out of the hotel and drove to my newest house, stopping along the way to buy some food for myself and for the kitten.

The house looked much the same on the outside, except the garden was much tidier, and the window frames had been freshly painted. The inside was dramatically different, though. Wooden floors, plush rugs, leather furniture, muted down-lighting. The kitchen was modern, with an enormous aluminium refrigerator, marble top counters, and a top of the range espresso machine. The main bedroom upstairs was dwarfed by a huge wooden sleigh bed neatly made up with white cotton bedding. I was impressed. Even for Fergus, this was a remarkable achievement. I liked it.

I packed my few groceries away, noticing that Fergus had even remembered to stock the kitchen with crockery and cutlery. Amazing. I dug two small porcelain bowls out of the recesses of a cupboard, and placed them on the floor. I was looking forward to having some company, even if it was only feline.

I waited until just after three, when I sensed that Mark Harding was walking down the street to his house. I gave him a few minutes to get inside the house before I walked across the road, and rang the doorbell. He answered it after a few seconds, gently cradling the white kitten in his arms. He grinned at me.

“Damn! I was hoping you’d forgotten.”

I grinned back. “You’re welcome to come and visit her any time, Mark.”

“Thanks. I’ll definitely do that. She’s gorgeous.” He tickled the kitten under her chin, and she purred loudly.

I froze. Something was wrong. I closed my eyes and let my mind roam through the house. Someone was upstairs, but it was impossible to say who it was. I sensed pain and fear, and incredible frailty.

“Who else is here?” I asked Mark abruptly. He looked startled.

“Rebecca. She wasn’t feeling well, so she stayed home today. Why?”

“She’s sick,” I told him as I darted past him and up the stairs. It wasn’t strictly true, but I couldn’t tell her brother that she was dying. Not yet.

I was shocked at what I saw when I opened her bedroom door. Rebecca lay there, still in a t-shirt and sleep shorts, deathly still, with an unhealthy sheen over her white face. She didn’t even look at me as I lifted her from the tangled nest of sheets on her bed. Her chest rose and fell, desperately sucking air into her failing lungs. I carried her hastily down the stairs, past her worried looking brother, and across the road to my house, indicating to Mark to follow me. He trotted behind me, still carrying the kitten.

I lay Rebecca on my new sofa, wondering what to do next. She was deathly pale, even her lips and tongue were white. I knew she needed iron, preferably in the form of fresh blood. Blood was really the best source of iron for us – it was rapidly absorbed from our stomachs, seeping into our systems within seconds. Images of Marcus’ experiments on us flashed across my vision, and I was grateful for the unending thirst for knowledge that drove my brother. I could help Rebecca, but iron tablets would take too long. I dug a breadknife out of one of the kitchen drawers, and carried it into the sitting room, where Mark stood against one of the walls, gazing in horror at his sister.

“Mark.”

“Yes?”

“Trust me.”

He nodded slowly, and stroked the kitten’s head. His eyes widened involuntarily when I lifted the breadknife, but he said nothing, and remained leaning against the wall.

I used the tip of the knife to slice longitudinally through the skin of my left wrist and the artery pulsing beneath it, and swiftly held my wrist to her mouth.

“Drink, Rebecca!” I barked at her, and her eyes fluttered open as the salty fluid flowed into her mouth, she swallowed once convulsively, and then again. Her eyes closed.

“Rebecca!” I was almost shouting now. I felt rather than saw Mark flinch, but Rebecca opened her eyes, and started swallowing again. I watched as a trickle of blood travelled slowly from the corner of her mouth down her chin. Then she started sucking thirstily at my wrist, and I sighed in relief. She was going to be OK.

I let her drink for a minute, and then I withdrew my wrist. Rebecca sighed, and closed her eyes again, but her skin had lost that chalky pallor, and her breathing had slowed. I stood with my wrist over the sink as I tied a compression bandage around it. It would stop bleeding within another minute or so, and by tomorrow you wouldn't be able to see a scar. We heal fast.

I looked over to where Mark stood. His eyes were still wide, but he didn't look frightened anymore. He looked fascinated, and intrigued.

"Well," he said levelly, "that was freaky."

I chuckled. A bit of an understatement.

"Want some tea?" I asked him.

He looked up at me. "Real tea? With boiled water and milk and stuff? No blood?"

"Yes." I smiled at his resilience.

"Yes, please." He went back to gazing at his sister. She looked almost normal now, and appeared to be waking up.

Rebecca

Mark was standing against an unfamiliar wall when I woke up. He was staring at me as if I'd grown an extra eye or something. I was lying on a comfortable leather couch. It smelled new.

"Where are we?" I asked him.

"Angus' house."

"Why are we here? What happened?"

He glanced towards what must have been the kitchen, and said wryly, "I think you'd better let Angus tell you." He grinned at me. "Well, you look a lot better."

I frowned. He wasn't making sense. I tried to sit up, but the world spun sickeningly, so I lay back down again. Angus came into the room and handed Mark a mug. He looked over at me and then came and stood next to the sofa. I could almost feel the heat of his body near mine. It was oddly comforting and perturbing at the same time.

"I can see I've got some explaining to do," he said with a smile. "But first you need to drink something." He turned away before I could say anything and went back into the kitchen, reappearing after a few seconds with a glass of water and five unremarkable brown tablets.

"Drink these," he commanded. I looked up at Mark, and he nodded. I took them from Angus' warm hand, and swallowed them one at a time. Angus smiled at me, and sat down on a nearby armchair, stretching out his long body as he leaned back.

"It's a long story," he said, sighing. "I'd better start at the beginning."

Angus

I knew that I'd have to explain everything eventually; I just hadn't expected it to be so soon. I'd thought about how to do it for a couple of days, about how to start. *Well, see, you're a vampire, same as me* didn't quite cut it. And I hadn't expected to be factoring a normal fourteen year old teenager into the equation. I decided to use Marcus' terminology for now, and let the historical references drift through the conversation a bit later.

"Rebecca and I have something in common. We both use iron differently to other people. I have two brothers, Fergus and Marcus, who have the same, er, ability. Marcus has

studied the basic physiological mechanics of how we use iron for a few years now, and he says that people like us are able to incorporate it into our tissues in different ways to normal people. The most important difference is a change in metabolic activity when we eat foods containing iron." Like blood, I thought.

"When we eat normal food, our bodies function like normal human bodies, using the usual metabolic pathways to extract energy from normal food types, mostly glucose, fats and proteins. But when we eat enough iron, our bodies switch over to a different metabolic pathway that has adapted to utilise molecular iron to increase the efficiency of many body functions." I looked at Rebecca. She was frowning, concentrating.

"Muscles work better, nerves conduct their messages faster, our bodies even heal faster, and are better at fighting off infections. And our skins are harder, because iron becomes incorporated into our cells, in the walls, so we don't exactly deflect bullets, but it's harder to hurt us." I paused, wondering how to continue.

"Our parents were also like us, and Marcus assumed that that would be the only mode of inheritance. But it looks like Rebecca here inherited it differently, recessively. That means that both your parents had to have the genes in their DNA, even though they weren't able to use iron themselves. Their DNA combined could generate an iron metaboliser. There's apparently a one in four chance. That's why you got the genes," I looked pointedly at Rebecca, "and your brothers didn't." I paused, expecting questions. I didn't have to wait long.

"So what happened today with Rebecca? It looked like she was going to die." Mark grimaced at the memory.

"She *was* dying. I'm not sure why exactly. I think something must have triggered her body to switch to the iron pathways, and she was using up all her red blood cells to feed those pathways. I had to give her a big dose of iron to stop that process, or it would have killed her." I wondered what could have precipitated the switch.

"Blood contains a lot of iron, in its most bioavailable form. That means it's easily absorbed and utilised by our bodies. And those tablets I just gave you are high dose iron tablets."

Rebecca was frowning again. "Blood?" she whispered.

"Yeah, you drank his blood. And then you stopped looking like a corpse." Mark looked like he was enjoying himself. He'd slid down the wall, and sat on a thick rug with his legs stretched out and the kitten curled up in his lap.

"I don't understand," Rebecca looked uneasy.

"You're a vampire, Sis," said Mark gleefully, unknowingly hitting the nail on the head.

Rebecca

A vampire? What a ridiculous idea. I didn't even eat meat, let alone drink peoples' blood! But here Mark, my own brother, was telling me that I'd drank Angus' blood. The thought of that level of intimacy thrilled me, somehow, even as I knew I should feel repulsed by the concept. I pushed it away impatiently, trying to make sense of what he was telling us. I didn't want to believe it all, but I looked searchingly at Angus' face, and read the truth in his eyes, and heard the calm authority in his deep velvety voice.

I sat for a few minutes, running over everything in my head. Intellectually it made a kind of bizarre sense, but I knew I would need some proof. As if he had read the question in my mind, Angus started unwrapping the bloodstained bandage that encircled his wrist.

Mark leaned forward slightly, anticipation written all over his face. The bandages fell away, and Angus held his wrist out to us, palm facing up. There was an angry pink scar running along one side of it. I heard Mark's sudden intake of breath, and looked up into his shocked face, and watched as it changed slowly to a kind of awed wonder.

"What?" I asked impatiently. Mark spoke without taking his eyes off that scar.

"That's where you drank his blood, Rebecca. He cut his own wrist less than twenty minutes ago, and I watched the blood pouring out of it. And now it's almost healed."

I glanced up at Angus' face. He nodded once. I felt the blood rush to my face.

"Did it hurt?"

"Yes. We feel pain, same as everyone else. We just regenerate a lot faster."

"I'm sorry that you had to hurt yourself like that for me."

"I'm not." His eyes were smiling at me again. I closed my eyes and imagined touching that beautiful face, running my fingers over his smooth skin. I shuddered as my body reacted to the thought, and opened my eyes again, trying to escape from where my mind was headed. I looked at Mark, but he was playing with the kitten again, wiggling his index finger as it pounced. I risked another glance at Angus. His eyes had darkened until they were almost black, and he was staring at me with such hunger and intensity that I felt momentarily afraid. And then he blinked, and that expression was gone, and he was smiling again.

"Coffee?"

"Yes, please," said my graceless brother, still sipping his tea. Something occurred to me, a piece of the puzzle that was missing.

"Yes, but how do we know that I am an iron...metaboliser?" I hoped I'd pronounced the term correctly. I also hoped that they weren't going to ask me to cut myself to prove it. I wasn't keen on that idea at all.

Angus tilted his head to one side, and eyed me speculatively.

"You can probably remove that cast now. I'll bet your fracture has healed already."

"But it's only been, what, six days since I broke it! It's supposed to take at least six weeks to heal."

"I know. And I'm sure you haven't noticed yet, but it doesn't hurt anymore, does it." It wasn't a question.

"No, it stopped hurting the day after it happened..." My voice trailed off.

"Let's take it off!" Mark sounded eager. I pulled a face at him.

"I don't see any plaster saws hanging around here, do you?" I was strangely reluctant to have any definitive proof that I was indeed different from other people.

Angus grinned suddenly and stood up. He walked over to where I still lay on the large sofa, leaned over, grasped the lower edge of my cast with both hands, and simply tore it apart, right down the centre. I lay dead still, mesmerised by the strength of this man, and slightly concerned that he could rip my leg off by accident if I moved. I glanced down at my exposed knee and gasped. It looked completely normal. The abrasions that had been splattered over the outer surface of my knee had disappeared. There was no bruising, and no swelling. I flexed my knee. No pain, either. Angus lifted the mutilated cast off the sofa and I swung my leg over the side, and stood up in one easy movement.

"Cool!" said Mark.

"Yeah, cool," I agreed.

Angus

She took it better than I thought she would. They both did. I was really starting to like Mark with his bizarre sense of humour, and his unconventional thinking. And my cat was clearly infatuated with him. I was grateful to him too, for helping Rebecca come to terms with her new life so smoothly. His easy acceptance of the situation had been of enormous benefit to her. I would have to thank him properly someday soon.

"Rebecca. Mark." They looked at me expectantly, waiting for the next revelation. They were still only children, and I suddenly felt guilty for involving them in this complicated situation. And then I remembered how Rebecca had looked when she was dying and all my remorse vanished. I hadn't involved them. Genetics had.

"You can't tell anyone about this. Ever. Not your mother or your brother or your best friends. Nobody. Ever." I paused, letting it sink in.

"Because if you tell anyone about this, one of two things will happen. The first option is the likeliest – they will laugh at you, and think you are either making it up, or they will dose you up on antipsychotics. The second scenario, where someone actually believes you, will be far worse. You will be tested and experimented on, the media will get involved, and you will be labelled a freak, and held up for public scrutiny and derision. And I will be gone then, and you will be alone." I saw Rebecca flinch slightly, and I understood how she felt. The existence of my brothers had made it so much easier for me, to accept what I was, because I was not alone. Rebecca would fear being left alone. Good. I wanted her to fear it. It might help protect her.

Mark was nodding seriously. I reached out and gently touched his mind, felt the determination, and the love for his sister, and I knew he would never reveal our secret. I shied away from touching Rebecca's mind. There was too much at risk. I didn't want to lose control with her, and if I detected the slightest hint of that same desire I had felt the night before on the surface of her thoughts, I might surrender to that raw, overpowering craving. Cold showers wouldn't work for me.

"But my cast is gone. How can I explain that? I have to go to school tomorrow, and Mum..."

"That we can fix," I said.

"Really?" Mark was eyeing the mangled cast on the floor. "I'd like to see that!"

I grinned at him. "Coffee first. Then we call Fergus. I think we could get away with a knee brace, and you can tell everyone that you fell in the bath and the cast got wet and had to be removed." I looked at Rebecca, and she blushed.

"She's a rubbish liar," said Mark.

"I am," Rebecca nodded, embarrassed. "Everyone knows when I am lying, and nobody ever believes me." She looked forlorn.

"You're going to have to try." I smiled encouragingly at her, and she blushed again.

"Mark, let me teach you how to work the coffee machine. I need to phone my brother." I showed Mark around the kitchen, and while he enthused about the espresso machine and clattered about, I dialled Fergus on my iPhone.

"Like your new house?" his voice was reassuringly familiar.

"Very nice, Fergus. I need a knee brace."

I heard the exaggerated sigh on the other end. "What size?" Fergus never bothered querying my requests, no matter how strange they might seem. I was grateful.

"I'm not sure. Big enough to fit a seventeen year old girl, height maybe five-seven."

"Is it for Rebecca Harding?"

“Yes.”

“Is she there?”

“Yes.”

“Have you told her?”

“Yes.”

“Can we talk to her?”

“Sure.” I switched the iPhone to speaker mode, and carried it through to the sitting room. “My brothers want to say hi, Rebecca.”

Her eyes widened slightly, but she nodded, and spoke nervously towards the mobile. “Hello?”

“Hello Rebecca,” Fergus almost purred.

I mouthed Fergus’ name and she nodded. “Hello Fergus.”

“Welcome to the family, Rebecca.” Marcus sounded enthusiastic.

“Thanks.” Rebecca was starting to look a bit bewildered, so I interrupted. “Knee brace, Fergus. As soon as possible.”

“An hour, brother. Bye Rebecca!” Click. I looked up at Rebecca and smiled. She smiled back but she looked confused, and apprehensive. It was beginning to dawn on her properly now. I wanted to hold her, and reassure her that it was all going to be OK, but I was afraid of touching her. And then her face started to crumble, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Rebecca

It was too much. I’d apparently almost died today, and now I had to adapt to the idea that I was fundamentally and weirdly different from everyone around me. I felt unbelievably isolated and lonely. And those two disembodied voices confirming the madness. I wanted to cry, to curl up somewhere where this was not my reality. I felt those weak pathetic tears forming in my eyes and I tried to turn away so Angus wouldn’t see me crying, but next thing he was there, lifting my chin with his long fingers, and smiling down at me, and enfolding me in his arms, and all my fears evaporated. I felt safe. I buried my face in the fabric of his shirt, snuggling against his shoulder, and wound my arms around his warm fragrant body. I felt his body shudder, and heard the sharp intake of his breath, and heard the rapid thudding of his heart against my ear.

His fingers found my chin again and tilted my face upwards. I looked up into glittering eyes black as night. And then his mouth was on my mouth, his lips moving urgently against mine. I closed my eyes and surrendered to the sensation that flooded through me. His free arm tightened around my waist, and pulled me against his chest. I felt the strength and tension of his body through the thin fabric of his shirt.

The sound of Mark clearing his throat brought me back down to earth, and I pulled away, blushing furiously. Angus whirled around towards my brother, and almost snarled at him. His eyes flashed briefly, and then he closed them, clenching his jaw and breathing deeply.

“Coffee, remember?” Mark sounded nervous.

“Thanks, Mark.” Angus’ voice was level and controlled, his eyes still closed.

I sat down and Mark handed me a tiny cup of black, greasy looking liquid. I glanced towards Angus, and saw that he was still standing, his eyes now open, and that he too had a cup in his hand. His eyes were brown again, and he was frowning slightly.

“Are you planning on staying up the whole night?” he asked my brother.

"It looks a bit strong, doesn't it," Mark agreed. "I followed the instructions."

"Fair enough," Angus grinned at him, and Mark suddenly looked very relieved.

"Man, I thought you were going to bite my head off there."

"It crossed my mind." Angus admitted.

"That's the first time you actually looked like a vampire," Mark continued. "Cool."

"Is that what I am, what we are?" I interrupted him. "Vampires? I thought you were joking, Mark." I looked at Angus for confirmation. He hesitated slightly, then nodded.

"Historically, yes, we would have been called vampires."

"But where are the fangs?" Mark wanted to know.

"No fangs."

"So how did you puncture peoples' jugulars?"

"Bite through them. And it's not the jugular we went for, but the carotid. The jugular is a vein, and carries slow blood to the heart, but the carotid is the large artery that you can feel pulsating in your neck, here," he pointed to his own throat, "and that's much faster, and the blood tastes better too." I didn't want to know how he knew something like that.

"I don't need to drink blood now, do I?" I heard the edge of panic in my own voice.

"No. That's what the iron tablets are for. But we need to be careful how much we give you. Marcus reckons we should start at five a day, and work up slowly from there. Too little, and you could start to feel weak again, but too much can make you a bit mad. Too much power, too much sensory input, it can all become very overwhelming very quickly. Reality becomes a distant memory."

"Oh goody," I muttered. This was getting better and better. Not only was I some sort of metabolic oddity, but there was a good chance I could become insane too.

Angus smiled at me again. "It's OK, we'll help you through it all. I'll protect you," he added in a softer voice. There was that dizziness again. I closed my eyes and nodded, remembering the feel of his body against mine.

"Are you immortal too?" Mark was on a roll now, his eyes wide with excitement.

"No, we just live a bit longer than normal humans."

"How long?"

"Two hundred and fifty years, give or take a few."

"How old are you?"

Angus hesitated and glanced sideways at me. "I was born in 1951."

"But you look so young!"

"We all do. It's got something to do with our ability to regenerate cells. I will look like this until I die."

"What about garlic and crosses and wooden stakes?"

"All myth." Angus was laughing now. "The only way to kill us - and this is not something we've ever tried to prove, obviously - is probably to decapitate us. And maybe if our hearts stop beating, that could do it too. Other than that we're pretty tough."

I sat quietly, trying to drink my coffee and take it all in. The coffee was strong; the caffeine rush hit, and I felt better suddenly. This potential change in my life was really not all that frightening. Nobody except Angus and Mark would know about it, and I could carry on as normal, living a normal life. I glanced over at Angus again, and it suddenly occurred to me that maybe I didn't *want* to live a normal life. I had a choice, now, one that I would never even have contemplated 24 hours ago. I wondered idly which life I would end up choosing. What I didn't know was that the choice had already been made, and not by me either.

Angus

The knee brace arrived within fifty minutes of my call to Fergus. Mark was sitting against the wall again, and the kitten was once again draped over his lap. I had pointed out to him that he was welcome to sit on the furniture, and that I wouldn't bite him, but he said he preferred the floor, and so did the cat. Rebecca sat curled in the far corner of the big three seater. I gave the brace to her, and suggested she try it on. It was a bit big, but it would do.

"What should I say to Mum tonight?" she asked, fastening Velcro straps. "She'll never believe me if I tell her I fell in the bath. And how did I get the cast off? What if she asks me?"

"I think you should let me do the talking," Mark interjected.

"I agree with your brother," I said. "Whenever you need to withhold information, or even give false information, like in this case, you should always say as little as possible. Keep things simple. That way it doesn't feel so much like a lie as just keeping quiet."

"We'd better go now," Mark reluctantly put the kitten on the floor. It stumbled a few steps, but gained its balance, and limped across to Rebecca, who leaned down to stroke it. "Mum will be home in about thirty minutes, and it's my turn to make supper."

Rebecca looked up suddenly, grinning widely. "Something to look forward to," she teased.

"Just because you've now got a taste for the red stuff, doesn't mean you should mock my broccoli cheese bake." Mark pretended to be indignant. Rebecca chuckled, and stood up. I stayed where I was, watching their easy interaction.

"What about tomorrow?" Mark asked. "Should we come here after school?"

I nodded. "Both of you, please. We don't want to give the neighbours cause for concern."

Mark seemed to think that was hilarious and launched into a long loud baying laugh, clutching his abdomen, and tears streaming down his face. I wondered if all the excitement of the afternoon was catching up with him, and he was becoming hysterical. Then he spluttered, "If only they knew!" He was still giggling as he crossed the road with his sister. I smiled. Nice kids. Brave. But very vulnerable too. That worried me.

Rebecca

I knew Mark was going to make trouble for me as soon as we got in the house and he started making loud smacking noises with his lips.

"Smooching a vampire! Woohoo!" he ducked away from my attempted swipe, grinning.

"Mark! Someone might hear you!"

"There's nobody home yet, Bex." More kissing noises. Brothers!

"Seriously, Sis, it might be a good idea for you to go on the pill or something. Angus didn't look like he was going to stop, and I seriously thought he was going to kill me when I interrupted you two."

"I'm considering killing you myself, you irritating little..." My voice tapered off. Someone was turning a key in the front door. "If you're not careful, I will *bite* you," I hissed at him, showing my teeth. He giggled again, and ran up the stairs.

"Hello, baby! How are you feeling?" Mum sounded slightly breathless.

"Much better, thanks." She looked at me carefully and nodded.

"You look a lot better. You've got some colour in your cheeks now. Amazing what a morning in bed can do." And half a pint of blood to drink, I thought, smiling inwardly. What a bizarre day. All I wanted to do was go upstairs and curl up in bed so I could think, but Mum wanted to talk about her day. She went into the kitchen, chattering away about some man that she'd met at work. I made encouraging noises, and asked questions at the right points in the conversation. She didn't even notice that my cast had been replaced by a knee brace. Mark appeared in the doorway after a few minutes.

"Hey Mum," he said. "Broccoli cheese tonight?" He grinned sideways at me. I pulled a face.

"Sounds lovely!" Mum wasn't fussy.

Joe arrived shortly afterwards, and we ate our supper and drank tea and watched some crime drama on television. I excused myself just after nine, pleading exhaustion, and crawled into bed. I had anticipated this moment all evening, and was looking forward to thinking it all through, but I fell asleep within minutes of putting my head down, and the last thing on my mind as I drifted off was the feel of Angus' body against mine.

Angus

Fergus phoned me at about nine. I was grateful for the interruption. My house was beginning to feel eerily empty without the Hardings. Even the kitten had disappeared.

"How did she take it?" That was Fergus. No preliminaries. Hello was a word that happened to other people. I grinned. I missed my brothers.

"Surprisingly well actually. Her brother was here, and I had to tell him too." I explained how I had found Rebecca dying, and what I had had to do to bring her back. I described Mark's levelheadedness, and his easy acceptance of a peculiar situation.

"Hmmm," said Fergus.

"No." I said it flatly, with finality. I knew what they would think – that Mark knew too much and would need to be eliminated. I liked and admired that boy, and I'd felt his determination to keep our secret. I wasn't about to kill him, or allow him to be killed. "My cat likes him."

"As long as you're sure you know what you're doing." I smiled. I had been expecting them to put up more of a fight.

"So what is she like?" Marcus interrupted impatiently.

I hesitated for a few seconds, wondering how honest my reply should be. I decided to throw caution to the winds. My brothers would know eventually anyway.

I groaned slightly, wondering how to describe in words the fixation that was beginning to grip me. They understood anyway.

"Hah!" barked Fergus. "That bad, is it. She would be hard to resist, though, wouldn't she. It's like we're a bunch of tigers running with wolves. We like their company to a degree..."

"And occasionally we'll eat one..." Marcus and his tasteless jokes.

"But they're just not the same as we are. And now Angus has met a female tiger. Yummy!"

"The hormones must be whipping through your system like a tornado. And maybe through hers too. I wonder if that's what triggered her switch to iron metabolism? Hmmm..." Marcus sounded intrigued again. "I'm going to need a blood sample from you, brother. And one from your tigress, if you can manage it." I had long ago become used to

being a guinea pig for Marcus. He would get his blood, of course. I owed him that much, and more.

"I wonder if we should pay you guys a visit." Fergus sounded thoughtful.

A twinge of jealousy shot through me, but I suppressed it. "I think you should. Marcus can do his blood tests, and Rebecca can meet the family, poor girl."

Fergus sounded pleased. "I'll start organising. We'll stay in a hotel, obviously. Your house is too small for all of us."

"I've got things I need to finish up here," Marcus said gruffly. He didn't like to be rushed.

Fergus sighed exaggeratedly. "Forty-eight hours, then, brother." Click, and they were gone.

CHAPTER 5

Rebecca

It was still dark outside when the alarm went off in the morning, ripping me away from the ghostly memories of some strangely gratifying dream. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, struggling to wake up. I knew that if I lay my head down for just one more minute, I would wake up hours later, late for school and in loads of trouble. It had happened before. Often.

I blinked owlishly as light flooded my room. Mark stood in my doorway, grinning, his finger still on the switch. I lunged at him, and almost caught him, but he slipped away downstairs, laughing triumphantly. I sat back down on the bed as memories of yesterday unexpectedly poured into my head. I looked around at my bedroom, surprised at how normal everything felt. I was still worried about getting to school on time, for goodness sake. The ordinariness was comforting. I can do this, I thought.

I had a quick shower and dressed in a clean uniform, strapping the ungainly knee brace around my leg almost as an afterthought. It was all about keeping up appearances. I tied my still wet hair back in a rudimentary plait, brushed my teeth, and hobbled downstairs, crutch free. Much better.

Mum had left for work while I was showering, and Mark had finished his breakfast, and was sitting in the corner of the sitting room at the computer, clearly deeply immersed in what he was reading. Joe had left soon after Mum. He had never been an early riser before, but now he was seeing some girl, and he liked to be at her house early to walk with her to college. Love in action – changing the habits of a lifetime.

"Time to go, Sis. I'll walk with you today." Mark stood near the door suddenly, bag slung over his shoulder.

"You don't need to do that, Mark. My knee is fine now. And what about Harry?"

"I'll send him a text. I know your knee is fine. I'm more worried about you trying to rip people's throats out and suchlike. What will the neighbours say?" He burst out laughing again. I glared balefully at him. "No, seriously, Rebecca, I think I'll keep an eye on you until your iron levels have stabilised. I thought you were going to die yesterday." He shrugged.

I was grateful for his uncharacteristic concern. "Thanks Mark. I'll get my stuff."

The walk to school was uneventful. Mark had stopped teasing me about blood and throats and things like that. Maybe he was worried that we would be overheard, and

someone would take his ridiculous banter seriously. He was taking this secret keeping business seriously. Good. I wasn't ready to be outed yet.

Mark left me at the gate and went to find Harry. I made my way to my first lesson of the day – maths – trying to remember to limp. The knee brace helped.

“Freakface!”

Oh crap. Shanice again. I sighed, irritated. I'd been thinking about this afternoon, and seeing Angus again. I'd also been trying to dismiss those intrusive thoughts and *not* think about him and how he looked and smelled and felt. It took a lot of concentration to think such conflicting things at the same time. Shanice interrupted that concentration, and I was suddenly angry with her. I turned abruptly.

“What!” I almost barked at her.

She smirked at me and took a few steps forward so that her face hovered near mine. “Ooh, Freakface here is getting *cross* with me. Ooh, what am I going to do?” I smelled her fetid breath as she leaned even closer, and heard the tittering of her friends and fellow bullies in the background. I should theoretically have been afraid of her, all two hundred pounds of malice and spite, but I wasn't. Not anymore. When something really big happens in your life, I guess you forget to sweat the small stuff. I was tired of always trying to avoid this big reeking nemesis of mine.

“Back off,” I growled at her.

I saw the change in her eyes, the intention, and her face hardened. I was prepared for the blow, and swayed backwards as her hand shot out, glancing off my chin and shooting past my left ear. She was suddenly off balance, her face even closer, her nose a tempting target. I put my right hand out and hit her in the face with my palm, feeling the crunch of breaking bone as her nose was squashed against her cheeks, feeling the spattering of blood on my arm and face. She squealed and lurched backwards, tripping over her bag, and landing with a thud on her large backside. I stood and watched her, waiting for retaliation, but none came. She held her shattered nose and sobbed.

The first thing I noticed was the intensely alluring smell of blood. I lifted my right hand and looked at my palm. Shanice's blood was smeared and splattered across it like some gory Rorschach test. I had an almost irresistible urge to lick that thick crimson liquid from my skin. But Mark was swiftly at my side, grabbing my wrist and turning my face to look at him, mouthing *NO*, and pulling me away. I looked at him through a red haze, and I realised what I had almost done. The haze faded slowly as I stood staring into my brother's eyes, trying to anchor myself, to get back to being normal. Then I was back, and I was suddenly very frightened.

“It's OK, it's OK,” Mark repeated over and over, his eyes on mine, his hands clamped around my wrists. I gazed back at him, wishing that he could be right, and knowing that he wasn't. I nodded, signalling the return of my control, and he released my wrists, and we turned to face the commotion that had evolved from my clash with Shanice.

She was on her feet now, still sobbing, while one of her friends patted her gingerly on the back. My maths teacher, Mr Townsend, was standing nearby with his hands on his hips, frowning. I watched him, but I could feel the horrified glances of the bystanders who had witnessed the encounter.

“What happened here, Shanice?” He asked the instigator first. I was annoyed, but it's always that way. The person who got hurt is assumed to be the victim, whether they started the whole mess or not.

“She hid be!” Shanice gestured towards me with her free hand. The other was still wrapped protectively around her squashed nose. Blood was oozing briskly from between her fingers. I held my breath, not wanting to get a whiff of that again.

“Rebecca?”

“She tried to hit me first.” I felt I had to defend myself. Mr Townsend frowned again.

“Right. You two are both suspended for the rest of the day. I’ll be telling Mr Parker about this, and I’m sure he will want to discuss this with both of you tomorrow.” The threat was there, and as threats go, it was a pretty good one. Mr Parker, our headmaster transformed into a terrifying giant of a man with a legendary temper when he was annoyed. If I hadn’t been so worried about my own craziness, I would have been suitably anxious about the idea of having to explain this fracas to him.

“Now go home and get cleaned up! Show’s over!” He rounded on the spectators and they scattered.

I turned to Mark. “Thank you,” I said, meaning it.

He smiled and nodded. “No worries, Sis. Go home now, have a shower, and go see Angus. The neighbours will just have to think what they want.” He chuckled again. I had to smile.

“See you later,” I said hopefully.

“Bet on it. I’ll be there straight after school. Go now.” He waved me off.

I walked home slowly, wondering how my fourteen year old brother had managed to grow up so quickly. I realised that he must have somehow sensed the danger in me, and he’d decided to protect me from myself. I was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude and love and admiration for my brother. I owed him big.

Angus

When Rebecca rang the doorbell at ten that morning, I thought that she had decided to skip school for the day. But when she told me what had happened, and more importantly, what had almost happened, I realised that it was a bit worse than I had thought.

Rebecca sat curled in her corner on the three seater sofa, her eyes filled with anguish as she described her near catastrophic encounter with the smell of fresh blood, and how much she had wanted to taste it.

“It could have been a lot worse,” I told her. “You did fairly well, actually. For one, you didn’t actually lick the blood on your hand, no matter how much you wanted to. And secondly, you didn’t go for Shanice’s neck either.”

“You haven’t met Shanice, have you,” she said dryly. I laughed.

“Mark saved me. I think he knew something like this would happen.”

“I am really going to have to get him a big present some time soon.”

“I think he wants the kitten,” she smiled at me. Speak of the devil. It sauntered in to the sitting room from wherever it had been hiding and mewed at Rebecca. She picked it up and it sat purring on her lap, clearly satisfied with the situation.

“Rebecca, whether you like her or not, the fact that you didn’t bite Shanice when you smelled her blood is a very good sign. I would never have been able to do that when I was your age. I think that’s why our father kept us out of school. Boys fight, and blood gets spilled. It’s one of those things. My father knew he couldn’t take that risk. I didn’t expect *you* to be breaking noses quite so soon though.”

"She had it coming. She's been trying to bully me for ten years." She paused, her brow furrowed in thought. "The strange thing was that I really enjoyed breaking her nose. It was so satisfying. And afterwards, when I realised what I had done, I wasn't really sorry I'd done it. I tried to *feel* sorry, but it just wasn't there. I was a lot more upset that I'd almost exposed myself as beyond freaky by licking her blood off my hand. That really scared me."

I nodded slowly.

"Have you ever hurt someone and actually enjoyed it?" she wanted to know, looking at me with a worried expression, and stroking the kitten's back. It purred even louder.

How to answer a question like that. Hmm. I decided to be truthful. Mostly.

"Yes." I let that sink in for a few seconds. "I think it's because when you develop this need and ability to kill people and drink their blood, your brain makes a kind of automatic adjustment, so it doesn't feel completely wrong to hurt other people."

"So, what, am I a psychopath now?" her voice rose in panic.

"No Rebecca, you are most definitely not. Just because you enjoy hurting someone when it becomes necessary, it doesn't mean that you are now going to run about murdering and torturing people indiscriminately. Intellectually you know that that would be wrong, so you will try to avoid it. But when you have to hurt someone, you will, and you won't feel bad about it. It's kind of a self defence mechanism."

She sat quietly, trying to absorb and process my reasoning, and after a while she nodded.

"I get it." But she didn't look too happy about it. "Do you think I can still go back to school now?"

"Do you want to?"

"I don't know. I always expected to finish, but now it all seems so pointless. Problem is, if I drop out now, Mum will suspect the worst." She laughed suddenly. "Well, no, she couldn't, could she? She'd think I had *human* problems, like being pregnant or something like that." She looked at me and blushed. I tried to think of something else. Being in the same room as Rebecca Harding was difficult enough, but even thinking about her being pregnant, and how she'd get that way, well, that became excruciating. Even without factoring myself into the equation.

"I need to learn how to do this. Yesterday it didn't seem so scary. I suppose because it wasn't quite as real as it is today."

"That reminds me. I've got some iron tablets for you."

"Do I have to take them?" I knew she meant *do I have to be this?*

"You are an iron metaboliser, Rebecca. Whether you want to be one or not. You need iron, because if you don't take it, you could die, or you could tear someone's throat out in desperation eventually." She looked shocked by my harsh words. I leaned forwards, and continued. "The best thing you can do is accept it and learn to control it." Tears were forming in her eyes. I continued, lowering my voice. "You don't have to do this alone, Rebecca. I will help you as much as I can, and my brothers will be here tomorrow evening. Marcus is good at this sort of thing. Much better than me. He makes it all sound normal. And then you've got Mark, and of course," I paused for effect, "don't forget the kitten." She giggled at that.

"What more could I ask for?" she smiled through her tears.

"Coffee."

"Yes please. But not that thick tarry muck Mark gave us yesterday." She pulled a face.

"Yeah, it was pretty grim, wasn't it?" I stood up and went into the kitchen, leaving her to think it over. She didn't really have much of a choice, but it would be easier for everyone if she were on board with us, so to speak. Especially for her. I made coffee and dug out some biscuits I'd bought the previous morning. She was sitting in the same position when I walked back carrying a tray.

"I wonder if the people who hurt this little thing will ever be punished," she said quietly, tickling the kitten under its chin. It purred ecstatically.

"Yes."

She looked up at me. "You've done it already, haven't you?" She knew. There was no point denying it.

"Yes."

"Good." I handed her the coffee, careful not to let our fingers touch. "Does your television work?"

I grinned at her. "Probably."

"Do you mind if we watch a film or something?"

"Sure." I handed her the remote. She glanced at it and pressed a button. The television lit up, and I watched her face as she flicked through the channels. It was hard to read her expression, but I wasn't about to start reaching into her thoughts again. I was afraid of what I would detect, and a lot more afraid of what my reaction would be to what I found. I sat there, pretending to watch some romantic comedy, while all I could think of was what it would feel like to touch her.

Rebecca

I got home from school in a complete mess. I glanced in the mirror. My clothes were splattered with blood, but it was my expression that frightened me most. I looked wild-eyed and feverishly excited. No wonder everyone had stared at me at school. I was *scary*, man. I shook my head at my reflection and stripped off and climbed into the shower. The hot water washed the beguiling smell of blood from my skin, and the familiar soapy scent seemed to wash away the madness sloshing around in my head. I stepped out of the small shower cubicle feeling a lot more balanced than when I had stepped into it. I dressed quickly in jeans and a t-shirt and a thick jumper, and threw a load of washing in the machine. I didn't want my mother to find my bloodstained clothes and assume that I was the one who had been hurt. Ten minutes later I was ringing the Angus' doorbell, eagerly anticipating seeing his strong, beautiful face again, and nervous as all hell at the same time. He answered the doorbell in jeans and a white cotton open necked shirt, tall, powerful and dangerous, but strangely gentle too.

"Rebecca." He seemed pleased to see me and a bit puzzled too. I explained what had happened at school, and he nodded. He seemed impressed that I hadn't actually bitten Shanice's neck. Someone who admired my restraint! I was stunned and grateful at the same time.

We watched a film for a few hours. I can't for the life of me remember what it was about, but I felt I needed some kind of distraction. The cat seemed to enjoy it.

Mark arrived straight after school, still dressed in school uniform and carrying his bag.

"Hey, Sis," he grinned at me. "You look a lot more, er, civilised than you did this morning!"

I grinned back. "Come say that here!"

“Nah, it’s alright. You got anything to eat here?” he asked Angus, who stood behind him.

“Frozen pizza. They’re in the freezer.” He looked at me over Mark’s shoulder, his eyebrows raised. “You ready for those iron tablets now?” I nodded, and felt my face flushing traitorously. “I’ll get them for you. Mark can heat up the pizza.”

“Excellent. I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me. Anyone want pizza?”

“Yes, please.” I was suddenly very hungry. Angus tilted his head slightly as if considering something.

“Yes,” he said, and took a small container from a nearby cabinet drawer, and tossed it my way. I caught it one handed, surprised. “Five daily, Rebecca.” I shook the container briskly. There were a lot more than five in there. I nodded, grateful for his confidence in my reliability. Or maybe he was relying on me not wanting to take too many tablets and go berserk. Fair enough.

“Coming up!” Mark disappeared into the kitchen, returning twenty minutes later with three steaming pizzas and a huge smile.

“I have questions,” he announced as he took up his usual position on the floor against the wall, biting hungrily into a massive slice of pizza.

“Let’s have them,” Angus smiled, and bit into his own slice.

“Well, let’s see.” Mark pulled a small notebook out of his bag, and flipped the pages until he found what he was looking for. “I have a list.”

Angus groaned slightly. “Not a list!” he said, his voice tinged with false dismay.

“Number one. Is it true that you react to sunshine?” Mark took another huge bite. I glanced at Angus.

“No. But we always look like we can’t go in the sun because we’re so pale. We don’t tan. Normal humans tan to defend their skin from the sun. We don’t need to do that.”

That explained my continuing colourlessness in the face of weeks of tanning. So there was a reason for it! I was strangely pleased.

“Number two.” Mark grinned at Angus. “Vampires on TV and in legends and books are usually kinda hideous. You both look normal. Good looking, even.” He pulled a face as he said the last three words, as if it cost him to do that. I was flattered.

Angus grinned widely. “Thanks, Mark.” Mark looked sour.

“My brother Marcus has done a lot of research on vampire legends, and he’s come up with a theory that, knowing him, is probably pretty accurate.” He took another bite, and chewed for a few seconds, and swallowed. “Marcus reckons that we look normal because we eat like normal people too, besides taking iron supplements. He compares it to people who are addicted to heroin. Some will give themselves over entirely to the drug. Their lives revolve around the drug, obtaining it, and then using it. They don’t eat normally, or look after themselves in other ways, like bathing for instance. They soon start to look pretty grim, but they don’t seem to care. Marcus thinks that older vampires used to be a bit like that. Their addiction hit them like a bus, and they were never able to recover. He also thinks that we manage to live relatively normal lives because we take iron tablets instead of blood. Iron is released fairly slowly into our systems, so we don’t have that massive rush that you get from sucking blood.” He grinned again.

Mark was nodding slowly, like it all made sense. “Cool.”

Angus said nothing.

“Number three. Are there any others out there?”

“Hmmm. Good question. I don’t know. The likelihood is, yes, there probably are more of us out there somewhere. We haven’t found them yet, but they could be camouflaging themselves as normal people, same as us. There are a few possibilities, really. Firstly, there could be a family or two of fairly civilised vampires, like us, who know what they are and how to control it. They would also know how to avoid detection, so it’s unlikely we’d ever find them. The second possibility is that there is a group of old style vampires, but that’s a long shot. They would have to be pretty organised, and live somewhere that was very isolated, because they’d look wrong. They’d also need some human go-betweens. That kind of group would have had to have existed for a long time. We haven’t bothered to look for groups like that. Marcus doesn’t think that they could exist, and there would be no point in finding them anyway. They’d be too freaky, even for us.” He grinned.

“The third possibility is that there are more like Rebecca out there, with two human parents. Both your parents carried different parts of the genes you needed to metabolise iron, and the combination of the two was like fitting two pieces of a puzzle together.”

“How did you find me?” It was my turn for a question.

“You had a blood test when you were hit by that car. Marcus isolated a specific blood subtype in the three of us that wasn’t present in the rest of the population. Fergus hacked into most of the blood banks in the world, including those in the NHS. Your name was flagged by one of Fergus’ systems. I was in the vicinity, so I was sent to check you out.”

He smiled at me. I felt that now familiar fluttering rush in my abdomen again.

“Marcus somehow got them to send him a sample of your blood. He confirmed the presence of those three genes in your DNA.”

“Have you found any others like me?”

“Not yet, no. We weren’t even expecting to find you. It was quite a surprise.” He was smiling with his eyes again. Flutter, flutter. It was becoming almost painful to be in the same room as him, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. I was starting to dread having to go home tonight. I tried diversionary tactics.

“So where do Marcus and Fergus live?”

“Russia. We were born in Aberdeenshire, but we moved to Russia shortly before the cold war ended. I haven’t lived there for years, though. Marcus and Fergus stayed behind when I left.”

“Why did you leave?” Mark asked through a mouthful of pizza.

“I’m not sure. There was nothing to keep me there, I suppose. Our family lands are pretty extensive, and we have a huge house out there. Marcus was able to set up a state of the art lab in a purpose built addition to the house, and Fergus snuck his computers in there one day and never left. They had all they needed. Marcus did loads of degrees, Fergus made loads of money.”

“Do they look like you?” Mark again. His curiosity knew no bounds.

“No. They have light greyish eyes and blonde hair. So when they get excited their pupils dilate and it looks like their eyes have changed colour from grey to black. Our eyes are different to yours. When our ‘fight or flight’ response kicks in, our pupils dilate completely, so you can’t see any of the coloured part of the eye at all. I blend in better because my eyes are dark anyway. The change is not so noticeable.”

“I’ve noticed it,” muttered Mark. Angus grinned wickedly at him.

“And yet, here you sit, still alive, and eating my pizza.”

Mark grinned back. “It’s ‘cause your cat likes me, isn’t it?”

“Why else?”

“She needs a name, you know.” I decided to interrupt. The kitten was still cuddled up on my lap. She was asleep now, and her paws twitched wildly as she stalked her prey in the throes of feline dreams.

We spent the rest of the afternoon debating about what to name the kitten. Mark and I did anyway, while Angus stretched out in his armchair and watched us with amused eyes. The debate got a bit heated when Mark suggested calling the cat Quark, because she was so tiny, and it rhymed with ‘Mark’. Angus eventually interrupted us to point out that our mother would be arriving home in about ten minutes. The idea of going home was unwelcome, but we both stood up reluctantly. The kitten had wandered off to find something to eat earlier, and hadn’t returned yet.

“I should be OK to go to school tomorrow?” It was a question, not a statement. I was worried about the whole prospect of attacking somebody and drinking their blood. It was not something I’d ever wanted to do before, but things were clearly changing. And people out there were unlikely to be as understanding as Mark and Angus.

“That depends. Now that you know how you react to the smell of blood, you will probably do your best to avoid spilling any again.” He grinned at me, teasing.

“Very funny. So you think it will be OK.”

“You should be fine,” he said as he walked us to the front door.

I shouldn’t have listened to him.

Angus

It was easier for me when Mark was around. The two of them arguing with each other reminded me of how young they both really were; they seemed older. And Mark’s presence distracted me from the enticing female smell that Rebecca exuded. I didn’t have to hold my breath so much when he was there. It should have been getting easier, but it wasn’t. And then when they were leaving, and she looked so unhappy and withdrawn, I suddenly needed to check that she was OK. I hadn’t tried to feel her thoughts the whole afternoon, but as she was leaving I caved in to intense curiosity. She looked so sad.

Big mistake. As I reached out I was immersed in a violent swirl of confusion and desire. I withdrew as soon as I could, but it was too late. I felt my eyes changing and my body stiffening, and I fought to control the hunger that blazed through me. I suddenly wanted her so much more than anything I have ever wanted before. Ever.

Instead, I somehow managed to suppress that crushing desire, and I let her leave with her brother. I couldn’t know then how much I would come to regret that decision.

Rebecca

I put off telling Mum about Shanice until after supper. Mark and Joe were sitting watching some allegedly riveting football match, and I was washing dishes while she tidied everything away. She looked tired after a long day at work and I felt guilty about having to lay this on her too, but I knew it had to be done. She would find out eventually, and then she’d be doubly upset that I hadn’t told her about it. As with most things nowadays, she took it unexpectedly well.

“Isn’t Shanice the one that used to bully you in primary school?”

I was surprised and touched that she remembered after so long. “Yeah, that’s her.”

“Well, I’m sure she deserved what she got. Did you get into trouble?”

“I have to go see Mr Parker tomorrow and explain.”

She winced. “Poor baby. It’ll be fine, don’t worry.”

I smiled at her thankfully. She was a mother in a million. She hardly ever criticised us, she never lost her temper, and she worked like a maniac to keep the family going. I felt fleetingly guilty for excluding her from my new secret life, but I dismissed that thought quickly. Just the thought of trying to explain to her that I was now a vampire made me break out in a sweat. Her life was difficult enough already without that kind of information.

I stayed up for a while with my family, trying to absorb the normal tone of my surroundings, but it was no use. I went to bed just before ten, remembering just as I was changing into my pyjamas to take my five iron tablets.

CHAPTER 6

Rebecca

I woke earlier than usual that day, and I felt a kind of whimsical satisfaction when I put the alarm off before it could start screeching at me. Mum was already up, of course, and I went downstairs to have breakfast with her. We sat at the table in companionable silence until it was time for her to go. She hugged me as she left, wishing me good luck for the encounter with Mr Parker. I thanked her and kissed her cheek, and then she was gone.

I had a leisurely shower, and stood ironing my school uniform in my terrycloth bathrobe, listening to Radio 1 and humming a kind of off-tune accompaniment to a few songs. Mark eventually stuck his head around the corner and grimaced at me, so I shut up. No point torturing people at this time of morning. Not even brothers.

I dressed, tied up my hair and brushed my teeth, and stood waiting for Mark to get ready. I had to confess – I was nervous. School was going to be so much more of an ordeal than usual today, and I needed his comforting presence. Plus he could stop me if I decided to bite somebody’s neck. Ha ha.

We walked the mile or so to school with Harry, who had arrived a bit earlier than usual too, and had grunted a kind of greeting. Harry was a strange one sometimes. It was almost like he was evolving backwards. Speech, now grunting. I imagined him knuckling about and hooting, and I chuckled.

We arrived at the school gates at ten minutes to nine, and I was hanging about just outside them, apprehensive about going inside and facing the day. Then out of nowhere a white van drove up, and three guys in balaclavas sprang out. I turned to face them, surprised at the screeching brakes and sudden activity behind me. I should have run, but I didn’t. I guess I wasn’t expecting them to grab my arms and twist them behind my back, and lift me bodily into the yawning cavity of the van. The door slid slamming into place behind us and the van took off, all revving engine and squealing tyres. I didn’t even have time to scream.

The men worked fast, cuffing my hands behind my back and wrapping cable ties around my ankles. They draped a pillowcase over my head, and then they shoved me in a corner of the van and left me to my growing terror.

Mark

They came out of nowhere. I was standing about ten yards away from her, talking to Harry, when that van slammed on brakes, and those three men in balaclavas snatched my sister off the pavement, while we all stood watching in open-mouthed astonishment. Then they were gone, the tyres of the van swirling in a cloud of smoke. I tried to make out the number plate, but there was none. Make of van? I wasn't sure. Maybe a Ford Courier, or something like that. They all looked the same to me. I tried to remember its general shape so I could maybe try and identify it later if the police asked me. Police! I hauled out my mobile phone and dialled 999, and waited for seven long rings before I was put through to a bored operator who promised to send a couple of officers around to talk to us. Talk! I felt the panic rising in my throat. I had to *do* something. I glanced frantically around me at all the shocked blank faces, seeing no help there. Who could I call? Mum? No. She would lose her mind there and then. I couldn't do that to her. Let the police do that. And that's when I thought of Angus.

I took one last look at the other students milling about, and then I started running.

Angus

I'd been awake since three in the morning. I woke up feeling refreshed, but there was something bothering me, though I couldn't quite pinpoint it. I had breakfast and fed the cat, and then settled down to read. I read a lot of books. It helped to pass the time. Reading books had also taught the three of us how to behave more or less normally. About as normally as we could behave, I suppose.

It had just gone nine when somebody started hammering on my door. When I opened the door and saw Mark's white face and touched the fear in his mind, I was stunned.

"You'd better come in," I said.

Mark

It was almost as if he knew what I was about to tell him before I actually told him. His jaw was clenched, his mouth drawn in an angry line, and his eyes burned black.

"Rebecca's been kidnapped. Three guys in balaclavas jumped out of a white van just outside the school gates and grabbed her. They stuck her in the van, and off they went. No number plate. Generic looking white van, no markings. I called the police and they said they'd send someone to investigate, but I didn't wait for them. They'd take too long. And then I thought of telling you." I was babbling, my voice rising in alarm. I looked up at Angus' expression, at the rage that had settled there as if it belonged, and wondered if I'd done the right thing. He stood frozen for a few more seconds and then suddenly he was moving, snatching his mobile off a cabinet and punching numbers like the phone itself annoyed him.

"Fergus," he barked into the phone. "Somebody's taken Rebecca. White unmarked van, three guys in balaclavas, really smooth pick up, they've probably done it before. I'm going after them. I'll contact you if I need anything." He smiled grimly at whatever his brother said to him, and then he hung up.

"Let's go," he said to me. "You need to show me where she was when they took her." He shoved his arms into the sleeves of an expensive looking leather jacket, and dropped his phone into one of the pockets. Then he unlocked the top drawer of the wooden cabinet and started filling his pockets with objects that I couldn't quite identify, but which mostly looked

dangerous and highly illegal. He locked the cabinet drawer again, pocketed the key, and took a small tub of tablets from the second drawer, which he opened, revealing brown tablets. He counted fifteen out into his hand and swallowed them all in one go. He put the tub in one of his pockets too. I stood motionless, watching this frenetic activity, and then suddenly he was stalking towards the door, car keys in hand.

“Come!” he barked. I jumped at the sound, and followed him obediently out of the house. He was in his car and firing up that colossal engine before I’d even opened the door. I yanked the passenger door open and dived in just as the car started moving off.

We got to the school before the police did, of course. I had just managed to click my seatbelt into place, when I had to unclick the damn thing again. There was nobody around; the bell had sounded and everyone had disappeared into their classrooms, business as usual. I felt a sudden surge of anger at their apparent lack of concern.

“Where?” asked Angus as he slid out of his seat in one easy movement. I scrambled out, and pointed out where Rebecca had been standing when they had taken her. Angus didn’t bother looking around. He just stood there, his face white and composed now, and he closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose. Five seconds. Then he was moving again, sliding back into the driver’s seat, and gunning the engine. I managed to get my backside on the seat as the car pulled off, the door closing automatically behind me with the sudden lurching motion.

Angus looked at me with blank eyes as if he’d never seen me before. Then he braked suddenly. “You can’t come with me,” he said harshly.

I don’t know where I got the courage from, but I huddled down in my seat, clutching the seatbelt around me, and muttered, “I’m not getting out.” I must have been mad.

Angus’ eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched again, and I thought for a second that he was actually going to physically throw me out, but then he nodded. “Right.” And then we were moving again, weaving briskly in and out of the rapidly clearing traffic. There was a pause in our progress as we waited at a red traffic light. Angus punched in a number on the iphone, turned it to speaker mode, and thrust it into my hands. “Hold this.”

It rang twice, and then a brisk voice answered. “What’s happening?”

“She was taken by a vampire and two human males. Vampire’s pretty old, probably one hundred and fifty or more. He lives on blood only, not human, probably animal. So he’s strong for a human, but in pretty poor shape for one of us. The human males are in their thirties and in very good shape. They’re armed. Heavily. This looks like it was an organised kidnapping, and the coincidence is too great. One vampire kidnapping another? They must know what she is. How did they find her, Fergus?”

“I’ll find out. What else do you need?”

“I’m heading north. I need you locate their base. This looks like it’s one of those groups of old style vampires that we didn’t think existed anymore.” I heard another voice swearing in the background. Angus smiled tightly. “You can’t always be right, Marcus.” More swearing.

“There will be things you can start looking for, Fergus. They will have a fairly large base, in an isolated area. It’ll be colder than the rest of the country.”

He paused. “I’m going to need to use our estate in Aberdeenshire.”

“It’s yours. I’ll notify the housekeeper.”

Another pause. We were moving again by this stage. Angus drove effortlessly, as if he didn’t need to think about it at all.

“Fergus. Look for patterns. Increased percentage of missing persons, not recent, but spanning the last century and a half. Recent disappearances would be in the indigent population, beggars, prostitutes, homeless people. Vampires are not always stupid, especially if they’ve survived this long.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

“There will be an abattoir nearby. Medium to large size. That’s probably where he’s getting the blood. He drinks a lot of it.” He paused, looked sideways at me, and continued. “I’m going to need some equipment.”

“Shoot.”

Another grim smile. “Indeed. Two Glock 17’s, two hundred rounds - hollow point preferably. Ballistic vest. And a Heckler and Koch PSG1 with two hundred rounds and a couple of spare magazines. I’ll be arriving in Aberdeenshire in, say, five and a half hours. Can you arrange for all that to be delivered to the estate by then?”

“Could be a bit complicated. The UK is not the best place for firearm purchases. Especially the rifle.”

“Can you do it?” Angus sounded impatient.

“Yes. Probably.”

“You flying now?”

“We’re in the air at the moment, but I’ll try and redirect us to a more northerly airport. If you think you could use the help.”

“Absolutely.”

“Yeah.” Click and they were gone.

Rebecca

Of course I was scared. At first. The van rocked and swayed, and I bumped my head a few times against its raw metal insides. My head hurt for a few moments, but then the pain subsided and I learned to sway with the motion of the vehicle instead of trying to brace myself against it. It was a minor accomplishment, but to me, sitting there with my hands and feet tied and a mouldy smelling pillowcase over my head, it felt like a lot more than that.

There was something hypnotic about the sheer concentration required to move with a rocking van, especially if your other senses are muffled. I stopped being afraid after a while. Nobody seemed to be trying to hurt me; I was being ignored with a capital I.

Then someone spoke. Male voice, older adult, gruff, like maybe he smoked a lot.

“Pull over. We need to reattach the number plate.”

“There’s a lay by up ahead.” Another male voice. Maybe younger than the first. “Watch the girl.” The van slowed, and stopped. One of the front doors opened, and a sudden tilt in the floor I sat on signalled that someone had climbed out. A few minutes later the floor tilted again, and a front door closed. The van started moving again. It took a few moments for the implications of what had happened to hit me. No number plate. I had been kidnapped in a generic white van with no distinguishing markings and no number plate. How was anybody going to be able to find me?

I was suddenly and paralytically scared again.

Angus

I know I should have insisted that Mark get out at the school. I didn't, though. I'm not sure exactly why I let him tag along. It could have had something to do with the images that flashed across my mind as he sat cowering defiantly in that seat. Images of me having to drive for hours with my rage my only companion, trying not to imagine what they were doing to Rebecca with every passing minute. I knew I would have to keep a level head, or as level as was possible for me. Mark could help me do that. He would *have* to help me do that.

Mark

About half an hour into the journey or trip or pursuit or whatever you wanted to call it, I started worrying. About my mother and how she would be spinning out about Rebecca's kidnapping. And maybe they'd have realised that I'd disappeared too. I would have to contact Mum, and let her know that I was OK, and that I was with Angus and we were trying to find my sister, the needle, in a great big British haystack. Maybe not.

I looked across at Angus. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel, his face looked like it had been carved from marble, or some sort of more angular stone.

I had questions, but I also had doubts. Angus looked like he was about to snap something in half, and I didn't want that something to be me.

I stared out of the windscreen at the greys and browns of the wintry English countryside blurring past. We were heading north on the M6 motorway, averaging about eighty to one hundred miles per hour. Why north? My sister was missing and Angus was heading north? I didn't get it.

"Why are we going north?" My voice sounded tentative and nervous in my own ears. Angus looked across at me and smiled tightly again.

"I was waiting for the questions."

"You don't mind?"

"No."

I waited a few seconds and then asked my question again. "Why north?"

"Two reasons. Firstly it's a lot less heavily populated. Secondly vampires like the cold. They function best in a temperature range of between minus five and ten degrees. Celsius. That's why my brothers live in Russia."

"How do you know it's a vampire that's got her?"

"I smelled him. And two other guys. Probably military background. They both reeked of gun oil, and one smokes a lot."

"How did you get all that from sniffing the air for a few seconds?" I was impressed. And not quite believing it all.

"I have an excellent sense of smell. If Fergus can get me within five miles of them, I'll be able to track them down using smell alone."

"Cool."

Angus smiled again. "Yeah."

"And you know the vampire drinks blood only. What does that mean?"

"He'll be weaker than one of us. He's feeding his addiction to iron, and not his body. So he won't have much in the way of muscle left, but he'll still be stronger than you humans. Especially after a big dose of blood. And I know that he drinks blood only because I can smell it on him. That and the stink of his slowly atrophying tissues."

"Yuk."

“Yes. But it’s a very distinctive smell. Easy tracking.”

I waited for a minute or so before asking the question that had been bothering me for a while.

“Why did they take Rebecca?”

The knuckles whitened even more, but his voice was controlled when he spoke. “I don’t know. There are a couple of possibilities.”

He paused, and took a few deep breaths.

“Firstly, they might not know that she’s a vampire. Young female abduction; she’d be raped or murdered or both.”

I felt sick. Angus spoke again, managing to keep his tone level.

“Or they do know that she’s a vampire. That is the most likely scenario, and that means a whole different set of options. They might want her to join them, as a part of their *community*,” he spat the word. “As a breeding female.”

I shook my head vehemently. “She’d never stand for that.”

“She might not have a choice. She has a major vulnerability that they can exploit. She needs iron, high doses on a daily basis. If they withhold that from her, she could become weak, and almost die. She wouldn’t have a choice, Mark. They would force her.” His voice had become gravelly, as if he was having trouble controlling his emotions. I knew how he felt.

Rebecca

I forced myself to concentrate on breathing deeply and swaying with the van again. It took me a while, but I eventually calmed the acute panic down. The van must have moved onto a motorway, because the swaying all but stopped, and the speed increased. Fast but not too fast. It made sense that they wouldn’t go faster than the speed limit. They wouldn’t want to run the risk of being pulled over.

I leaned back against the nearest surface and adjusted my position slightly. My limbs were starting to ache slightly with the forced inactivity, and unnatural positions that they had been tied in. I felt a fleeting irritation with these people. I wanted to make them pay. Eventually.

I started thinking about escaping. I was no expert on kidnapping, but these guys appeared to be careful. Taking a number plate off for doing the deed and then putting it back on afterwards. Cunning. They were unlikely to take any unnecessary risks. Crap.

Then it occurred to me. I had a bit of an advantage over these people. I could metabolise iron, and if Angus was right, a big dose of iron would make me tremendously and invincibly strong. I smiled under my smelly pillowcase, imagining tearing these idiots apart, and escaping back to my family. And to Angus.

All that was missing in my plan was a massive dose of iron. As I started wondering how to get hold of it, I realised that all my fear had evaporated, and I felt slightly triumphant. Score one for *the girl*.

Angus

Mark was a welcome distraction, except that he asked the wrong questions. Why had they taken Rebecca? I didn’t even like to think for a split second about what they would do to her.

But something else had crossed my mind as I was speaking to him. If there was a group of iron metabolisers out there somewhere who lived on blood, they would look strange. I had built up a mental picture of the vampire from his smell – thin, maybe even emaciated. Parchment-like skin. Tired looking face, dark rings around the eyes. Like any junkie with an all-consuming addiction.

Someone who looked like that would need to hide, and stay hidden. And if there were a group of them, they would need a cover story to explain their reluctance to be seen in public. And they would need servants who would have to be fed that cover story, and who would swallow it. The servants would be in daily contact with them, and would eventually have to see them as they were. What kind of cover story could render the horror of a collection of crumbling vampires *normal*? Well, maybe not normal, but believable. And maybe even pitiable, so it would be frowned upon to talk about them too much. Hmmm.

“Phone.”

Mark grabbed it off the dash, and handed it to me. I dialled Fergus again, switched on the speakerphone function, and handed the phone to Mark. He held it obediently.

Two rings and Fergus answered. “Got your arsenal, brother. It’s on its way as we speak.”

“Thanks.”

“Estate’s yours too. Housekeepers’ sorting it out now. I think she’s even going to make you supper. She’ll leave it in the fridge, of course. You’ll have the place to yourself when you get there. We’re diverting to Glasgow airport. Well be arriving at the estate sometime around midnight.”

“Fergus, we need to consider the possibility that these vampires aren’t living in complete isolation. They could be blending in under some kind of believable cover story. I want you to locate private hospices, especially those dealing with rare diseases.”

“Right.”

“And look for unexplained violent or animal related deaths around one hundred plus years ago. Transport wouldn’t have been as good, so that kind of search will probably reveal more of their whereabouts than a more recent one.”

“Tricky.”

“Yeah, but you’re good at tricky.”

“Thanks, brother. Later.”

Rebecca

Iron, hmmm. I’d left the iron tablets behind that Angus had given me. Even if I had them, say, in a pocket, there was no way I could open that tub and take some out and swallow them with my hands tied behind my back. And even if these guys untied me, they’d never sit by and let me swallow a bunch of tablets. They would want me alive and conscious for what they were planning, I bet. Whatever that was. I tried not to think of it, but concentrated on my plan.

There was no help for it. I would have to bite the neck of one of these guys. And drink their blood. The decision didn’t repulse me as much as it probably should have.

I would wait for the opportunity. There’s a lot of iron in blood.

And these guys had it coming.

Mark

Something had been bothering me since Angus' first conversation with his brother Fergus. Well, something *else*. There were too many things on my mind for me to really notice this one until I'd had some time to think it through. Once a question occurred to me, I just had to know.

"So how does someone like you know so much about guns and stuff?"

Angus chuckled. "Guns and stuff," he mused. "It's a long story."

I said nothing. I was learning from an expert.

"I've been in the armed forces for quite a large proportion of my fifty-nine years," he said eventually. Every time I heard how old he really was, my mind started lurching around like a drunk. He really didn't look more than twenty. Twenty five if you really pushed it.

"I couldn't stay in any one place for more than, say, five years. People start noticing that you're not getting older. I started off in the British military, the SAS, and worked my way across Europe. I spent a few years in Africa too. I ended up working for the FBI in the states until I retired about four years ago."

"Why did you stop?"

"Because it wasn't what I had expected when I started. I realised fairly soon after my father died that I needed an outlet for my, er, violent tendencies. I joined the armed forces, thinking that I'd be able to hurt deserving people in a disciplined, controlled way. It didn't work like that, though. You didn't get to hurt anyone. You learned about guns and knives and unarmed combat, but you couldn't hurt anyone until you were actually in the battlefield. Those were quiet years, and I spent five and a half years learning to curb my frustration. It taught me that much at least, I suppose."

"But surely you liked the unarmed combat bit?"

Angus laughed humourlessly. "Rolling around on the floor with some idiot, pretending to fight him off? No." He paused, and then he turned to look at me, his expression grim. "I can crush your neck with one hand, Mark, without even lifting the other off the steering wheel here. I can break that massive bone in your thigh by just *squeezing* it. I could thrust my hand through your ribs and into your thoracic cavity and rip your beating heart out." Expressionless, like he was reading the weather.

I shuddered. I wasn't much liking the direction this conversation had taken.

"So, you see, I spent all that time in unarmed combat training sessions fighting *myself*. Trying *not* to hurt those men. It wasn't fun."

"Why the FBI?" Change the subject.

"The idea of the bad guy going after the bad guy appealed to me." He waited a few minutes before continuing.

"I killed a man when I was seventeen. He was setting traps out in the countryside where we grew up, and when I confronted him, he laughed at me. He was a big man, see, and he thought that he would easily be able to fight a teenager off. That laugh, and the derision and contempt behind it; that enraged me. I'd killed him before I even realised what I was doing."

His face hardened. "Afterwards, when I was standing over his broken body, I waited for the shame and remorse to wash over me. It never came. The only thing I felt was satisfaction. I realised then that there was something profoundly wrong with me."

I said nothing, because there was nothing to say.

"Marcus explained that my reaction had a biological basis, that it would make sense for those of us who had to survive on blood to *not* feel remorse when we killed. It made no

difference to me. Biological basis or not, I was still a monster. Just before my father died, I swore to him that I would tame that monster. I have, to a degree, but I still know what I am, and what I am capable of.”

“Funny thing is,” he smiled wistfully, “my father always refused to believe me, that I was capable of such things. When I promised to tame my monster, he told me I already had, just by acknowledging its existence, and resolving not to succumb to it.”

“It’s not that easy, though. Sometimes that beast rears its ugly head whether I want it to or not.” He paused again and then he turned his head to look at me, a wry, sad smile on his face. “I’ve got a feeling we might see it tonight.”

Rebecca

My anger grew with my discomfort. It’s amazing, but once I’d stopped feeling so helpless, once I’d realised that there was a way that I could escape from this situation, I stopped being afraid. The fact that I was going to have to kill one of these morons was an added bonus, of course.

We had been driving for what felt like hours. Then somebody started speaking.

“Jack,” said the voice, harsh and dry sounding. “I have a present for you.” The tone was wheedling, and I didn’t like the lascivious way he said present. I wondered who this Jack was, and what the present was. Then I realised that I was supposed to be the present. Gross.

“It’s a young female.” Pause. “Yes, I’m pretty sure she’s one of us.” Pause. “Someone posted a video clip on youtube of her hitting someone’s nose. Her expression when she saw the blood on her hand! She was *hungry*, Jack.”

Damn. They knew I was a vampire and that’s how they’d found me. I resolved to find the person who had posted that footage and *hurt* them. I was still dwelling on this when the pillowcase was suddenly tugged off my head, and the mobile pointed at me. Click. The bastard had taken a photograph of me. I watched as he smiled to himself, and pressed a few buttons on the phone, sending my image through cyberspace and to the waiting phone of Jack, whoever that was. I studied the speaker with narrowed eyes. He looked awful, like he had some kind of nasty wasting disease. Skinny, with dry mottled skin and bony hands and face. He looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks. He glanced up at me and his deep set eyes shone with triumph.

Angus

It was dark when we finally reached the estate. I felt an overwhelming nostalgia as I drove through the gates, and down the tree lined drive. I was born here, and I’d grown up in the house that loomed ahead. I had spent much of my relatively carefree childhood running through these woods that surrounded us, playing assorted childhood games that all involved improvised weapons, improbable plots and long, drawn out chase scenes. Such a long time ago.

Mark hadn’t said much since I’d told him about killing that trapper when I was seventeen. I had wondered if he had been repulsed or afraid, so I had reached briefly into his mind. I was surprised by what I sensed. No shock or horror at all. Instead there was acceptance and understanding and even compassion. He was definitely older than his fourteen years. I knew then that bringing him had not been a mistake. He reminded me of

my humanity, or what there was of it. When Fergus tracked those vampires down, and sent me the information I needed, I knew I would have to leave Mark behind here. I couldn't let him see what I was going to do.

The old stone house looked welcoming, even after all these years. I hadn't been back here in decades. There was more ivy growing up the walls than there had been the last time I'd been here, but other than that it looked the same. Timeless. Fergus had made sure that someone had always looked after the place.

The heavy wooden front door was unlocked, and we walked into the warmly lit front room. There was a fire burning in the grate, flanked by two elderly leather armchairs, and Mark made a beeline for it and held his hands out. It was colder here than down south in England, but I felt invigorated by the frosty air. Mark just felt cold, I suppose.

I showed him briefly around the house, turning up the central heating along the way. He dived into the fridge as soon as we entered the oversized kitchen, and hauled out the roast the housekeeper had left for us. I left him to dish up, and went to look for my packages. I found them in a shed near the front door of the house. I carried them indoors to the kitchen where Mark was already chewing on a hunk of roast beef.

"I thought you were a vegetarian," I teased him.

"Nah, Mum's a vegetarian. We just go along with it for her. I've eaten meat before. Delicious." He smiled happily.

I lifted the wrapped packages onto the big oak table in the middle of the kitchen.

"I'm just going to check these out, make sure they work."

"Sure," Mark nodded, too busy carving the roast to look up. "Potatoes?"

"Please."

I unwrapped the largest of the three parcels, and lifted the Heckler and Koch sniper rifle out of its protective cocoon of bubble wrap. It was in good condition. Not brand new, but looked after, like somebody had appreciated it. It was a weapon I had used many times in Germany; it was reliable and accurate, and could fire up to twenty rounds without having to be reloaded. I would have to check that it was in working order in a few minutes, and line up the scope. I had a laser in my pocket for that purpose, and a few shots in the countryside were likely to go unnoticed. The second largest package contained the rounds for the rifle, as well as those for the handguns. Hollow tipped, like I'd requested. I thought of them splitting apart on impact and exploding through the soft inner organs of Rebecca's kidnappers, and I smiled to myself.

The Glocks were in the smaller package, also used, but in good condition. The ballistic vest was top of the range. I was touched by Fergus' thoughtfulness. I would test all the firearms after I'd eaten. As I ate my supper and watched Mark's wide eyes drift over the weapons laid out on the table, I wondered what progress Fergus was making.

Rebecca

My arms were really aching by the time the van finally lurched to a standstill. And I needed to pee.

It was dark outside, but as the guy with the gruff voice grabbed my left arm and lifted me out of my huddled position in the back of the van, I was able to make out some kind of artificial light source coming from somewhere nearby. A building, maybe. I was flung unceremoniously over the gruff man's shoulder, compressing my already uncomfortably distended bladder. I concentrated for a few seconds on trying to control the urge to pee,

and then I gave up and peed all over my kidnapper. Serve him right. He swore and I giggled. He swore some more.

It was strange, really. A part of me was afraid, but I was also enjoying the anger that pulsed through me. I wondered if Angus felt like this all the time. Just thinking of him made my heart leap. I had spent a lot of time thinking in that grubby van. And what I had been thinking about most was Angus, and the way he looked and felt and smelled. It struck me after a while that the thought of never seeing my mother or Mark or Joe again saddened me. But the thought of never seeing Angus again wrenched my soul. I suppose it was time to admit that I was insanely in love with him. Rubbish timing, obviously, but I couldn't help that.

I looked around as best I could while I was being carried. His hip got in the way, but I was able to make out a large building. It looked like some sort of institution, like a hospital maybe, or a home for the elderly. There was a ramp for wheelchairs leading up to the front door. Weird place to take a kidnap victim.

My captor turned before he reached the entrance and headed out towards the right side of the building. I squinted to see where he was heading. I could just make out what looked like an old stone barn. Great. Isolated and draughty. A much more suitable place to detain a prisoner.

The barn was lit by a solitary bulb that dangled from higher up in the recesses of the barn roof. There were sacks of compost stacked against one wall, and a row of rusting gardening implements along another. Gruff man stopped suddenly, and I saw his companion struggling with a large trapdoor in the floor. It had been cunningly hidden under a few empty bags and some dirt. He lifted the trapdoor, revealing old stone stairs leading downwards. A torch flickered into life in his hand and they both started down those stairs, reluctantly but inevitably accompanied by me.

Mark

The call came just after six thirty. Angus was outside, checking that the guns worked properly, or something like that. I picked up the phone and carried it outside, still ringing. Angus appeared like a ghost out of nowhere in seconds. He pressed a button on the phone and said, "Yes, Fergus. What have you got?"

"There are two possibles. The more likely one is about fifty miles from where you are now. There's a privately funded care home for people with some degenerative neurological disorder. The reason I'm a bit suspicious of it is that Marcus tells me that people with this disorder rarely live beyond five years at the most. Some of the people in this place have been there twenty years and up."

"Hmmm."

"Indeed. There were a few unexplained and deeply suspicious deaths in that vicinity in the late 1800's."

"What's the address?"

Fergus read out the name of the place, and the postal code. I knew Angus would be able to punch that into his satnav. Easier than tracking by smell.

"How many residents?"

"Eleven. The staff appear to have evenings off. Strictly nine to five working hours."

"Auxiliary staff?"

"Nothing registered. But cash can still buy you an army."

“Yeah.”

“Look after yourself, brother.” Click. This family were clearly not big on the whole hello and goodbye thing.

I looked up into Angus’ hardening face, and I was suddenly afraid for my friend. He was a good man, whether he chose to believe it or not, and I didn’t want him to die tonight.

Rebecca

They dumped me in what looked like an old fashioned dungeon, and slammed the solid wooden door shut. Massive iron bars appeared to have grown out of the stone floor and into the thick beams in the ceiling. My cell was about three feet by five feet, dusty, with a rough wooden bench along the far wall. I stood with my back to the bars as ordered while one of my captors sliced through the cable ties around my wrists and ankles. As soon as they had freed me from my restraints, they stepped away from the bars. I turned to watch them as I massaged my wrists and stretched my arms out. They were leaning against the wall farthest from my cell. Clearly taking no chances. What a shame. I sat down on the bench and leaned my back against the rough stone wall.

“Oscar’s been wrong before.” The gruff man smiled evilly at me, although he was clearly talking to his colleague.

“Yeah, that was fun. She was a bit of a screamer, though. But nobody can hear screams through this lot,” he pointed at the ceiling. “It’s soundproof, baby.” He sneered the last word at me.

I wondered if they were trying to frighten me. It wasn’t working. I was visualising one of them coming into my cell, and me leaping up at them and sinking my teeth into the soft exposed flesh of their neck, and gulping down the sweet and salty blood that pulsed out of the torn flesh. I shuddered with pleasure at the thought.

“I think he’s right about this one, though. She doesn’t look as frightened as she should. She’s giving me the creeps.”

Damn, my cover was blown. Well at least they’d stay away from me now.

“Man, you stink.”

“She pissed all over me.” Gruff man sounded gruffer than ever. I grinned.

“Wait ‘till Jack gets here, sweetie. He’ll wipe that smile right off your pretty little face.”

I sniffed in his general direction, and grinned wider, letting the anger and hunger seep into my eyes.

They stared warily at me and said nothing.

Mark

It took Angus about ten minutes to get the car loaded up. He put the guns in the boot, except for one of the pistols, which he loaded and shoved in his belt. He strapped the vest on over his shirt, and pulled the leather jacket on over that. He looked over at me as he was sliding into the driver’s seat, and he nodded.

“Thanks, Mark.”

And then he was gone in a swirl of mud and roaring engine. I wondered what he was thanking me for. He was the one rescuing my sister, after all. He was helping *me*.

I shut the door, and sat down in one of the ancient leather armchairs by the fire to wait. It was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER 7

Angus

It's hard to believe how long a journey of fifty miles can take in your head, even when you look at the clock on the dash and it's actually taken less than an hour. I pulled over onto the grass along the side of an isolated country road about two miles from my destination. The area was isolated and protected from view by a clump of gnarled chestnut trees.

I retrieved the sniper rifle from the boot, loaded it, and put spare magazine in one of my now bulging pockets. I loaded the second Glock too, and stuck it in my waistband at the small of my back. Two spare fully loaded magazines also went onto my pockets. I stood, rifle held loosely in my left hand, and breathed in deeply through my nose. Once, and then again. The sour scent of slowly decaying vampire flesh wrapped itself around my olfactory neurosensory cells. I smiled grimly, and taking the tub of iron tablets out of my pocket, I counted out another ten, and swallowed them. I was going to need all the power and speed I could get tonight.

I set out in the general direction of the smell, jogging silent footed through the fields and hedgerows between me and my target. It occurred to me that I'd killed quite a few people in my time, but never a vampire. I hoped that Marcus was right about the whole decapitating business. I was prepared to try a number of alternative options, though. It also struck me that if I waited until midnight for my brothers, I might stand a better than even chance of annihilating these creatures quickly and quietly, and getting Rebecca out of there in one piece. But the idea of sitting and waiting for Marcus and Fergus to arrive while the images of what they could be doing to Rebecca blazed like fire through my mind... No.

As I ran I went over a few possible approaches to the situation in my mind. Chances were these vampires had no idea that I even existed, so surprise would definitely be on my side. There were likely to be at least thirteen of them. Eleven vampires and those two human males that had helped abduct Rebecca. The humans were armed, the vampires? Probably not. When you're as strong physically as these guys were likely to be the only assault weapon you'd need would be your own body. I was counting on their complacency. And I was hoping to shatter it soon.

Rebecca

After a while I got fed up with watching those two idiots. All they did was watch me back. I stretched my aching body out on that wooden bench and closed my eyes. My feet hung off the lower edge, but it was comfortable enough if you had low expectations to start with.

I let my mind wander. It seemed to gravitate automatically to Angus' beautiful stark face. I remembered the way he looked at me when we first met, and the way he'd smiled at me yesterday. God, was it only yesterday? And the way he'd held me when I'd felt overwhelmed by the newness of everything he was telling me, and the way he'd kissed me until Mark interrupted us. Poor Mark. My train of thought derailed. Mark must have seen these morons grabbing me and shoving me in that white van with no number plate. He was probably worried sick about me. And my mother. My mother would be frantic now. I imagined her thin fragile face creased with desperate, devastating anxiety. How I hated

these men and that freak show called Oscar for putting her through this. They would pay. I would make them pay.

There was a disturbance by the trapdoor, and it creaked open reluctantly. Oscar walked carefully down the stairs and went and stood next to Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

"Jack phoned. He'll be here in about an hour." He placed a dented metal flask on the floor. "I've brought her some tea. She's going to need all her strength for what Jack's got planned for her." He drew back his lips in what he probably thought was a smile, showing his teeth. The two idiots chuckled loudly. Oscar glanced at me once more before heading back up the stone steps. The trapdoor creaked shut behind him.

"It's a shame Jack never lets us watch." The man with the gruff voice spoke, a taunting, spiteful edge to his voice, his eyes running over my body.

"Yeah, I think this one's going to fight back." He opened the flask and made a big performance out of spitting into it. He closed it and nudged it through the bars with his foot.

I wasn't going to drink that tea, anyway. I needed every little molecule of iron that my body had. But I was definitely going to kill these men. I hugged the image of their broken, empty bodies, while I tried to fight off the panic that was welling up inside me.

Jack was coming. Whatever that meant.

Angus

I saw the lights as I approached the building. There had been a six foot wall a few hundred yards back, but I'd vaulted easily over it, the iron tablets I'd taken earlier starting to kick in. I ran crouched over with the rifle gripped in my left hand. I paused about a hundred yards from the building and veered off to the right, running easily, dodging the occasional tree. I ran a loose perimeter, watching and listening for any guards or other signs of life. Nothing. A few minutes later I had chosen my base in a copse of trees, slightly higher than the surrounding grounds, where I would be able to ambush them. I stood dead still for a moment and built a mental picture of the terrain in my head. The main building, the one that looked like an old fashioned hospital, sat like a fat tick in the middle of a small hollow, four lit windows visible against the night, two upstairs, two downstairs, front door between them. It was flanked by an old stone barn on the right, and a smaller bungalow on the left. The bungalow was empty. The stone barn was not. There was no light showing through the windows of the barn, but I could smell them. Two men and Rebecca. I tried not to think of what was happening in there, although it was probably nothing right now. I could detect no fear or pain in Rebecca's mind. There was anger, though. Good girl. I concentrated on setting my rifle up on its tripod and centring the sights on the front door of that main building. I was going to massacre these bastards.

I had noticed a back door in the main building on my reconnaissance run. I would have to do something about that. I left the rifle standing in a small cluster of trees, and jogged around the back of the house. It took me forty seconds, two grenades and a roll of dark nylon fishing line to booby trap the back door. Any vampire trying to open this door would get a pretty explosive surprise. It might not kill them, but it would definitely alert me to their attempt to escape. And then I would kill them.

I was about to head back to where I had left the rifle, when I smelled the familiar stench of a blood addict vampire. The same one I'd smelled outside Rebecca's school. I saw him out of the corner of my eye heading away from the barn and towards the main building, and then I was running as fast as I could towards him. I didn't want him to smell me and

alert those animals inside. He turned a fraction of a second before I reached him, but his dry squawk was cut off when I grabbed his throat with my left hand. He tried to fight me off, but I was much stronger than he was. He hadn't had a blood meal in a few days, and it showed. It was almost too easy. I twisted his head around with my right hand until I heard it snap, and then I twisted it some more. Right up until his head became detached from the rest of his body.

I waited a few seconds until his blood had drained from his open neck and then I carried both head and corpse up to my clump of trees. I had been wondering what to do to create a diversion, and now I had my answer. I grinned.

I stood for a few more seconds surveying the terrain, and then I hurled that head over arm through one of the lit windows downstairs, the one on the left, and I sat down to wait.

I didn't have to wait long. A head peered around one of the curtains draped across that same window for a fraction of a second too long. I sighted down the scope of the rifle and squeezed the trigger. The face disappeared in a puff of blood and brain matter.

A silhouette appeared in the doorway. Two shots in quick succession, both in the face. The silhouette collapsed in a lifeless heap.

I'd spent some time during the trip here pondering about how to kill a vampire. I'd come to the conclusion that if I could shoot them in a critical region, like the head or the heart, then even if they could regenerate those areas, it would take them some time. I reckoned I'd be able to incapacitate most of them with gunshot wounds, and then finish them off properly before they had a chance to regenerate. An hour at least, maybe two. I placed a hand on the chest of the decapitated body lying next to me. It was cold, no heartbeat, no signs of life. *Result.*

There were no more heads to shoot at so I pulled the pin on my last grenade and lobbed it through one of the upstairs windows. The tinkling of broken glass was followed by a loud explosion. Still no heads to shoot at. I took the magazine out of the Heckler and Koch, and jammed it in one of my pockets. I didn't want one of those vampires finding the rifle where I had to leave it, and taking pot shots at me. I took the one of the Glocks out of my belt, and chambered the first of seventeen rounds. I had two spare magazines in my left pocket, just in case. I set off towards the main building at a gallop, dodging from left to right occasionally, just in case they decided to fire at me. I needn't have bothered.

I dived through the one of lit windows downstairs, ignoring the glass shards that fell in a shower around me and sliced through my skin. I rolled as I fell and came up shooting. A vampire stood frozen in shock in one of the corners of the room. I shot him in the face, and put another shot just above that one. He went down. Another two stood framed in the doorway that led out into the rest of the house. I shot the first in the head, but the second dived sideways. I scrambled after him, and put a bullet through his spine as he scuttled away. His legs crumpled, and I shot him twice in the head as I stepped over him. Six down, five to go.

There was a sudden explosion as the grenades at the back door went off. I hurried towards the sound, and found three vampires lying on the floor, still very much alive and writhing around. One had lost an arm in the blast. I shot him first, then put two rounds into each of the others' heads. They stopped moving. Six rounds left, two vampires.

I froze for a second, listening. There was an almost imperceptible squeak in the room above me as someone trod cautiously on ageing floorboards. I tilted my head, and waited. There it was again. I triangulated the likely origin of the sound and emptied the rest of the magazine in that direction. There was a muffled thud, but I was already racing up the

nearest staircase, ramming home a new magazine as I ran. I was up those stairs in two seconds, and in the room within one more. An emaciated vampire lay on the floor, his left leg curled unnaturally under his body as he hissed his defiance at me. Three rounds in the face and he was quiet. Right. One more. I stood still and listened. Nothing. I went downstairs and out the back door. And there it was. The scent of a frightened vampire moving at speed towards the thick woodland that lay to the north of the property. I couldn't even see him anymore. He was long gone. He must have legged it past those three casualties while I was shooting at a creaking floorboard. I knew I wouldn't have time to go after him.

I reached out to Rebecca's mind again. Still fairly calm, but something was worrying her. Nothing too urgent yet. I decided to deal with the vampires first.

I went through each of the rooms of the house and methodically twisted the heads off the necks of the vampires. It was a messy job, especially since I'd spent the last few minutes shooting dirty great holes in those heads. I put all ten heads in a couple of carrier bags I found in the kitchen, poured lighter fluid from under the sink over them and set them alight. Resurrect *that*.

Rebecca. I left the house via the back entrance, and crept towards the barn. The thoughts of the two men seemed serene enough. They were oblivious of the commotion that I had just caused. That meant that they were probably in a soundproofed room. I glanced through a grimy window. Nothing.

I skirted around the barn and ducked inside the vast doorway and stood for a second or two, letting my eyes adjust to the gloom. Deep breath. I could still smell Rebecca. I followed the scent until it disappeared suddenly in the middle of the barn. Strange. A few empty bags lay on the floor here, but they certainly didn't carry that scent. Where had it gone? I took another deep breath through my nose, and smelled vampire, two men, and my Rebecca. This had to be where she was. I could feel her mind.

I brushed the bags away, and that was when I spotted the thick iron ring set in a large solid wooden trapdoor. This was going to make things even more difficult. One entrance and one exit only. It would be all too easy for those men to shoot upwards at me as I stood framed in that open space. I would have to be supernaturally fast to get down there in one piece. I grinned in the darkness. Imagine that.

I reached out to Rebecca's mind fleetingly in a futile attempt to warn her, and then I grabbed the iron ring in one movement and flung the trapdoor open.

Rebecca

I was sitting on that wooden bench with my back against the wall, when out of the blue I felt this overwhelming need to *do* something. I stood up and crossed the floor of my cell, scooped up the flask in my right hand and hurled it at the man who had made such an issue of spitting in it. He lifted his hands in shock to fend off the unexpected missile, and suddenly the trapdoor squealed and crashed and then there was someone *else* in my dungeon. Shots were fired, two, one, two again, and then it was quiet.

Angus stood there, like an avenging angel, tall, beautiful, filled with rage and power. And covered in blood. He curled his lips in a smile as he saw me, and then he bent over and searched the nearest body, dragging a large key from a hip pocket. He stepped over the body, which was barely recognisable as that of the spitting man, and inserted the key in the huge iron lock in the door, and turned it. The door screeched open, and then suddenly there was another shot, and Angus' left leg folded under him, and he fell backwards onto the

conveniently situated body of spitting man. Gruff man lay to my right, his arm with the handgun clutched in its fist having fallen back to his side, a smug smile on his face.

Angus was still alive. He'd been shot in the thigh, but the way that that leg had crumpled meant that the bone was shattered. Not only would he be in severe pain, he would also not be able to walk for at least twelve hours. And Jack was coming.

I would need to help Angus out of here, carry him even, but he was so much bigger than me. I looked at the wounded body of gruff man, wanting to make him pay. And then I smelled the blood leaking from his wounds, and a primitive hunger overcame me. I let it, because it had given me an idea. I stepped towards him, removing the gun from his weakened fingers, just in case. His eyes rolled in panic as I grinned at him, savouring the moment. I kneeled over his damaged body, forced his head to the left with my left hand, exposing his neck. And then I bit him, my teeth slicing through layers of smoky skin and sinewy muscle, and down to that big artery with the name I always forgot. A hot torrent of fluid poured into my mouth and I drank it, slightly reluctantly at first, then thirstily, until the flow ceased. I stood up then, wiping my mouth with my sleeve. Gruff man was dead. Damn shame.

Angus had lifted himself on his elbows to see what I was doing. His expression was a mixture of awe and pain. I smiled at him, and felt the jolt of power as it slammed through me, almost knocking me off my feet. I fought to control my voice as I said, "Let's get you out of here."

I bent down over him, lifted his arms and somehow hauled him over my right shoulder. It was easier than I thought it would be, but my body still felt the weight of him. I turned slowly and stepped cautiously onto the first stone stair. I stood there, Angus' solid body draped over my shoulder, and flexed my muscles. Another jolt of power shot through me and I danced up those stairs as if I was carrying nothing. Angus groaned with pain. I lay him down on the floor of the barn, as gently as I could. "What must I do?" I asked through clenched teeth, my muscles jerking and twitching as new and extraordinary forces surged through them.

"Splint," suggested Angus, also through clenched teeth. I looked around the barn, noting the dusty implements with their conveniently wooden handles. It took me a few seconds to dismantle those tools, ripping them apart with frightening ease. I selected three potential splints from the mangled wreckage that lay before me, and turned back to Angus.

"Belts," he groaned and pointed down the stairs. I nodded, and leapt down, undoing the dead men's belts with twitching fingers, and jerking them out of their belt loops. I bounded back up those stairs, and fashioned a rude splint with those three wooden handles and two belts. That done, I looked at Angus' face. He nodded, and smiled slightly.

"Better," he sighed.

I grasped his arms again and pulled him back up and over my shoulder. It was easier this time. I was learning to ride the power, to harness it. It was mind-blowing.

"Where to?" my voice sounded peculiar, like thousands of insects were all buzzing together in the background.

Angus pointed, and I started loping across the gardens and into the grounds around it. "Stop," he barked out. I stopped, thinking I was hurting him beyond even his endurance, but he pointed to what looked like a scrawny metallic beast in a clump of trees to my right. "Get the rifle."

"Right." I trotted over to it, and handed it to Angus, who disassembled it in seconds, folding the tripod into a manageable tube. He clutched the rifle, and pointed again. "Go."

I ran, dodging smoothly through the trees and bushes that were scattered haphazardly around the grounds, the grassy surface blurring beneath my feet. A six foot brick wall loomed ahead of us. I considered how to get over it with Angus still on my shoulder. It didn't seem possible. I gave it an experimental kick, and a jagged crack appeared in the brick work. I kicked it again, feeling the force of the bricks and mortar resisting my assault. Another kick, and a four foot long segment of the wall crumbled outwards. I grinned, skipped through the gap and set out again in the direction of Angus' finger again.

We reached the car in what felt like seconds. Angus unlocked it remotely with the keychain, and I opened the passenger door and slid him gently off my shoulder and onto the seat. I lifted his splinted leg and placed it carefully next to the other. It had already stopped bleeding. The rifle went in the boot, and I danced around to the driver's door and hopped in.

Angus grinned at me. "Can you drive, love?" That simple endearment sent another, very different shock through me, and I grinned back.

"Let's hope so."

Angus closed his eyes and groaned loudly. "I like this car!" he protested.

"Never mind, I've had two lessons." My voice wasn't buzzing quite so much now, and the electrical current that had seemed to be coursing through my body for the past few minutes was sputtering slightly.

I started the car, found first gear, and pulled away carefully. I was definitely coming down from my high now. Muscles and bones ached, and I worried now that we would be pulled over by the police or something. I would hate to have to try to explain the arsenal in the boot. I drove cautiously at first, then a bit faster. Angus closed his eyes and lay back against the headrest. I found my gaze drifting constantly to look at his perfect face.

"Watch the road." His eyes remained closed, but his voice was amused, and a faint smile curled his lips.

We drove the rest of the way in silence, and arrived back at where the satnav had started out in just over an hour. As we drew up outside the house, the front door opened and light spilled out onto the pebbled drive. Mark stood silhouetted in the doorway, his face tired and drawn. I turned off the engine, and got out.

"Rebecca!" He sounded disbelieving, and then ecstatic.

I burst into tears of relief. He ran down the steps towards me. "Are you alright? Where's Angus?" He looked suddenly worried.

"I'm fine, Mark, but Angus has been shot. We need to get him inside."

Together we helped Angus hobble through the front door, and into one of the armchairs. His leg had already lost that rubbery look, but it obviously hurt him to put any weight on it. He subsided gratefully into one of the cracked leather armchairs by the fire.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" Mark was looking at me, horrified.

I glanced down at myself, seeing the blood caked all over my school uniform for the first time. "It's not my blood," I said. I didn't think he needed to know exactly how it got there, so I didn't elaborate. Angus was leaning back in the chair again, eyes closed, smirking slightly.

All at once I felt drained, exhausted, and I stumbled to the other chair and almost fell into it. Angus opened his eyes, and looked over at me. The fire blazing in the grate lit his eyes eerily. "Go sleep," he told me. "This tiredness is normal for what you've been through tonight. There are showers and beds upstairs." That sounded like a hint to me.

He looked at Mark. "You too, my friend."

“What about you, Angus?” Mark wanted to know. I yawned.

“My brothers will be here shortly. I need to speak to them. They can carry me up to bed afterwards. Go!” It was an order. We went.

I showered quickly, jerking awake a couple of times under the hot darts of water, not even aware that I had been falling asleep. I stumbled into the closest room and dug an oversized t-shirt and some boxer shorts out of a chest of drawers. I pulled them on and fell into the bed, asleep before my head touched the pillow.

Angus

Marcus and Fergus arrived at eleven thirty that night. I heard the purring of the great engine pulling up outside and I smiled. Those two liked to travel in style.

They strolled casually through the front door, Fergus first as dictated by his fidgety nature. They stood just inside the threshold and sniffed the air cautiously. Fergus spotted me in the armchair and crossed the room to where I sat, taking in the hole in my jeans and the makeshift splint.

“You’ve been busy tonight.” It was a statement, not a question.

“One got away. You’ll be pleased to know that decapitation seems to do the trick, Marcus. I set fire to the heads as an added precaution, though.” Marcus shuddered slightly.

“Rebecca’s OK.” Another statement, this time from Marcus.

“She had her first taste of human blood tonight.” Two sets of raised eyebrows. “I was shot in the femur, and she knew she would have to carry me out of there. She drank a dying man’s blood to save me.”

They exchanged a speaking glance and nodded. “Bath first, then bed,” said Fergus. They carried me carefully upstairs, helped undress me, ran a hot bath, and gently lowered me into it. They left me while I sponged the vampire stink from my skin, and soaped away the blood. My thigh was already straight, and felt firm enough, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to put any weight on it for at least eight hours. I had broken bones before.

My brothers returned within minutes and extricated me from my tub. They propped me upright as I towelled myself dry, and then carried me to one of the spare bedrooms and lay me on the bed, covering me with cool sheets.

“Goodnight, brother,” Fergus grinned at me, then turned to Marcus. “Let’s go clean up.” Marcus rubbed his hands.

“Yes, let’s,” he agreed, and then they were gone.

CHAPTER 8

Mark

I woke up worrying about the kitten. And then about Mum and Joe, and how worried they must be. I should have phoned them last night as soon as Rebecca and I had got Angus in the house. I thought about Angus and Rebecca and how they had looked last night, all covered in blood and shot up, and then I started worrying about them too. After a while I got fed up with all the worrying and decided to go downstairs and find two things; something to eat, and someone to explain exactly what had happened last night. And a phone so I could tell Mum we were all OK. Three things, then.

I was rooting around in the kitchen cupboards and the fridge, and had located bacon and eggs and bread, and was just about to start frying it all up in a monstrous black skillet type thing I'd found, when someone said, "You must be Mark." I seriously have no idea how I managed not to drop that thing on my foot.

I turned and said in a quivering voice, "You gave me a fright." I hadn't heard any sounds of someone approaching at all. Creepy.

"My apologies," said a tall man with silvery blonde hair and blue eyes. I recognised the resemblance immediately. He had the same features as Angus, but his colouring was different, obviously, and so was his expression. This man looked like curiosity would look if it had a human face.

"No problem. You must be Angus' brother."

"Yes. My name is Marcus."

"Aah, the clever one." Marcus smiled with his eyes, same as his brother. He seemed pleased that I knew who he was.

"Better not let Fergus hear you say that," he warned, his lips twitching.

I grinned back. "I was just about to make breakfast," I said, lifting the skillet onto the stove.

"Go ahead. Fergus and I have already eaten."

"D'you think I should make something for..." I pointed upstairs as I spoke. Marcus shook his head. "They are going to need a few more hours sleep. I actually wanted to tell you that Fergus and I spoke to your mother late last night, and we told her that we had happened upon a white van that had been ditched by the side of the road, and had rescued your sister. She had been in too much shock to give us any details until very late last night, so we hadn't been able to contact her family until then.

"You, in the meanwhile had gone off with Angus to look for her, and you will be arriving here in about twenty minutes. We phoned you a bit earlier than your mother because Rebecca remembered that you were there when they took her, and wanted you to know that she was OK first."

My eyebrows climbed up my forehead.

"I know. It's the best we could come up with now. Rebecca doesn't want the police involved at all, and she's not saying why. She wasn't hurt, by the way, she's just a bit shaken up. You wanted to get here to verify our story and see your sister before you phoned your mother."

"OK. D'you think she'll buy it?"

"She has to."

"Yeah. Is Angus OK?"

"He is. He should be up and about in a few hours."

"Thanks."

Marcus nodded, and turned and left as silently as he had arrived. I fried bacon and eggs, and made a fat sandwich while I waited for the twenty minutes to elapse until I could phone my mother. I dialled her number a few minutes early, anyway. I was still licking bacon fat from my fingers. I would have to talk to her about the vegetarian thing. Eventually.

"Hello?" anxiety laced her voice, but there was hope also.

"Hi Mum, it's Mark."

"Mark!" the word gushed from her. "Are you with Rebecca?"

"Yes. She's fine, just shaken up and exhausted." All truth so far.

She said nothing for a second or two, and then, "Oh, thank God!" and she started sobbing uncontrollably. I said nothing, and let her cry for a minute or so.

"Mark, is it true that she doesn't want the police involved?"

"Yes." Truth. "The guys who took her had the wrong girl, so they let her go, but said if she described them to the police, or told them anything about them, they'd come back for her." All lies. Oh, well.

"Oh Mark! Poor baby. She must be terrified. But that's not right. The police are involved already. They were the ones who informed me what had happened." I heard the reproach in her voice, and felt guilty.

"I know Mum, but she starts crying if we even mention the police. I think it would be best to leave it. She can answer some of their questions when she gets back, but I can tell you now that she won't tell them much

Mum appeared to accept this. I was pleased. I made that one up myself. Slick.

"Where are you?" She sounded more composed now.

"Aberdeenshire. As soon as Rebecca is awake we will get Angus to drive her back."

"Angus. How did he get involved?"

"He was the only person I could think of to help. I couldn't stand about waiting for the police when so many other people saw what happened and could answer their questions as well as I could. Probably better. I couldn't even identify the make of the damn van."

"Well, he seems like a very nice man."

"He is." For a vampire.

"OK, baby. I'll see you later. Get Rebecca to give me a call when she wakes up."

"I will, Mum."

"Love you."

"I love you too."

As I hung up, I was profoundly grateful that she had taken it so well. Then I remembered the kitten, and I phoned her back, and asked her to go across to Angus' place and check that it was OK, and give it some food and fresh water. She laughed, a lot more cheerful now, and promised to go across right away. I tried to remember if Angus had locked his house; I didn't think so. Why would he. He probably *wished* someone would try to break in.

Rebecca

I woke up with sunlight streaming through the windows. Bleak wintry sunlight, sure, but it was definitely sunlight. The events of the previous day came flooding into my mind. Angus! I needed to see him, to make sure that he was OK. I stood up and stumbled on uncertain legs through the doorway of my bedroom, and into the passage beyond. Everything looked strangely unfamiliar in the daylight. I felt disorientated, and dizzy. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply until the giddiness subsided. I turned to my right and made my way along the passage. There were two more bedrooms and a bathroom, and then another bedroom. And there was Angus.

He was lying on his back, his eyes closed, his face relaxed and peaceful. My breath caught in my throat as I stood and watched him. He was so beautiful. I suddenly felt an almost visceral need to touch him. I crossed the room and stood next to his bed, leaning over his sleeping form. And then he was awake, smiling up at me, his eyes watching my face hungrily. I smiled back. He groaned and his arm snaked out and wrapped around me and

pulled me down on top of him. I giggled, and stretched out next to him, my head on his chest, my eyes closed, inhaling his delicious scent.

"You're in deep trouble, you know," his voice was husky.

"Why?" I lifted my head to look at his face.

"Your brother's on his way up. And you're half naked in bed with some man."

"I've got clothes on!"

"Not enough," he growled.

Just then Mark burst through the door.

"Aargh! Get a room!" He didn't look disgusted, though. He was laughing. "Come on you two, get up already. We're waiting for you downstairs. There are a few things we need to discuss urgently, plus Bex has to phone Mum."

"Mum! Oh, God, she must be going crazy!" All my happiness dissolved, just like that. I felt immensely guilty for forgetting about my mother in all of the relief of being alive and well and with Angus.

"It's OK, Sis, I spoke to her earlier. Marcus and Fergus phoned her before that, and gave her a bit of a cover story. I'll explain on the way down," he added pointedly, and indicated the antique wardrobe that stood against one wall of the bedroom. "Put some clothes on, please."

"I've got clothes on!" I said again.

"Yeah," he muttered, unconvinced. "Put more on." He turned and went to stand outside the door while I reluctantly stood up and went to look through the wardrobe. Angus stayed in bed.

"Can I wear some of these, do you think?" I asked him, surveying the collection of jeans and shirts and wondering how I was ever going to fit into them.

"Yes."

"Don't look, then."

"I may have to." He was smiling at me again.

"Right, then, I'm changing in the bathroom," I said, selecting a few items from the crowded rack, and dragged a leather belt from a shelf.

"It's probably safer," he agreed. I grinned at him and skipped out of the room, past Mark and into the bathroom. I dressed as best I could in those clothes, cinching the jeans around my waist with the belt, and rolling the cuffs up. I washed my face and brushed my teeth using a disposable toothbrush I found in the mirrored cabinet above the basin. Mark was waiting for me as I stepped out of the bathroom, and he explained what Mum had been told so far, as we walked together down the stairs and into the kitchen. It all sounded very plausible.

Marcus and Fergus were already sitting patiently at the large oak table that took up most of one half of the sizeable kitchen. They were drinking coffee, and discussing samples; of what, I wasn't sure. They looked up as we entered the kitchen, and smiled.

I was struck by their obvious resemblance to Angus, and then by the even more noticeable differences. They were very good-looking, beautiful, even, but in a different way to Angus. They looked tamer somehow, more refined. More civilised.

I smiled back, slightly nervous and said, "I need to phone my mother."

"Yes," said one, and they turned instead to Mark who rolled his eyes, and said, "You were right, she was in his bedroom." I felt my face blushing furiously as I looked in vain for a phone.

Mark grinned at me. "Through there," he said smugly, indicating a doorway that led out into a small hallway. I escaped from the room and spent five minutes talking to Mum, and reassuring her that I was unhurt. Just shaken up. And, no, I definitely did not want the police involved any more. Satisfied at last, she told me that she was off to work for a few hours now, and she would see me later that evening when I got home. I hung up, immensely pleased that she was taking this so well. My mother was a strange combination of bewildered nervousness over a titanium core. We'd all underestimated her.

Angus

I'd been dreaming about twisting heads off and then I was suddenly awake and Rebecca was leaning over me. I couldn't resist, and when she stretched her warm body out next to me, it was rapture and agony for me. Then her brother interrupted us *again*. Next thing she was standing by my old wardrobe in Fergus' t-shirt and boxer shorts looking for something to wear, heartbreakingly lovely. I would never see boxer shorts in quite the same way again.

I closed my eyes as my body remembered the feel of her after she left. Hmmm. I wrenched my thoughts away from her, and stood up to get dressed. My leg was completely healed and painless, the skin smooth and unscarred where the bullet had torn through it last night. I dressed quickly, brushed my teeth, and went downstairs to join the others at the kitchen table just as Rebecca was saying goodbye to her mother on the phone.

"Coffee?" Mark grinned at me.

"Please."

"I'd love some," Rebecca said as she came back into the kitchen, her expression relieved and happy. "Mum's OK."

"Yeah, she's a tough old bird. Who knew?" Mark interjected as he handed out five cups of steaming coffee. We all sat and sipped our coffee in silence, until Marcus spoke.

"Right. We need to examine the evidence now, so that we can try to understand what happened last night, and why it happened. To do this we will need to correlate all our data. I suggest we begin with Rebecca."

"He always talks like that," smirked Fergus. Rebecca nodded, hiding a smile behind a curtain of silvery blonde hair.

"I guess that means I should tell you what happened to me yesterday."

"Yes," said Marcus expectantly.

"OK." She paused for a few seconds, then started again. "Yesterday morning I was abducted by three guys in a white van. They tied me up and put a pillowcase over my head, and then they left me alone for a while."

I gritted my teeth. Listening to this was going to be harder than I had thought.

"Then the freaky one, whose name was Oscar, started speaking to someone called Jack on a mobile phone, saying he had a present for him. I got the impression that the present was me. He said something about a breeding female, and that he knew I was one of them because he'd seen a video of me wanting to lick blood off my hands that some idiot had posted on Youtube." She grimaced. "He took the pillowcase off my head and took a photo of me with the mobile, and I think he sent it to this Jack person."

"They drove for hours, and then they stopped at this place that looked like an institution of some sort. One of the other men picked me up and carried me to a kind of

dungeon under an old stone barn. I peed all over him.” She smiled at the memory, completely unrepentant. Mark giggled, and said, “Cool!”

“The two normal looking guys locked me in a cell, then untied me and stood guard over me. They made all these suggestive comments about what Jack was going to do when he got there. I wanted to kill them.”

“Then I threw a flask of tea at one of them and Angus was suddenly there. He shot them.” She smiled grimly. “Angus found the key, unlocked the door and let me out. Then the man with the gruff voice shot him through the leg. I could see it was broken by the way it bent when he fell. I was mad at the man who shot him, and I knew I would have to get Angus out of there. So I bit him, and drank his blood, and carried Angus back to the car. I even kicked down a wall.”

“Awesome!” Mark breathed. “So that’s why you were covered in blood.”

“Yes,” Rebecca smiled gratefully at him, clearly relieved at his reaction.

“Interesting,” said Marcus. “Youtube, you say. We wondered how they’d found you.” He turned to Mark. “Your turn, please.”

Mark looked puzzled. “I didn’t do much of anything really. I saw Rebecca being abducted, called the police, and then thought of Angus. I showed him where they’d taken her and then refused to get out of the car, which is why I’m here now.” He said it as if he was having the time of his life. I was starting to have my suspicions about Mark; he was fourteen and apparently fearless; he probably *was* having the time of his life.

Fergus glanced at me before he spoke to Mark. “I think you did a lot more than you will ever realise, young man.” I nodded my agreement.

Marcus was impatient. “Now you, Angus.”

“Mark told you how he came to get me. Well, when I smelled that vampire, I suspected that we had an old style coven somewhere. He smelled wrong,” I explained, “like he drank only blood and his body was slowly crumbling because of it. We started driving north, because vampires like the cold, and it’s more isolated up here. I contacted Fergus and gave him a few things to search for, and he eventually found them. He also got me a couple of handguns and an exceptional sniper rifle.” I smiled my thanks at Fergus.

“I found the place, and managed to kill ten of the eleven vampires living there. One got away.” I left out the gory details. “I found where they were keeping Rebecca, and shot those two men. I should have delivered a head shot to each of them, but I was distracted.” I smiled as I said it. Rebecca blushed.

“She splinted my leg, and carried me about two and a half miles, running most of the way.”

“Wow,” said Mark.

“Wow,” I agreed. “She drove me home. My car still works, too.” Mark gave a shout of laughter at that, and Rebecca scowled at me. God, she was beautiful.

“Excellent,” said Marcus. “Well, when we got there, the place looked like a bomb had hit it. I assume one had?” he looked at me.

“I had a few grenades in a drawer at home. I rigged up the back door to explode when opened.”

“Yes, and so it did. Fergus and I tidied up as best we could, wiping away prints and tracks and suchlike, and placing the heads near the bodies in assorted rooms of the house. I took some samples,” he smiled, clearly pleased about that. “Then we burned the place down, barn and bungalow too. And we found the van and abandoned it along some country road, as per our story...”

"We found some papers in the bungalow, innocuous looking receipts and a few handwritten notes. I'm going to have to take them back to Russia to analyse them." Fergus sounded a bit worried about something.

"And my samples are degrading as we speak, too. We have to leave in about an hour to go back." Marcus had a mildly fanatical light in his eyes again. "But first we need to sort out a few matters." He took a deep breath before he continued, and he looked at Angus through narrowed eyes.

"Rebecca turns eighteen in eleven days, correct?" She nodded. "You two," indicating Rebecca and me, "are going to get married then. Fergus will organise the whole thing, of course." Fergus nodded his agreement. "Something small and tasteful, I think. Then you will live in Angus' new house until you have finished school." He looked at Rebecca, who was by now staring open-mouthed at him. "I assume you do wish to finish? You are almost done with your A levels, and you appear to have done quite well so far."

"Er, yes, I was planning on finishing," she said uncertainly, and cast a dazed look at me.

"They do this to me all the time," I said wryly.

"Hush Angus, you know that it needs to be done. This Jack is likely to try and abduct her again. Vampires are likely to be old-fashioned, and he may think twice if she is married. And it will also give you the full authority to protect her." He smiled grimly. "When she is finished school, I would suggest that you relocate to make it more difficult to find her. We believe that your entire family should be relocated too, to protect them. Where you decide to move is up to you, of course. Money is not an issue."

Mark was grinning widely now. The time of his life. I chuckled softly.

Marcus turned to him now. "When you get home there will be a package waiting for you. It will contain a laptop and an iPhone. We will text you our contact details. We want to know if anything happens to these two." Mark nodded eagerly.

"One last thing before we go." Marcus stood up and went out for a few seconds, returning with a stainless steel lockable briefcase. He adjusted the combination locks and it sprang open, revealing an astonishing array of sample bottles and tubes.

"I will need a sample of blood from all of you now, and some cells from the inside of your mouth." He smiled avuncularly.

"Like on CSI?" Mark again. "Me too? Why? I'm not an iron metaboliser."

"Indeed. But you could be carrying the recessive gene. I would like to try and isolate it."

"OK," he said and obligingly held his arm out. Marcus took his samples from all of us. Rebecca said nothing throughout, but stared fascinated as her blood flooded the tubes in Marcus' hand. Eventually Marcus' briefcase snapped shut, and he and Fergus loaded up the luxury hire car. Mark groaned when Marcus removed his samples from a shelf in the fridge.

"Oh, man, my bacon was in there with bits of dead vampire!"

Fergus grinned at him. "Welcome to my world," he said dryly.

They were soon ready to go; Marcus was driving because Fergus tended to get distracted. "We will see you again in ten days time," he said as they waved goodbye, and then they were gone.

Mark

What a weird morning. I have to say, I liked Angus' brothers; Fergus with his nervous energy and quirky sense of humour, and Marcus with his out of date formality and burning curiosity. So when they told Angus and Rebecca that they had to get married in eleven days

time, I was worried that Angus was going to attack them or something. But he just sat there and smiled, while Rebecca looked kinda shocked, but she didn't say anything either. Nothing. Not even while we loaded up Angus' car, or when we were driving away from the old stone house that Angus and his brothers had grown up in.

That was a bit of a nerve-racking ride for me. I kept thinking about the guns in the boot, and the bullet proof vest with a squished bullet in it that one of the kidnappers had managed to shoot at Angus. Every time I saw a police car I almost had a heart attack. I kept watching the speedometer, and reminding Angus when he went over seventy. You'd have thought that he would have been irritated, but he just laughed, and he even slowed down. Amazing.

Rebecca sat up front in the passenger seat and stared out of the window. After a while Angus reached out and put his hand over hers. She turned to him and smiled, but she still said nothing. I got fed up with all this silence after about an hour, and I asked Angus to put the radio on, which he did. I leaned back, closed my eyes and fell asleep.

Rebecca

When Marcus told us that we had to get married in eleven days time, and Angus made no objections, I was speechless. I felt an enormous guilt settle on my shoulders, that he should be forced to get married to save me from Jack's evil intentions. But I was also secretly thrilled at the idea, and then I felt even more guilty for being so pleased about it. I was afraid to speak to him in case he told me that he'd changed his mind about it, and that he'd thought of an alternative plan to foil Jack. How dumb can you be.

When Angus put his big, warm hand over mine, I wanted to cry, but I smiled at him instead, grateful for the support. I had such a lot to be grateful to this beautiful man for.

When Mark finally fell asleep, Angus turned the radio down slightly so the snores from the back could be more clearly heard. Then he spoke without taking his eyes off the road.

"We don't have to get married if you don't want to."

Oh, God, I thought. This is it. This is where he backs out of it. I was terrified and furious at the same time, mostly at myself for being such a coward. I kept quiet, and felt a tear stealing its way from the corner of one of my eyes.

He spoke again. "I don't want you to be forced into doing something you don't want to do." He glanced at me. I tried to stare out of the window so he wouldn't see me crying, but somehow he knew anyway, and he reached out and wiped the tear from my cheek.

"I didn't object when Marcus suggested it," his voice was husky now, "because there is nothing I want more than to be your husband, but if you..." His voice trailed off. It took me a few seconds to comprehend exactly what he was telling me.

"Really?" I looked at him, and he was smiling at me again, but there was a hint of sadness in his eyes, as if he was expecting *me* to back out.

"No," I said, tears running down my cheeks in earnest now. So this was what it was like to cry with relief and happiness. Bizarre.

"What do you mean, no?" A puzzled frown creased his handsome brow.

"No, I don't want to not marry you! I mean, I do want to marry you!" I was confusing myself now.

"Really?" he looked surprised and delighted. "So why are you crying?"

“Because I’m so happy!” Now I was really starting to sound like a halfwit. Angus didn’t seem to mind, though, and he reached out and gently cupped my cheek in one of his hands, and wiped away my tears with his thumb.

“Watch the road,” I said, smiling like an idiot now. Angus let out a bark of laughter, and the snoring in the back suddenly stopped.

“What?” said Mark sleepily.

“Nothing,” I told him. “Go back to sleep.”

“Well, I would if you would stop making so much noise,” he grumbled. “I can’t hear the radio.”

I shook my head disapprovingly, and Angus grinned and turned the radio up.

Angus

We arrived home just before six in the evening. Rebecca’s mother was already home and eagerly awaiting us. As soon as the car drew up outside her house, she was out of the front door and pulling the passenger door open. Rebecca climbed out stiffly and was immediately enveloped in a huge hug. Even Joe looked pleased to see her. He had followed his mother out of the house and stood waiting in the dim light cast by the open doorway. I wondered what he was thinking, but I didn’t reach into his mind. I had decided last night that the minds of this family would remain off limits to me, the same way that my brothers’ thoughts were. It was like being able to see people naked; just because you *can*, doesn’t mean you *should*. Unless there was an emergency, of course. I thought about Jack, and wondered if he was out there right now, planning his revenge.

We were all ushered into the warm sitting room, and plied with coffee and tea. The white kitten appeared out of nowhere and launched itself onto Mark’s lap, purring like a Harley Davidson. I pretended to look disapproving.

“Little traitor. I think you’d better keep her, Mark. She’s obviously infatuated with you.” Mark’s face lit up. “Brilliant! So I can name her what I want to now?”

“No!” interjected Rebecca. “He wanted to call her Quark, Mum.”

“What, like the noise a duck makes?” Joe looked puzzled.

“No!” Mark was impatient. “Subatomic particle, oh daft one.”

“Oh, physics,” Joe said dismissively. “Still sounds like a duck.”

“Yeah, I guess it does. What about Soft White?”

“Like the bread?” Joe was eyeing his younger brother with perplexity. “What’s wrong with you?”

This was clearly a conversation that was not going to reach any sort of satisfactory conclusion soon. I looked around the room at Rebecca and her mother cuddled together in one corner of the sofa, Mark and Joe sitting at the other end, and I smiled to myself. You’d never say that this family had been brutally ripped apart only yesterday. I knew that they would want to talk about the whole thing later, but for now they seemed satisfied just to be together.

I thought about all the firearms in the boot of my car, and stood up reluctantly to leave. I had a few things that needed sorting out tonight, starting with a gun safe. I wasn’t going to disarm myself now. Not when Rebecca and her family were so vulnerable. I would need Fergus to acquire some top of the range surveillance equipment, and a few dozen unobtrusive tracking devices. I wasn’t going to risk not being able to find my girl again. I

smiled at her as she and her mother stood up to say goodnight. She was tired but radiant. I thought about eleven days time and my heart leapt.

"Thank you for rescuing my daughter," Rebecca's mother said.

I nodded. "No problem at all, Mrs Harding. Would you mind if I had a word with Rebecca before I left?"

"Of course."

Rebecca blushed as I took her warm hand and led her outside. The feel of her hand in mine was so right, so real, that I was reluctant to let it go.

"I will fetch you tomorrow and take you to school." I'd been thinking about this business of her staying to finish her A levels. We might need to rethink that decision at some stage. I would speak to Fergus and Marcus when they arrived for the wedding. I smiled. "I will also be fetching you and taking you until you finish your schooling. I will have a study set up in the spare bedroom of the house, and you can work there in the afternoons until your family are all home in the evenings."

"OK." She nodded.

"We will need to go shopping tomorrow afternoon." She looked up at me, her eyebrows raised in surprise. "You need a ring," I explained. She blushed a fiery red in the gloom.

"You will probably also have to invite me over for supper tomorrow night so we can tell your family about us getting married," I continued.

"OK," she said again, and then smiled shyly up at me. God, she was lovely. I wanted to stay there the whole night, her hand in mine, but I had to go. She needed to get back inside to her waiting family, and I needed to empty that boot, and go back to my empty house. I had been so used to being alone that I'd never realised what loneliness is. I would miss her for those few hours before the morning.

"Goodnight, my Rebecca." I held her chin and kissed her all too briefly on the lips. Then I released that little hand, and turned and walked across the road.

Jack

The vampire called Jack surveyed the burnt out ruins of his home. One of his homes, he corrected himself, smiling grimly. His face was angular, with a cruel set to his features, and his smile did nothing to ameliorate the effect. He had arrived the night before, summoned by that idiot Oscar. The fact that Oscar was his son did nothing to change his disapproval of him. Most of the vampires here were his sons, one way or another.

He had found the bodies last night, lying scattered throughout the house, headless and lifeless. It was as if someone had known that this would be the only reliable way to kill vampires. And when he'd found Oscar's headless corpse, and smelled the scent of the male vampire who had knelt there and ambushed his coven, he had a pretty good idea of what had happened. He had tracked the sole survivor of the massacre to another of his bases two hundred miles to the west, and had extracted the story from him. The pathetic creature had been remarkably reluctant to reveal what had happened, especially his own cowardly actions, so he'd had to torture him for a while, something which he always enjoyed doing. He smiled again at the thought, this time revealing sharp, yellowed teeth. Who knows, he might even survive. Unfortunately, when he'd finally got back, someone had set fire to the complex, destroying most of the evidence. But he already knew what had happened.

Oscar had brought this catastrophe upon them when he had kidnapped the girl. She had not been alone and helpless as so many others before her; she had even drank the blood of that idiot Mercer and carried her vampire rescuer to the car, and to safety. Jack was impressed. Furious and enraged, but impressed nonetheless. He would have to proceed cautiously now, but proceed he would. He wanted that girl. She would breed strong minded, powerful vampires, and he would enjoy taming her. And if he managed to destroy the male vampire who had so decimated his personal army, then so much the better.

Jack glanced again at the photograph that Oscar had sent to his mobile phone. The girl was scowling at the camera, her hair dishevelled, but she was still very attractive. He smiled hungrily.

He would need to gather some resources before he tried again to take her. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. He was looking forward to it.

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