

Strange Tales

Weird Partnerships

Chapter One

PI Victoria Handle was balancing her bag of groceries awkwardly on a hip a block away from her office/home while trying to locate her keys in her fanny pack when she noticed a dark figure was creeping up her stairs. Once her fingers snagged the key ring and a better grip on the bag was made, she focused her attention on her visitor. Curious, she studied his actions as she neared her stoop, not worried about any danger to herself.

A hand came out of the dark clothing and hovered over the doorknob as if reluctant to touch it. It must be one of those people afraid of germs, she thought. Feeling rather sorry for the fellow and not wanting to lose a prospective customer she decided to give some assistance.

"Hey, bud, you looking for someone?" She stood at the bottom of the steps looking at the stooped figure.

It was downright scary when in a blink of an eye the stooped figure straightened up and turned to her, looming over her. If she had a weapon she would have pulled it out. Uneasily, she laughed at herself. With all the amulets and protection spells around her house, nothing could harm her or if dangerous, approach, much less climb her stairs. Her charms and spells saved her house from the tornado. Didn't they?

You're darn right, she thought.

"I'm looking for Victoria Handle," said a youthful voice.

Not what she was expecting.

"You found her. Give me a moment and I'll unlock my office."

Vic scooted by him and unlocked the door. His face was pale as if he didn't spend much time outdoors. He probably spent a lot of time in front of a computer, she thought. It was annoying he didn't move out of the way or even have the decency to offer to hold her bag of groceries. But then, if he were mysophobic...

Once the door was opened, she stepped in and turned to wave him to a nice comfortable couch for her visitors.

He was gone.

She glanced around the front room and admitted while Allie was away, the place tended to get dusty but certainly not dirty; she wasn't the housekeeper type, but she didn't spend much time in her office to dirty it.

Depositing the bag on the counter she went back out to see where her potential customer was. Nowhere could she see the figure. Not even a car. There were a lot of advantages to being the only building in a cleared section of town, one being you had a panoramic view of landscape for miles, and another is she didn't have to worry about noise from her neighbors. Maybe she needed to renew her spells and strengthen her amulets. Disappearing customers could mean trouble.

Closing the front door, she went to the bedroom door and let Night Owl out. He did furniture damage if not chaperoned, especially if he was high on catnip.

"I brought you something from Ruthie, NO." She pulled out the fabric mouse stuffed with catnip and tossed it high into the air. Night Owl leaped and batted it into a corner, where he caught it on a claw. His scampering and sliding across the wooden floor after the catnip bag would go on for the rest of the morning with some breaks for napping. She liked watching his acrobatic leaps and humanly impossible twists in the air.

While coffee dripped into her cup Vic listened to her voice messages. She took notes and numbers and called customers who had not paid and customers who wanted updates. Victoria Handle was a PI that got results. Not everyone liked her results and though they still paid, the energy of unhappy customers was the same as happy ones that didn't pay.

A cloud covered the sun's light that had been pouring through the window and for a moment it reminded her of her dream. It was irritating that she couldn't remember details when there was something important that transpired and her only feeling of it was just that – a feeling that the dream was important.

Another hour was spent on the Internet getting satellite views of where her next surveillance would take her. She wanted to know back alleys, dead ends, any backyards that someone could escape from her or sneak up on her. That was done and her coffee cup emptied, it was time to do field work. In her fanny pack she tucked a few candy bars and her iPod, just in case it was going to be a long stakeout.

Vic located Night Owl, napping on his elaborate cat pole in the bedroom. The toy was damp from his licking but still holding up. It hung by a claw trapped between his paw and the pole.

"Stay safe, NO." She closed the bedroom door and gave the front room a glance and decided it was neat enough. Allie would be back later that day so she could see if it really needed cleaning.

"Oh, my visitor."

Allie would be upset with her if she didn't mention who had visited and if she got any hang up calls. The dark visitor was like a hang up call. After writing a brief description she headed out. Her car was parked five blocks away. Odd that, but when you had the only building standing in a tornado swept area, having a car parked next to it was just not right. If you pressed her for why, she would have been evasive. It just wasn't right.

As expected, her car was waiting for her without any tickets and without any missing parts, like tires and rims. Vic unlocked the driver's side and slid in. She tossed two folders of her clients on the seat next to her.

"Hey, watch where you're tossing things," Moore said indignantly.

Vic glanced at the apparition that shimmered into solidity. "You know I put my things on the passenger seat," she said. "Besides, you're not real. What brings you here?"

When Moore showed up it was because something was going to happen. Did it have to do with her dream?

"That visitor you had earlier."

"The mysophobic black suited guy? He took one look at my place and disappeared." She snickered at the idea of dust scaring someone off.

"He got a feel for your place and left," Moore said. "I'll give him credit for making it to your porch."

"That was someone I should be worried about?" Vic touched her bag of protection stones in her pocket and then her bag of herbs in her fanny pack for assurance. She didn't get a feeling of danger from the visitor. Her security around the house was working well just like when the tornado hit.

"That was just the hound. You should be careful not to do something to warrant a personal visit from his master." Moore's voice was too casual for this to be a minor warning.

"Moore, why am I getting a visit? And from who? Can't you just tell me that?" She should be grateful to Moore just for showing up, alerting her that something was about to happen, but she wasn't. She wanted more. Names, places and a time the visit would take place.

"It would take the mystery out of it." Moore sounded amused.

Vic glanced at her passenger. He was gone. Well, that part was good. When she went into the city people didn't feel comfortable seeing people who talked to themselves, which reminded her. She reached into her fanny pack and pulled out her Bluetooth ear bud. Talking to spirits without people thinking you were strange was easier with today's wireless connections.

While waiting for the light to change her thoughts turned to Moore, the harbinger of change. An agent of fates, if you believed in that. A dark shadow fell over her sight momentarily which lifted when the car behind her honked. She needed to focus on the present to avoid mistakes and not do things that were going to happen whether she knew about them or not.

Her cell buzzed.

"Victoria Han..."

"What's taking you?" the voice interrupted. *"I've been waiting here for an hour now."*

It was Ernesto, her first customer stop of the day. This shouldn't take more than thirty minutes, she thought.

"The appointment is 10:30AM and it's 10:15AM," Vic answered. "I'm a few blocks away. You're late with my fee, which I'm only taking cash from you. Your check bounced."

"Just get here!" and he hung up.

"If this wasn't such an interesting case, I would stop working for you until you pay me," she said to the disconnected caller. She snapped her cell shut.

Vic pulled up in front of Ernesto's restaurant and could see what he was talking about. A hard-to-miss ugly green trash truck was rumbling up the street toward her

customer's place of business. The truck wasn't real, but the smell of trash was. The breeze was blowing the wrong way for Ernesto's business. He wouldn't be getting any customers sitting in his patio. Vic could see he had someone recently decorate it, so it looked just like a natural grotto.

Besides not knowing how to run a restaurant, Ernesto's other problem was he didn't want to bury his ex-wife in the family plot. Her death was ruled a suicide which absolved him of murder in the eyes of the law; however, because of religious rules and superstitions it meant she wasn't going to rest in peace in the family's hollowed grounds. His deceased ex-wife insisted on being buried next to her mother. Living people should just pay their dues to the dead so they can move on in the living world.

This guy wasn't too stupid. To prevent any further investigation of her death he had her cremated. The urn was tossed into a closet that used to be hers. It was a big closet that could be a bedroom, which his new girlfriend was still mining for clothing left by his deceased wife. Sound ghoulish? There seemed to be a lot of that in her recent jobs.

After a month of his deceased wife's ghost harassing him, he hired Vic to stop her haunting.

Vic slid out of her car and stood next to Ernesto, watching as the trash was not just dumped in front of his restaurant but onto the hood of her car.

"Hey, I'm not involved here!" she shouted at the driver of the garbage truck.

She got a lot of fearful looks from passers-bys that couldn't see the garbage being dumped but could smell it. For sure his restaurant wasn't going to get any business for a while.

"Ernie, I have a solution for this problem," Vic said, knowing only his favorite bed partners could call him Ernie.

"You damn well better or I ain't paying you a cent more. And stop calling me Ernie! What did I tell you about that?"

Can you believe that Ernesto was the typical short fat guy with a cigar sticking out of his mouth? He did have hair, compliments of transplants. However, he didn't wear a three-piece suit with watch chain. He wore a polo shirt with the name of the club he belonged to. It was probably a knock-off like all the other brand names, including his

watch, that he supplied to street vendors. The guy was a real competitor with the Asian and Russian knockoff marketers.

"Then you don't get the solution. You owe me the entire sum in unmarked bills. You owe your deceased wife too. You keep running up bills and no matter where you move to, in this life or beyond, you're going to have trash dumped on you. Would you like to be buried in a trash yard?"

"Are you threatening me?" he said in a loud quarrelsome voice.

One of his very big bodyguards took a few steps towards Vic.

"My fee, now," she said, not backing down. Allie said she was a push over but not with bullies. Sometimes she agreed with Allie that she was cautious when it wasn't necessary and fool hardy where she should be cautious. Was there a word for dyslexia in matters dealing with your personal security?

"Come on in," he said, and stuffed the chewed cigar back in his mouth.

Ugly. Really ugly. Vic didn't smoke cigars, but she knew respectable cigar smokers didn't chew cigar ends like that. What was he on, anyway?

"Nope. I like the sunshine," Vic said.

"Go get the check. It's on my desk," he told the bodyguard.

"Cash. Your last check bounced," Vic said.

"Are you looking for trouble?" Ernie growled.

"You have trouble and I'm here with a solution. You want the solution, or no?"

Ernie was all bluff. How she knew that was because she did. She didn't worry about the bodyguard because he would only move if Ernie told him.

Ernie shot a few of his bodyguards ten years back because they took the initiative to beat someone to death that he ended up needing to get him out of a serious situation. Truly he did want the guy dead at that moment, but Ernie was so angry at being stupid that he had to blame it on someone. Those closest to him, like his girlfriends and wife, knew how to hide. Bodyguards can't call in sick when trouble is brewing or avoiding their employer. Ernie had a deadly temper in his younger days. Vic didn't know him then or of his gangster affiliations. This is the now.

An envelope was handed her. Vic opened it and pulled out each bill, examining them for counterfeit. Actually, she didn't have to look at them all since the feel of the

envelope told her not all were genuine, but since the US of A was printing out money like they were a banana republic what difference was it who made the money. That was Ernie's argument. To her it did. Most businesses accepted the government money made in South Korea, and not Ernie's, made in his restaurant basement, though he produced a good counterfeit bill.

She handed him the two bills that were basement produced. Ernie gave his bodyguard a nod and he dug into his pocket to replace the bills. Ernie studied the bills she handed him, no doubt looking for what gave the bills away as being counterfeit. She was surprised it was only two bills he stuck in the envelope.

Vic glanced up and down the block, spotting two telescopes with cameras pointed at them, no doubt snapping away. Government. Suddenly the sun broke through the cloud cover. Ernesto didn't appear bothered by it. It confirmed to Vic that Ernie wasn't a night dweller, just a fool.

"Well. What's the solution?" Ernie demanded.

"Dig a hole next to her mother's stone and bury her urn there." With that she left. Ernie could sputter as long as he had breath, but she wasn't interested in sticking around to hear it. She ignored the bag of trash Ernie tossed at her car as it pulled out on the street. If she was crazy for pain, she would have given him the finger, but some things didn't need testing out. Ernie, true to his nature, paid for advice and didn't use it.

According to her psychic line, his erratic behavior from his deceased wife's haunting him caught the attention of the local police and a curious detective. In a few days a DNA match would be made to a murder ten years ago, instigated by his wife's ghostly influence on a receptive detective that was interested in making points without letting on how she got so many cold cases solved. When they search his business they will find the printing press in the basement and the boxes of knockoffs of designer purses, shoes, and whatever.

Her business with him was finished. She got her money, gave him the solution, now she had other customers to attend to. The envelope was stuffed in her fanny pack with her herb bag that protected her from financial losses.

On to the next job but first a coffee stop.

Moore appeared again in her passenger seat. The first thing she noticed were white gloved hands holding a gentleman's cane and silk top hat, both resting on black pant trousers. She glanced at Moore, dressed in a Victorian starched high neck collar and white tie. Her long thick hair spilled over the shoulders of a black tailcoat. Her eyes were shadowed in deep purple and her lips were painted to match. Moore had no gender that Vic was aware of. How Moore appeared determined what gender she addressed the apparition as. Vic glanced at Moore's shoes, a gentleman's patent leather pumps. Moore looked exotic as a woman dressed as a man, but the eye shadow took some of that effect away.

"Coffee sounds good," Moore said.

"Top hat? You're dressed for the evening and it's not six pm yet. Are you expected somewhere else or did you just miss a time change...and other things?"

"Did you remember to bring money this time?" Moore asked, ignoring her jibe.

"I picked up cash from Ernie. Oh, better not pull all that money out. That much money spotted and I'd get mugged." She slid her hand into her pant pocket for her daily pocket money – a twenty and found her bag of stones first. Twenty was wrapped around the bag. Assured she had money she shoved everything back into her pocket. A parking spot opened in the loading zone. She intended on loading up on coffee so she parked at the white curb.

Sliding out of the car she noticed that Moore entered the coffee shop without waiting for her. Vic needed to remember not to say anything to Moore since most people couldn't see her. However, there were a few heads that turned as Moore walked by them. This wasn't the run-of-the-mill coffee shop. A lot of freaky people visited. For example, in the back rooms all sorts of classes were taught, like "How tos..." for new vampires and transitioning werewolves, including networking techniques that avoided calling attention to Homeland Security agents. This was a new age meeting place, because vampires and werewolves didn't always enjoy close quartered companionships.

If the coffee wasn't so good, she would have taken her business elsewhere when she stopped doing PI work for the night creatures, as she liked to refer to them as.

She lost Moore somewhere between adding milk to her coffee and walking back to her car. If Moore wanted to continue their conversation, she would have to catch up with her.

As she drove through the city stop-and-go traffic she watched the pedestrians in between watching the car ahead of her. It was eerie to witness a slow-motion event - a déjà vu experience - play out. A woman caught her heel in the sidewalk grating and fell off balance, knocking into her neighbor who bumped a passing bicyclist and the whole domino event poured out into the street where moving cars would get involved.

Either muscle memory or just fast reflexes, Vic quickly turned down an alley nearly scraping her bumper on the building wall. With a frantically beating heart, and adrenalin filled veins, she sped down the alley as if pursued and burst onto another street where she continued on her way to the road taking her out of town. It took ten minutes for her to calm herself. It was miraculous that she didn't run someone over bursting out of the alley that way.

"I bet that's what the dream was about. What did I change by taking the back alley?" She couldn't remember what she had done in her dream, only that the incident was familiar. Maybe she didn't change anything.

At a crossroads she stopped at the red light and glanced one way and then another. She forgot which way to turn. As soon as the light changed to green, she could only go right because of the other cars around her. It wasn't long before she could feel the steering wheel vibrate.

A flat tire.

Stopping at the side of the road, she pulled out her cell to call roadside service. This was exactly why she paid for the cell phone and roadside service.

"No reception. Another dead area." Disgusted, she slapped her cell closed and got out of the car. Looking around she could see only warehouses, and they didn't look inviting to visit. It was going to be through her effort alone that the tire was going to get fixed.

A car drove by and then stopped a few yards ahead. The car began to back up toward her. Vic slid her hand inside of her pocket and didn't find her bag of lucky stones. They were there before she went into the coffee shop.

She leaned in the car and rummaged around the floorboards, coming up with a few of them. Apparently, her bag opened and the stones spilled out.

The passenger looked at her for a few moments, which was enough for Vic not to feel comfortable.

"Do you need a ride somewhere?" the girl asked.

"No. I'm fine."

After the car left, any other cars passing kept on going. By the time Vic had the tire changed, her hands and clothing looked like she had changed the tire. From her glove compartment she pulled out hand wipes and a mirror. Dirt streaks were wiped from her forehead and chin. Why did those two spots always itch when handling dirty things, she asked herself amused?

It was late afternoon by the time she got back on the road, and it didn't take long to realize she was going in the wrong direction. The building numbers were going down and not up. By the time she did reach the building she was going to stake out the sunset was hidden behind gray clouds. The trouble with the weather around here was that it always threatened to rain but seldom did.

Parking a car that had nothing out of the ordinary about it in a parking lot with nice shiny and expensive cars tended to make her think it was time to rent cars that blend in with her stake outs. Her passenger seat was not friendly to real people as the springs had been broken when a shape shifter transformed while sitting on the seat. The wolf was huge to say nothing of being angry at her and had fought the seatbelt which was still wrapped around him. He ripped the seatbelt out and reshaped her passenger seat.

That case convinced her to stop taking jobs that involved werewolves. She already had vampires on her short list to refer out.

Vic parked where she could keep an eye on both the front and side entrance of the office building. At five most of the people left but not her target. His vehicle was still in the lot. Vic was dozing when the sound of the backdoor slamming had her waking up abruptly. It was dark and smelled of rain. No pedestrians were around the nearly deserted parking lot. From her glove compartment she pulled out a thermal scope. Maybe her target was in a parked car doing the naughty.

"You looking for someone?" a voice said next to her elbow.

Vic felt who this was. Her nape hair rose and goose bumps ran along her arms. She put down the thermal scope knowing it wouldn't get a reading off her. Her medicine bag may need recharging after this meeting.

"Yes. As a matter of fact..." She turned to look at the vampire, careful not to make direct eye contact. The vampire was wearing dark glasses so that certainly helped.

"He's not here," she said without Vic even bringing up a mental image of him.

"Do you know where he is?" Vic asked. He wasn't a vampire three days ago. She would have known. This case needed to be closed ASAP. Was she running from trouble? Darn right. These creatures were scary when they visited at night with their associates or the werewolves, succubi, incubi and whatever life draining friends that tagged along.

"Dan's safe at home," the vampire said.

Suddenly an envelope appeared between fingertips with long nails painted black with red flames. "Erica said your job is done. They're back together."

"Erica is ..." she couldn't get it out.

"You can't escape what is part of you. Where you go, it goes." The smile on the bright red painted lips had Vic lifting her eyes, startled to gaze in the red eyes of the vampire. No more sunglasses. The Don't look in the eyes warning was lost on her.

A buzz on her cell phone brought Vic's wandering thoughts back to the present. The parking lot was deserted.

The number said it was Allie. "This is Vic," she said.

"I'm back. I haven't had a chance to get to the office so tomorrow I'll see you. You haven't been taking on any new cases have you?"

"Ah. No, Allie." She sat up straighter in her seat. "Just finishing up on old cases. Closed two." The crinkling of paper on her lap had her reaching for the envelope that the vampire had handed her. Oh, oh.

She remembered she had taken on a job. It sounded really easy. Follow someone to see where they went after work. Simple. She followed him the first night and missed him the second, then there was this evening. End of job. Fee paid.

"Well, I can feel something has changed. I've run into nothing but delays to get back. I'll see you in the morning and we'll talk about it," Allie said.

"Okay." If Allie noticed it too, then something big had changed. Since she gave up werewolf PI work her life had become less full of unpleasant surprises and near-death experiences.

What had driving down an alley, getting a flat tire, going in the wrong direction and arriving at her stakeout late to do with Moore's portended change of some sort?

The lamp lights in the parking lot fluttered on. The traffic in the street alongside of the office building was a river of lights moving quickly to some destination that wasn't work. Turning the engine on, she steered her car into the river of lights.

An hour later after stopping for coffee, she got home. Her usual parking spot was available. Before closing the car door, she wanted to find the rest of her stones that were scattered on the floor board. The quartz and Apache Tear she found right away. The bloodstone was elusive.

"Where is it," she whispered, shining her flashlight under the seats. The car wasn't piled with trash or paper so it should be easy to find it, yet it wasn't.

Rocking back on her heels, she held onto the car door for balance. Her vision went blurry as she willed the missing stone to move where she could see it.

"Are you looking for this?"

A Goth was peering at her through the open passenger side door. This Goth hung around vampires. It was an energy Vic picked up on easily.

"Yes. Thanks."

But she didn't give it to Vic. She rolled it between her fingers and continued to stare at Vic.

"It's the stone of sanguinarians - vampires," she whispered dramatically, and then tossed it so it landed on the driver's seat. "I was looking for a PI."

"I don't work on vampire or werewolf cases. Ghosts and maybe poltergeists are the most offbeat I'll go."

"They're dead and hardly anyone sees them. What can possibly bother them that they hang around to prolong everyone's misery?" she asked mockingly.

"Unfinished business they need help on so everyone can move on. I have someone I can refer you to...."

"No. Not a problem here." She stood up and walked across the street to a parked SUV. Before she even had the passenger side door closed the car pulled out from the curb and disappeared around the corner, heading out of town.

"I reopened the door to let in that strange energy," Vic muttered. "How the hell did I do that?"

As she walked over the broken sidewalk to her house, her eyes never stopped searching for anything that didn't belong. The broken bones of buildings, cars, trees and electrical posts were gone from the tornado damage, but the streets and sidewalks were beginning to buckle from unseen shifting of tectonic plates, with methane gas escaping. There was still a lot of tension leftover from Mother Nature's shift of attention to the area. It was good that the city got a cleanup crew to smooth out the wreckage above ground, but lack of money and the escaping gas stopped anything else from happening. There weren't any development companies that wanted to invest in unstable property. Not even criminal types wanted to hang around this area. It did have a creepy feeling to it, but this was where she had rented her small one bedroom house which was now hers in name, and she didn't want to move. It was safe enough.

The light was on over her stoop, and another person was sitting on the steps waiting. This person wasn't dressed in dark clothes, but it was another teenager. Was there a new vampire in town that liked hanging around teens? She hated the idea of re-acquainting herself with contacts she had cut ties to. Some of her previous vampire clients told her they would see her when she got back. As if it was just a vacation. Did the spells she placed on her house have an expiration date? No one told her they did.

"Can I help you?" Vic asked.

The teen jumped up looking relieved and quickly handed her a card. "I was asked to give this to you." She looked around. "You like living in this place?"

"It's home," Vic said. The card had the name of a bar on it. She turned it over. Meet me at 11PM at Dark Passions was written on the back.

"Who's this from?" Vic asked.

The teen shrugged her shoulders. She probably didn't know his name. "I was just asked to deliver it in person and wait for an answer."

"The answer is no. I don't meet strangers late at night in bars I've never heard of." Vic handed the card back to the teen.

"He's not going to like that. No one says no to him." She refused to take the card, and it fluttered to the stairs.

"I don't know him so no is still my answer. Tell him to call me and set up an appointment in the daytime."

The teen laughed. "Only on a dark and rainy day. He doesn't travel in daylight and he's partial to bad weather."

"He's a vampire. For sure the answer is no. I don't handle those types of cases anymore," Vic said.

"Like I said, he doesn't take no well."

"Well, he must have been expecting a no, or he wouldn't have you waiting for an answer. Would you like to come in? You look like you could use something to eat. When was your last meal?" Vic asked.

"I'm fine," was the indignant response.

"No, you aren't. If you're going to live in that world, you need more fat on your bones." Like she knew all about that world - she did once and almost got sucked into it herself. Allie rescued her.

The girl left in a huff and Vic let herself into her office. Standing in the doorway she scanned the room for anything out of place. The carpets were still balled up from Night Owls earlier play. Setting her coffee on the counter she checked each window and ceiling that her protection was still in place. The ceiling near entrances and exits had mirror squares glued on the ceiling with a spell that should anything pass, she would know. They also had bags of herbs and things that would make werewolf, vampire and most night creatures' skin crawl – or itch.

Vic chuckled. Itching did bring a sudden halt to some creatures. She had used itching powder on a pack of teenage werewolves to give her and her client a few moments to escape. It was rather an ingenious plan. She and her client had been trapped in a school and their exit out a window was taking a while to get the grating covering the window opened. A pack of teens, or werewolves were closing in on them. While Pat

worked on the window, she set up a fan in the school hall, turned it on and dumped a box of itching powder in front of the fan. Just like her spell book said, it was instantaneous.

Over her front door she had her pendant hanging with stones, talismans and a ward off that she spent a week working on. It had been working because the type of case she no longer wanted didn't pass through the door. Her phones were also protected by a spell a friend had come up with. Besides, she had Allie who screened her cases.

Business was just interesting enough to want to get out of bed and not so bad that she couldn't make payments on her house. Her utilities were taken care of by the wind turbine in the back and the solar panels which meant a big discount on her property taxes and the nonexistent power lines not interfering with her energy. She also had a garden in the back that no one stole from if they dared to enter the area.

Sitting on the couch she logged onto the internet from her laptop, sipping her coffee while the connection was made. While her business page downloaded, she looked up the local news. Keeping up with the neighborhood gossip helped to know where not to be.

According to the local happenings, strange things happened throughout the city. The domino effect with the woman and her broken heel was among the strange things listed. There was a clothing dealer whose rack of clothes got away and rolled down the sidewalk. By the time he caught up with it there were no clothes.

"Image that," Vic snickered.

A plane landed on the freeway. A car with no driver rolled through the grocery store parking lot, causing a lot of trouble. No deaths, just physical damage in all that had happened.

"What kind of energy fell on the city? Did Moore bring that?" She couldn't remember Moore's presence affecting so many people at one time.

It occurred to her that she had to get rid of the card the girl had brought. It was probably still on her steps. From her wall she unattached one of the silver foils she kept from when she used to fence. She wasn't all that good at the sport but it was fun.

Going back outside she glared at the gnome that squatted near the card. "Don't mess with that. Go back and stay in the garden where it's safe."

He was just making sure it didn't go anywhere. She sighed. She hadn't meant to be so sharp. The gnomes kept up her vegetable and fruit garden in the back. From the day

she learned about gnomes and the other garden creatures she promised herself a house with a garden to attract them. At first, she could only afford to rent a very small house but it had a yard and though it was squeezed between two big houses, she started her garden and welcoming in her gnomes, then garden fairies, visiting elves, and other garden creatures. When she moved to this house they came with her. She wasn't planning on moving again.

With the needle-sharp point of the foil, she stabbed the card and watched as it evaporated in gray smoke. The wind blew what was left away.

Whatever door she may have reopened, she was going to close it now.

Back in her office, she laid out candles, herbs, stones and her fencing foil. There's no telling what she would run into that pointing her silver sword at would intimidate. It never intimidated her fencing partners, but this is in another reality.

After an hour of chanting and trying to get the feeling that she had indeed shut the door that let in the type of energy that would attract the darker night creatures, she stopped. The door was open, and she couldn't close it alone. Maybe Allie will help tomorrow.

Before going to bed, Vic went out to sit on her stoop sipping tea to relax. She looked up at the stars and admired the full moon. The dark shape of a bat blocked her view. It grew larger and then...

"You have refused to meet with me," a deep voice said. "It is for your own good that I am offering my assistance to you."

"I don't..." Her anger at Viscount Beal had her rising to her feet. His name wasn't on the card and even if it was, there was nothing that he was involved in that she would touch. At their last unpleasant meeting, he told her they were related. That news had distracted her so much she made mistakes. The mistakes nearly cost her her life and did cost someone else's though what's another member added to the vampire tribe to a vampire?

She was an orphan and would stay that way rather than be associated with a vampire that was centuries old. Besides, they didn't have off spring. Where had she heard that? Allie.

A hand gripped her chin and forced her to look into his dark red eyes.

"You can't..." she started to say but the objections were silenced as she stared into the ancient eyes.

Chapter Two

Victoria leaped from her bed as if zapped with a thread of electricity. She landed sprawled on the floor where her pillows had been tossed in her restless night of dreams. Her feet were entangled with the bed sheet that throughout the night had alternated between kicked off and pulled back over her.

"What do you want?" she grumbled to Night Owl.

He was upset because he found no safe place to sleep on her bed, including the pillows which were the first to go in her restless sleep. Night Owl gave a wide yawn that showed his fangs. The very ones that bit her when she dared to take away his catnip toy last night. He was so high on the grass that he was preventing her from falling asleep as he chased his toy across the wooden floors and wrinkling up all the carpets that were not too heavy to slide on.

She rose from the floor, picking up the pillows and tossed them back on the bed. It was 6AM in the morning. Not a decent hour to get up if you had little restful sleep. She breathed in deeply for the smell of coffee. Of course, the automatic coffee maker wasn't set for this early in the morning.

"You can make yourself useful and make me some coffee the way I like it," she said to Night Owl.

Pulling out some clothes from the closet she tossed them on the bed and walked into the bathroom. That was a laugh to call it a bathroom. There wasn't room for a bathtub. It had a stall shower, sink and toilet. The storage was the rack above the toilet where her toilet paper, toothbrush, and towels were. She rented the building as an apartment for years then the owner wanted to sell it. She bought it because she didn't want to move.

When she stepped out of the shower NO was looking at her with a funny look on his face. Was she starting to humanize her cat? She needed to get out more.

Anthromorphizing meant she was going to start expecting him to give her useful answers. Translating mews and yawls wasn't a new skill she was intending to take up.

"Coffee?" Her nose picked up the smell. "Did you make coffee, NO?"

"Of course he didn't, silly. Get dressed and get out here. You have an appointment with a prospective client," Allie hollered.

"Hey, these aren't the clothes I pulled out!" Victoria said. "In fact, these aren't my clothes at all."

"They're perfect for your next job. Just put them on. Believe that you look great in leather and fishnet stockings and you will."

They did fit her like a glove, if that wasn't being too cliché. Vic tried on the boots. Not bad, she thought as her foot hit the heel with a thud. A new day with new clothes, new shoes, and a new case. The day was starting off great.

Vic blinked her eyes a few times at Night Owl who was watching her unblinking from the cat pole. "What? Am I wearing something you want?"

She looked at the arms of the leather coat remembering how she once had a leather chair that NO had clawed beyond decency in one night. Since then, NO had no more cat nip nights without a chaperon in the front room.

NO was purring loudly as if he remembered the night too.

Vic strolled out of her bedroom trying to get comfortable with a shorten step in order not to lose her balance and stumble into a wall. The heels weren't high, but it had been a long time since she wore anything over one inch. Running after people in heels was stupid and asking for twisted ankles. Just what kind of job did Allie have for her?

"So, what's the job that I have to dress in black leather? Check out some dude in a leather bar?" she joked.

"We're moving to a new level." Allie slid over to her a reused folder. The new label curled up. Allie went into the kitchenette and poured her a cup of coffee. Vic used her thumb to push down the curling label.

"Who is Vamp?" she asked suspiciously.

"That's who has hired you and dropped off the clothes you're wearing. You work the days, and he'll work the nights. He's trying to locate something that someone stole from him. He tracked it down to this city but not where or who has it. He gets a bit fuzzy

with details. He's paying very well so don't argue with his strange habits. He paid cash for immediate expenses...that's a car, clothes, meals, and gas."

"What's Vamp short for?" Vic was reading the write up and found the description of a cane so detailed that if she saw it, she would recognize it.

"Vampire. I haven't gotten his name right in spelling, so I just put Vamp."

"Is this the first of April or something? Did you wake me up for this?"

"I didn't wake you up. You were already awake." Allie slid a cashier's check toward her.

"Bank of America issued a cashier's check for a vampire?" Vic said. She took a few gulps of her coffee, taking a moment to savor the blend. It seemed unusual that Allie was actually handling a vampire case. She had her own reasons for disliking their energy but...well, Allie had her own reasons.

"They would know more about shadow people than anyone else...oh, and the Rothschild's of course. But let's get back to business. Humor him. He paid cash and here's a down payment of good faith for two weeks' worth of work, and if found sooner, you keep what's left. The car rental is for a week, so don't run into anything the insurance isn't going to cover."

"Like what, a vampire or werewolf?" Vic mocked. "Get serious...." But she looked over the contract. The name was Michael Von Der Heart. "Von der Heart? What kind of a name is that?"

"It's the closest I could get to what I heard. When you meet him, you can ask him how to spell his name. I have to get to the bank and deposit this. It'll cover some bills, namely my salary. The rental is outside and here are the keys. The address to meet with him is there. Go see him and he'll give you names of people you need to interview. Find out if they've seen this cane or... Oh, of course." She slapped her forehead, "You're the PI and I'm the office worker."

"If this is a joke..." But Allie didn't play these types of jokes. "Just what background check did you do on him?"

"None. That's usually your job. Let's go, Vic. You can give me a ride to my car."

If she didn't need the job, money, and something to do, she wouldn't have stumbled out the door with Allie behind her, leaving half a cup of good coffee behind.

"What kind of rental is that?" Vic demanded. A gold convertible sat at the curb.

"It's a Cadillac XLR. He already had it rented. He just handed me the keys and said you'll need reliable transportation. Drop me off at my corner, will you? I drove this car home last night and then drove Books back to the club so he could drive my car home. He darn near killed me for not letting him drive this baby. I don't want you to park it where you can't see it."

"Do I have to sleep in it? How does this guy know me?" Vic got into the car and turned the engine on. She could barely hear it purr.

"He's got his address in the GPS," Allie said.

Vic dropped Allie off at her house so she could pick up her own car and then headed to her new client's residence. Curiosity was Vic's undoing. It's what usually got her into trouble but also out of trouble. She liked her odds so far. At the corner of Vine and Adler she paused, wondering if she should follow the GPS's voice or her own directions on how to get to the address. The GPS again repeated to turn left. Since it wasn't her car and she was being paid a good fee, she would follow the GPS.

"You have arrived!" the GPS said.

"Wow. I sure have."

It was at the docks. The building looked like someone forgot to knock it down. It was cushioned between two warehouses. The front door opened as she stepped out of the car. No one appeared on the stoop, but she didn't expect a vampire to be up in the day time.

As she crossed the doorway an ordinary looking middle-aged man was waiting in the shadows of the entry way.

"I'm glad you didn't linger over your morning coffee, Ms. Handle. Please come in. I just started a fresh pot of coffee." He looked back at her. "Just the way you like it."

Vic followed him down a dim hallway and into a kitchen. The windows were covered so no sunlight would get in with the overhead lights muted so an ordinary person wouldn't fall over furniture or run into walls. He prepared two cups of coffee, handing her one.

The close contact brought a feeling of familiarity, but the feeling left when he moved away.

"Let's go into the front room where I've laid out what I've found so far."

"How do you know Allie?"

"I met her clubbing. She said you were a PI that had an uncanny knack for ferreting out information most people missed."

He sat on the couch which had books piled on both sides with no available space for her, thankfully. Vic found one chair without anything piled on and dragged it to the coffee table her host was leaning over.

"I take it, your name is Michael," Vic said.

"Of course," he said without looking up.

"That's a map of Stanton Beach in the 1890s," Vic said. "No tents or hotels. That's unusual for that time."

"The photographer that copied the original photo removed the unimportant." He looked up at her briefly.

Vic made the mistake of looking into his eyes and for a moment forgot what she was going to say.

"Hm," she said distracted. She tried to focus on the map.

"Do you know anything about vampires?" he asked Vic.

"They bite people and suck their blood and cause a lot of confused thinking which leads to stupid decision making."

"For some of us, that is indeed truthful. Fresh human blood is nectar that is highly addictive, besides being necessary for some of us to sustain our presence here."

Vic frowned, wondering if he was trying to scare her.

"To varying degrees, there are some of us that become irritated with garlic, silver, holy water and people waving religious talismans at us. There are those that won't cross rushing water, go out on sunny days, or make eye contact with anything that is human or subhuman unless it's for a purpose. So please excuse me if I don't gaze into your eyes."

Vic gulped. "What happens if you do?" Of course, she knew what would happen, but she asked just in case there was more to it than what she knew.

"It depends ...you can forget things or fall under my spell," he said lightly.

"Fall under your spell?" Something rang familiar about that, but it wasn't clear.

Michael tapped the picture of early Stanton Beach with a dozen homes in various sizes overlooking the ocean. The beach got its name Stanton after the name of the largest house on the beach. Stanton was the name of the owner's mother, who today would be called a cross-dresser. The Stanton home became the Stanton Beach Museum of Art.

"So, what are we looking for in these pictures?" Vic asked.

"I'm looking at them to refresh my memory. I left my cane here, buried in a box at the foot of this tree. I returned to collect it and..."

Vic glanced at him. Why did she think vampires didn't have any memory problems? "That tree and the carriage house have been removed, and a new museum was built where they had been. The carriage house was moved over here," Vic said.

"Yes. I know that."

"Why did you bury your cane?" Vic asked.

"It was a temporary solution to a problem," he said.

"When was that?"

"January 30th 1898. I was a guest at a party Elizabeth Pierce gave for a group of actors. She thought I was my son. She had aged and I had not." Michael touched the image of the largest house on the bluff. "But I loved another." He sighed and shuffled through photos.

"Who is this?" Vic's heart was beating hard against her chest as a face from a dream was there in a painting behind two children. The photograph of the painting was recent by the date at the bottom of the picture.

"The painting is old," he said softly. "You do have a knack for seeing beyond what is presented. That is the Lord and Lady of Melody Gardens. It was the title of the play written just for her when she was Elizabeth Meyers, cousin and close friend of Mary Stanton, whom the house was named after. It never went beyond the small community playhouse, but it never was meant to. It was a legitimate way for the playwright to see someone without causing a scandal."

"I remember hearing that Mary Stanton liked to dress as a man. She called her alter ego Hugh and Lizzy Pierce dressed as Walden, and they would visit the racetracks and other places women were not to go to. When Mary married... Marcel Meyers..." Vic's voice trailed off as the memory faded.

"They were independent thinkers and didn't have the constraints other women or men of that time had on them," Michael said quickly.

"Yes. That's what I heard," Vic said softly.

Vic didn't know how much time passed but Michael wasn't in any hurry to break the silence. When she finally took a deep breath to move out of the lethargy that settled over her, something was different. Leaning back in her chair, Vic looked around her seeing things she hadn't noticed before.

The windows had heavy curtains over them and there were a lot of draped wall hangings. The ceiling in the front room was high with no appearance of a second floor or loft.

"Why do you have mirrors if you have to cover them?" she asked.

"Why do you think I have mirrors?" he asked.

"The covers. I thought vampires don't like mirrors because they can't see their reflection." Vic felt her thoughts sluggish. She needed to think, move around, or say something to get her blood moving.

"Then having a mirror in a vampire's house wouldn't make sense," Michael said.

"Do you have mirrors in this house?" Vic felt off-balance and not able to figure out why.

"No. I have no need for such things," he said.

The next question she had on the tip of her tongue was forgotten. Vic rubbed her arm absentmindedly. "This place feels weird," she said.

"Perhaps your amulet needs to be reenergized."

"I'm protected just fine." She touched her forehead to recenter herself. She was here for a job and needed to focus on it.

"Do you believe you can be protected against vampires... werewolves... .skinwalkers?" his voice went deeper with each name.

"Just what is it that you want me to do for you?" Vic said, wanting to finish her business and leave.

He smiled and slid forward a sheet of neatly printed names, addresses and phone numbers. "Start with this list of names. Ask about the cane. The drawing of it is here. Have they seen anyone with it? Who? When? I would do it myself, but I have other

avenues of inquiry I'm making. I suggest, before you start your questioning, that you get your amulet energized." He rose from his seat and she followed. He was showing her out the door as if he were in a hurry. It must be past his bedtime.

"Well, thanks. I'll do just that," Vic said.

"Take this with you." He handed her his file. "It's additional information. I'll let the people on the list know you'll be visiting them on my behalf."

"That would help. When did you want another meeting?" Vic asked, feeling more herself.

"I'll call you."

He stood back from the doorway in the shadows, and Vic closed the door behind her. Glancing at her watch, she was startled to find it was nearly noon. She thought she was there longer. It wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. A few moments of goose bumps and that was it.

Before starting the rental car up, she called Maddy the first name on the list, to see if she was at home. If she was, that was her next stop.

Chapter Three

Vic frowned at the address. The address was to a seedy side of town. Not that it was that way on purpose. It was seedy because no one could afford to paint or repair buildings the residents could barely afford to live in. No one had money to invest in themselves or each other.

The door was flaking with the cracked wood slats showing underneath. If the landlord waited a few more months, it would be easy to scrape off the old coats of paint to put on a new one. Curious, she brushed her fingertips against the crusted flakes. Curled paint crumbled at her touch.

Tapping on the door made it rattle like it was an inside door where the tongue and groove didn't fit snugly, not made for each other.

"I'll get it," a little voice shrieked, and then other voices fought over who was going to open the door. A rough teenage voice shouted over them all.

The door was yanked open, and the teen couldn't have been over twelve years old yet the eyes were that of an old man. He was dressed in the black uniform of a Goth, accompanied by a lip piercing that looked painful to Vic.

The teen gave her a once over. "Whatdoyouwant?"

"I'm looking for Maddy. She said to meet her here at..." Vic looked at her watch. "Twelve noon. Aren't you supposed to be in school?" she couldn't help asking.

"I would if Maddy was here," he said. "She must have missed her bus because she isn't home yet. That means her next bus won't be..." He opened the door wider while he lifted a backpack that appeared empty, then brushed past her and vaulted effortlessly over the metal stair railing, out to the sidewalk. The three girls backed away, standing in the darkened interior.

A new figure was climbing the stairs.

"See you tonight, granny!" he yelled as he tore across the street.

"Girls, get on back inside the room. You know you can't be out here. You must be Victoria. Come on in."

"Why can't they go outside?" Vic asked as the three girls of different ages and obviously different fathers sat on a couch staring at her. It made her want to cover up, or something.

"The sun's too bright." Maddy had a bag that she unpacked. It had six bottles of what looked like cranberry juice. Each of the girls was handed one.

"Go on into your bedroom, girls and drink your juice. This woman and I have some talking to do."

The three, as if synchronized triplets slid off the couch and marched into a room. The door was left open enough for three pairs of eyes to stare out at her.

"Close the door, girls. Privacy."

Slam.

"Michael told me that you have something to show me," Maddy said.

Vic opened up the file and the first thing that showed was the picture of the two children and Elizabeth Meyers in the painting.

"That's him." She pointed at the boy. "He calls himself Muddy Waters. He took over the club two months ago and continued with the scene - vampires and fiends." Her chuckle had Vic looking up at her.

"Vampire pretenders, werewolves, succubi, incubi, ghouls and *the* vampires," she explained.

"How can I meet Muddy Waters?"

"You don't want to meet him, seriously. You're not his type and he has too many people between him and you."

"Have you ever met him?" Vic asked.

"Every night. I manage the club he took over. Moonless Nights. It used to be a theatre and before that a town hall where they had all sorts of goings on. It has a lot of dark history, so it fits the bar scene."

"Have you ever seen him with a cane?"

"That's his new acquisition. He's been walking around with it for the last week. Every month he has something new."

"Does he keep it in the club?"

"No. I told Michael to just let him tire of it."

"What's Muddy Water's real name, do you know?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I did. In fact, I wouldn't be alive if I did."

"Is that another vampire weakness?" Vic asked. She could find out for herself by looking up the names of Elizabeth Meyers children, she reminded herself.

"There is no shaman, holy man, or magic practioner...."

"I got it. Names are power." Vic looked at the pictures wondering what more to ask. "Do you know where he spends his days?"

"In a cave. He likes to hang upside down to think."

Vic thought back to Michael's home with the high ceiling in the living room.

"You're getting tired," Maddy said.

"No, I'm fine." A cup of coffee would renew her energy. She had more people to interview before dark.

Maddy wrote the name and address down. "Go see him. He's really good and doesn't get into the drama and hysterics some of them do to get you to think they're good.

Vic stuck the paper with the information in the file and left.

Carol was the next name on the list. She was a thin pale faced young woman. She didn't look like she had enough energy until Vic said she was a PI working for Michael. Suddenly the listlessness lifted and Carol became animated. Her energy was electrifying Vic's hair. Carol was a ghoul that gave blood to vampire causes. It was as plain as the aura around her.

"So did you see anyone with a cane at the club?" Vic asked.

"A lot of the older vampires carry one. They keep their loved ones' hair in the cap. Isn't that so possessive?" she said cynically.

"Why would they do that?" Vic asked, getting a déjà vu feeling.

"If the loved one is dead and never transitioned, the hair strand would allow the vampire to know who they reincarnated as. It would be like a thin thread to their soul."

Vic's mouth dropped in astonishment. "What happens if the hair strand falls into another's hand?"

"I don't rightly know. There are other forces that protect the reincarnated souls from being victimized by past associations."

"But the one who kept the hair strand...."

"Can use it to find the soul but not control the person. Free soul will. If the vampire forces that soul to come back, then a grievous breach in etiquette has been made. That vampire becomes vulnerable to the hunters."

"Hunters, meaning people who kill vampires."

"Now you're remembering." Carol's smile revealed yellowed teeth. A heavy smoker, Vic noted. The fingers on her left hand were nicotine stained.

"What do you mean, remembering?" Vic asked.

"You have the mark on your forehead that a vampire puts on someone that they want to forget an encounter. Since you're not a vampire, nor have that energy around you that you hang out with them, you probably were somewhere you shouldn't have been and were lucky to be excused with only a memory wipe."

Vic swallowed and touched her forehead. This was taking a different turn. "How do I protect myself from another of these memory wipes...how do I get my memory back?"

"Brother Sun at the Herbs and Remedies Shop. If you're working around vampires and such it's best to get the best to mix you up a protection bag."

Vic nodded and took the card she handed to her.

The phone number and name were the same that Maddy gave her. Vic said her goodbyes to Carol and hurried to Brother Sun's.

It was on a busy street, and everyone had to admire her car, making it embarrassing to slide into the shop without people knowing where she was going.

The moment she stepped into the shop she knew her presence was noted. There was no physical bell or hum from a security monitor.

"Ah, I see you have a problem that needs solving," a dwarf said. He was sitting on a ladder a few feet higher than her.

"Find a seat and I'll be right with you. Since I'm up here I'll finish gathering my herbs. While you're down there, can you get me a bag? I seemed to be short of one. And bring me the scoop. It's right on the table with the bags. Now don't climb the ladder. One at a time on the ladder. That's common knowledge on safety."

It was like that for a while. Get this – get that. Do this- do that. Finally, he had four bags of herbs for her and with one of them he hit her between the eyes. She saw little silver stars and a loud pop in her ears had her covering them.

"There. That will start it. Most will come back to you in dreams. You know, they don't dream. They're not human nor spirit. These days they're not very disciplined either. It takes the elders to bring them back in line but not all of them are nice, but they aren't nice anyway." He pushed a bag toward her. "This is when you run into violent ones. And this is to go under your pillow, so you don't have night visitors. This you should put in the room most important to you. Carry this one at all times."

Vic pulled out the bills she had from Ernest that she had forgotten to give to Allie. The dwarf didn't wait for her to ask a price or count out anything. The money went from her hand to his, leaving her with half of what she had.

Chapter Four

Vic arrived home and parked the convertible under a new car port. Allie had been busy. She had left a note on the table that a casserole was in the refrigerator and a reminder Don't forget to clean the cat box underlined.

Allie didn't wash dishes, do laundry, do cat boxes or work in gardens, especially when gnomes were in them. As her memory was coming back to her in bits and unconnected segments, she had a premonition that her life was taking a sudden dog's leg turn in another direction. She didn't do cases that involved vampires, werewolves and their friends and Allie was supposed to be her guardian to protect her from such things. Why did she think that?

The question of what happened was now why? From the why she would get the what. Following Brother Sun's instructions, she set up her circle in the middle of the front room, then drew diagrams within the circle. Sitting in the space he told her it was for her, the inquirer, she set out her stones and the new crystal that was half the thickness of her wrist. Just holding it she could feel the power it was charged with. Care for her new crystal was written down with Brother Sun's underlined words that meant she was to do exactly as it said.

Night Owl sat outside the circle looking reproachful. What possessed her to open the circle and let him walk in was beyond her. However, he daintily walked to the symbol that could have been a Gemini sign and squeezed his larger self between the pillars. The lines looked as if they were alive in three-dimensional space, bending as if rubber, then adjusting to the widened space. Night Owl sat with his tail curled neatly around his paws, encased between the pillars and energy of Gemini.

Was Night Owl her familiar?

She closed the circle and renewed her spell then chanted in a rhythm that Brother Sun had demonstrated for her. It came easily like she had done many times before.

A great gust of energy whirled around her and Night Owl, charging the energy around them but not moving a hair on their bodies. All her diagrams remained where they were, pulsing as if alive as the spaces between them electrified from the air movement. Pictures from a fast-moving movie reel played through her mind. Another level of awareness took it all in, remembering what had been forgotten.

The memory of her friend and lover who chose to be a vampire over her objections, slammed into her like a kicking bag that she failed to get out of the way of. Her belief that love would overcome all was crushed brutally. If others had not stepped in, she would have followed her blindly, hoping for some reconciliation. She had read that sixty percent of heart cells were neural cells, which explained why she was making so many mistakes. Since meeting Ariel, she had been thinking with the wrong neural cells.

You don't get in the way of another's destiny, Vic moaned.

After the first wave of pain from a broken heart, guilt followed closely behind. It wasn't so hard to see that she knew what Ariel's destiny was and still went and pledged her heart to hers and expected Ariel to change.

"Get over it," Night Owl said.

Vic's memory wasn't clouded now about Night Owl. He was her familiar, always with words of caution that she ignored after she met Ariel to the point that he just came along to say I told you so. She no longer heard him after Viscount Beal gave her forgetfulness. At the time it was merciful forgetfulness. How a broken heart could affect someone so strongly was astonishing.

Then Allie came into her life. She picked her depressed self up and put her back in the PI business. Her accountant recommended Allie to her.

Then there was the tornado. It was part of a case she took on too soon after Ariel's transformation into vampire. She may have been a little sloppy in her spells and left a large hole that attracted the energy of the tornado, but it was going to touch down anyway.

She recovered well. Rather than letting the tornado weave through the city she pulled the tornado to her neighborhood. Most of the buildings were dilapidated anyway and the residents had fled as if being chased by demons... which was close to what she had conjured up so no one would remain and lose their lives. She had succeeded in clearing the area, but all that conjuring and weaving of spells left a residue of weird energy behind along with the underground movement and release of underground gas. It wasn't a stable place to live if you were looking for long time security.

Why was it important for her to remember? Because she hated remembering she forgot something.

What was Allie's part in this?

"Ask her," was Night Owls suggestion.

"I will. I didn't want vampire jobs and I'm wallowing in energy unbeknownst to me," she said, feeling rather stupid.

"You have enough charms, silver, mirrors and garlic to keep the best of them away," Night Owl said. "If you would make up your mind whether you want that drama in your life or just stick to ghosts, your charms wouldn't be so mixed."

Chapter Five

The next morning Vic waited for an opportunity to ask Allie about the change in her acceptance of cases. To add to her uneasiness, she slept dreamless last night rather than tossing and turning in anticipation of trouble. Working on vampire cases always brought trouble that was deadly on more than one level.

Allie hadn't any new cases to add to her calendar - just Michael's list of interviews. The list and numbers were on the counter with her coffee.

"Allie, why did you take Michael's case when we don't deal with vampires?" Vic asked as she sipped her coffee.

"You're the one that took the break. Are you going to continue with the interviews sometime today?" Allie asked.

"I'm going to meet Frankie at the coffee shop."

"Don't you think you should get going?" she pointed to the clock.

"Oh, yeah. I'm going, I'm going."

* * *

Frankie was in a hurry. She wasn't anything like the vampire followers Vic had met. No dark clothing, tattoos, evidence of body piercings, or weird energy around her. This was a forty to fiftyish office professional. Actually, she was a bank branch manager. Vic couldn't imagine what she would have to do with Michael, a vampire. A vampire stays indoors during bankers' hours.

"Hi, Frankie?"

"You're Victoria. Michael described you very well. I have five minutes. What did you need to ask me?" She stood to the side while she waited for her double latte push, or something to that effect, got whipped up.

"Do you know of anyone that carries a cane that looks like this?" Vic pulled out the drawing Michael supplied her with.

"A vampire's cane? I did. She was a librarian. She was the cornerstone of the children's section. She died a few days ago. I don't know what happened to her belongings. I heard she had a renter living in the back of her home that was caught pilfering her place not even an hour after she died. He came into the bank and tried to close her accounts."

"Does she have any children she's survived by?"

Frankie shook her head, accepted her latte and looked at Vic with a raised eyebrow. Vic blinked a few times, to erase the image that overlapped Frankie's features.

"Anything else?" Frankie asked.

"What was the librarian's name?"

"Elizabeth Rubens and she never married. I heard her childhood beau died in Viet Nam and she wasn't interested in falling in love again. I have to go. If you think of any more questions, call me in a week. I have meetings in Seattle and I'm leaving now."

"Thank you, Frankie." Vic wanted to ask one more question, like how she knew Michael but Frankie was gone.

The smell of fresh ground coffee was delicious and intoxicating. Vic bought a large coffee with cream. Her next stop was the public library. She wanted information on Elizabeth Rubens and who would have inherited her cane. Taking a few gulps of her hot coffee, Vic covered it and reluctantly left it in the car. Beverages and food were not allowed in the library.

The library wasn't busy. It was midmorning and only one librarian was on duty. She was sniffing behind the desk. Vic had an idea it had to do with the wreaths of flowers and memorial candles outside the library door in memory of Elizabeth Rubens.

From the energy around it, it was a powerful emotional memorial.

Vic sat at the counter with a row of computers, aimlessly typing with one finger while thinking of what to ask the woman behind the desk. She didn't want to just barge in on her moment of mourning. While she waited another librarian joined her. He had a box of things, and a cane was sticking out of the box – the cane that looked like the one Michael was looking for.

The two librarians spoke for a few moments and then the guy left with the box and cane. Vic followed him. He headed to the parking lot, so Vic ran to her car. Vic could see him exiting onto a street that went in the opposite direction she was heading. She made a U-turn and chased after him.

The librarian stopped to get gas. While he went in to pay, Vic removed the cane from the box sitting on the front seat. The guy was careless and just asking for someone to remove what was in the box. A black cape and old dress shoes were on top of the pile. She just wanted the cane.

Vic called Michael and left a message with him that she had a cane that looked a lot like the one he was interested in. She wanted him to look at it and then she would decide what to compensate the family for on the cane if he wanted it. It seemed strange to her that Elizabeth would have an elegant man's cane. Was she saving it for someone? Vic drove to one of the high points in town to sort her thoughts and wait for Michael's return call. It was a hill in the middle of the city. She kept looking at the cane, remembering the story of the hair strand. Finally, she decided she had to see it. With a struggle she was able to twist the cap off. There was an empty space where something could be encapsulated but nothing now. She twisted the cap back on. Her cell rang. She flipped the cell open. It was Michael's number.

"Hello?"

There was only breathing, and it didn't sound like it was normal. Then the call disconnected.

Vic dialed Michael's number again and it went into his voice mail. Concerned, Vic decided to visit Michael.

No matter how many times she drove around the docks, she couldn't locate the address or the building. The GPS was no help. Dejected, she headed back home. This time no one was waiting on her steps or inside her office.

She dropped her keys on the counter and immediately began a pot of coffee. She should only have a cup this late in the afternoon, but it was going to be a long night, she was sure. Night Owl was released from the bedroom. He bounded into the front room and hopped onto the back of the couch.

"So, what are you doing with that cane?" Night Owl asked her.

"I found it," Vic said. "Are you hungry?"

"I ate. Where did you find it?"

"In a box of things."

"Whose?" he persisted.

"A dead person's things. It doesn't belong to anyone now."

"You need to burn it somewhere safe," he said.

"Why? What's wrong with it?"

"It has a curse on it." With that, Night Owl hopped down and went looking under furniture for a cat toy.

"Okay." The consequences of not following the advice of her familiar could follow her for a long time, she remembered.

Vic chose the side of the house to set up the protective ring. In the circle she drew symbols used to undo spells and dissipate into harmless energy. The cane burned and the gold cap disappeared under the dust of myrrh. The circle was opened and then the ashes brushed away with the broom she made herself. By then it was dark and just about bedtime for her. Before turning in she checked her voice mail. There was a call from Michael. She returned the call.

"Hi, Michael?"

"Victoria, I got your messages. I didn't have my cell with me. Can you meet me at the fourth address on your list now? There's someone I would like you to tail tomorrow but I would like you to see what he looks like," Michael said.

"Sure. I'll head out now. Ah, Michael, about the cane that Elizabeth...."

"The cane was Elizabeth's. It was hers to do what she wished to do with it."

"Oh. Well, there was a curse on it, so I burned it. I didn't want anything bad happening to an unsuspecting relative."

"Elizabeth was adopted. Her only friends were from the library."

"Okay. Then I didn't upset anyone."

Michael laughed. *"I didn't say that. The curse was there for a reason."*

* * *

Vic met Michael at the church address. The front of the building had the appearance of a church with high spires, stone carvings of saints...and gargoyles, with lights shining through the stained-glass windows. When they walked to the side of the building and into a garden the appearance was of balconies, some teaming over with plant life. Apartments or condos were behind the church facade. It took some mental gymnastics to not feel ringing the manager's bell was calling for some cleric. Vic glanced at Michael who looked like he was elsewhere. Maybe the vibes from this place were bothering him. They should.

Vic rang the manager's bell a second time, impatiently.

Eyes peered out from a screen.

"Hi, I'm Victoria Handle. I'm a private investigator. Do you know where I might find Jake? He's not in any trouble. I just need to ask him about someone." *Gods Vic shut up! You're acting like he's a priest or something and like you have something to confess!*

"He's a musician. Plays at the Laughing Cat at night. Days he may come home for a change of clothes."

"Thanks." Vic handed him one of her cards, not wanting him to think she was making all that up.

Michael was grinning when they returned to the Cadillac.

"What?" Vic demanded.

"I thought you were going to start saying the rosary or crawling on your knees doing mea culpas. Do you have a guilty conscience about something?"

The taunting voice was playing havoc with her senses, causing her to feel momentarily out of sorts. "No," Vic said shaking her head to clear it. "Churches and people living in them make me feel strange. I hope that's the last church we go to. What the hell did they do to that church, anyway?"

"It hasn't been a church for a long time, and the manager hasn't prayed for as long. They go together, don't you think?"

Vic squinted through the windshield trying to see past the image of the manager that she had just carried a conversation with. She couldn't remember a thing about him. Chalking it to Michael's influence she concentrated on getting to the nightclub.

The club was in an alley. Vic waited in the car while Michael went inside to look for Jake. She wasn't sure just what Michael needed her for since he was doing the questioning and running around. Five minutes later he returned.

"There's someone called Gail who hangs around Marilyn. They're in a building two blocks from here," Michael said. "Gail delivered a cane to someone a few days ago. We'll leave the car here and walk there."

Vic stared at Michael's profile as they walked, admiring the smooth skin and wondering if he shaved and what would happen if he nicked himself.

"Can't you be quiet," Michael complained. "I'm trying to concentrate and you're chattering a mile a minute."

Vic paused in midstride surprised. He was half a block away, turning into the alley when she recovered. Sighing, she followed. Michael's figure disappeared at the top of a long dark stairwell. The moment she stepped across the threshold, she knew nasty and the dying took up residence here. That would be drug addicts, pimps and rodents that probably got high biting these people. She wondered if a vampire would become addicted if they drank an addicts' blood.

She caught up with Michael in a dark hallway. He was standing outside a room that smelled of unclean death. People in various stages of mental and physical atrophy lay about.

"She's not here," Michael told her in a soft voice.

"So, let's get out of here." Vic shuddered from the energy that was coming from the occupants. They both turned to leave the building, with Vic trying not to breathe too deeply or touch anything.

"That's Marilyn, the one that hangs around with Gail," Michael said. "Ask her if she knows where Gail is."

Vic noticed that Michael's appearance, for those that weren't too far gone in the drug haze, were frightened of him. She didn't see anything fearful about him. Maybe they thought he was a Narc, though that was a stretch of the imagination.

"Marilyn?"

Marilyn stopped and sagged against the neon swirls that were painted around the holes in the wall.

"Where's Gail? She was supposed to meet us."

"Why? We shares." Going from suspicion to greedy in a blink of an eye was too much for Marilyn. Her eyes drooped to slits and her knees wobbled as if ready to give out. Forgetting us, she launched herself from the wall support, using the momentum to reach a space on the floor to collapse.

"Did you happen to get any type of useful mental images from her?" Vic asked Michael.

"No," Michael said. "Let's leave this place."

They walked quickly down the two blocks back to civilization. Vic glanced across the street from where she parked the rental car. An internet café was across from them. She hadn't noticed it was there when she had parked. It was doing brisk business now.

Vic turned to look at Michael to comment on the café. He was intensely focused on someone in the café. Vic's eyes flicked to Michael, but he continued to stare intently at the woman.

What was so interesting about her, she wondered.

"Is she a person of interest?" Vic asked, referring to their case.

Michael didn't give her an answer right away but started walking across the street. "Can you meet me at the old cinema at midnight tomorrow? Moonless Nights." He said over his shoulder. He didn't wait for her answer.

As Vic drove away, she could see in the rearview mirror Michael and the woman walking down the sidewalk with a cup of coffee, chatting.

"How does he work so fast? Mind control?"

* * *

Vic maneuvered out of the city and headed home. She parked the convertible under the car port. Her front door dinged as she opened it. Looking up she saw a new device on the door that would let her know someone had opened her front door. Night Owl was lying on the new couch already working the fabric into frayed ends. Allie forgot

to lock Night Owl in the bedroom. If he was familiar, why did he need to claw her furniture?

"Why can't you use your scratching post?" she grumbled. Vic locked the front door and prepared the bed. She was exhausted.

The next morning, she woke up at 6AM. Vic didn't need a clock. Her brain was time orientated. No matter what time zone she was in her brain adjusted. That didn't mean she woke up bright-eyed and bushy tailed, just that when she woke up she knew the time.

Vic stumbled out of bed and into the shower. She didn't get any restful sleep. Her dreams were erotic and powerfully sexual. When the warm water turned cool, she knew she was in the shower long enough.

Through the steamed window, two eyes stared back at her. "What's the point of sexual energy when there's no one in my life," she said to her reflection.

"Are you feeling sorry for your sins again?" Allie said. Allie was standing in the doorway to her bedroom.

Allie never came into her bedroom. It seemed like a personal thing, so Vic didn't bring it up, though she was curious.

"I'm just commenting on wasted dreams. Aren't they supposed to be helpful?" Vic asked.

Allie laughed and retreated back into the front room. "If you don't get it and it's important, you'll get a repeat performance."

Vic hoped not. Vic dressed as if it was going to rain. It had been threatening long enough.

"You're meeting Michael tonight?" Allie asked.

"He left it open. Last night we were around drug addicts and people that either have no souls or maybe once may have had." Vic dropped onto the couch and looked at the pictures Allie had neatly laid out on the coffee table. "It's not in my best interest to get involved with that type of business."

"PI business is full of surprises," was Allie's comment.

"What are these, Allie? They look like people in costumes."

Vic rested her fingers on one of the pictures and it came to her in a flash. It was the same person in different lives.

"Is the cane Michael looking for have her hair strand in it?" Vic asked.

"Maybe."

"Is Michael stalking her?"

"He's looking for the cane," Allie said.

"Who is Michael, besides a vampire?" Vic asked.

"An Enforcer."

"He said the cane was his. Is he telling the truth?" Enforcer rang a bell, but it was such a universal word for people taking vengeance that she needed to research it more.

"I don't know."

"Just why am I in this case?" Vic asked. If there was violence involved, she was not going to continue working the case. Michael could have his car back, though she wasn't sure where to leave it. If a vampire doesn't want to be found, unless you're a night creature, chances of finding him are next to none.

"Michael hired your services to assist him to find the location of a cane. Do what you usually do, ask questions, follow up on leads, create new ones where there are opportunities," Allie said.

Vic rubbed her head feeling weary. Taking her hand away from her head she stared at it. When she blinked, it changed. For a moment there, she thought she saw blood.

"Who's on your list today?" Allie asked.

"I thought I would try Abe, Ginger and Lyn. They're in the same neighborhood."

With her fill of coffee, she left. It took only a few minutes to add Abe's address to the GPS. By then it began to rain. At the bridge there was a sign saying it was closed due to the river was too high.

"What did Allie say the other day about these delays? What is this delay about?"

She pulled out her list of names and looked for someone not located on the other side of the bridge. There was one name, and his address was in a condo on Ocean Blvd. Across from the museum.

Through the rain-soaked streets she headed back into the city.

Stanley Meacham, the name on the mailbox said. Vic rang the bell and waited. The gate buzzed and she hesitated. It was getting annoying to have her thoughts and

presence known before she wanted them to be revealed. She opened the gate so the buzzing would stop and studied the names on the mailboxes. Her name stopped at Herman Munoz. Where had she seen that name? All the last names began in M. Working with vampires, who were prone to have many issues going on for all the centuries they lived, taught her that acting bravely and bold should be done sparingly, least she end up as one of them.

Suddenly, many faces peered down at the gate she was holding open. Looking at so many with dark glasses got her nervous. She would call Stanley Meacham and have him meet her somewhere. She went back out to the sidewalk and nervously looked around.

A black clad youth brushed by her and opened the gate without a key or being buzzed through. That was enough for Vic to bolt for her car parked across the street. She had enough of this job. Michael could look for his cane himself. Too much vampire presence or whatever it was made her feel panicky.

Pulling out her cell she dialed Michael. From the building she had just come from, the youth came bursting out of the apartment complex, pushing the iron gate so that it swung open violently. He looked up and down the street. Seeing no one, he waved at someone behind him. A gentleman with a cane, top hat and gloves, came out calmly. Vic pulled out her telescope and studied the cane as they waited. A limousine drove up and drove the pair off. Vic pulled out and followed the vehicle. The cane looked like a replica of the one she burned.

There were a lot of cars on the street at this time; horns honking and beeping as they moved through the busy wet streets. Vic felt sorry for the policeman dressed in rain garb, performing his duty and managing traffic on the busy street. The limousine was stopped three cars ahead of hers by the hand of the traffic cop. A whistle and a wave and their line began to move.

Vic followed at a discrete distance. She didn't know how long they drove but they finally arrived. They parked at the club Muddy Waters now owned, Moonless Nights, that at one time had been a movie theatre.

"Is Stanley Meacham Muddy Waters?" she asked aloud.

"Why don't you ask him?" Moore said.

Vic glanced at her passenger seat. Moore's gloved hands were covering his walking stick. He was dressed for the evening, without eye shadow and lipstick. His cloak was folded on his lap.

A black Model T Ford pulled up next to her car. The canvas cover was pulled aside, and an umbrella was thrust out. Laughing voices came from two gentlemen in evening dress with capes thrown over their shoulders. They assisted two women who arranged their long skirts so they could step out of the vehicle. Fashionably dressed in hats, gloves, and capes, they hurried through the rain into the building. Vic watched others disembarking from horse drawn taxis to new Model T Fords. Looking around the parking lot, she could see that it was full. If she didn't want to be late for her own party, she would have to get a move on.

Vic slid out of the car, taking refuge under the umbrella that Moore provided. She hoisted her skirts just enough not to get wet. As she walked up the stairs, she could feel the changes of time in her soul and see the sleeve of her clothing change as she ascended the steps. Something was going to happen. It was something that affected many lifelines.

Vic paused at the entrance while Moore shook out the rain from the umbrella and handed over their wraps to the attendant at the top of the stairs. She could see the dance hall and all the people gathered for a night of celebration.

"Victoria," Moore said.

Vic looked at Moore. It seemed only moments ago they were somewhere else. She was aware that they were sitting in the Cadillac convertible. It reminded her that she was to meet with Michael later. "I have to meet Michael tonight at midnight," Vic said.

"Are you going to dress the part?" Moore asked.

"How's that?"

"It's to a bar, isn't it?"

"I'm not going to a vampire bar," Vic said. Vic rubbed her head. Something was happening. What? What was there to remember? Did it have to do with a cane? Michael? Where was Allie? Allie had been grounding her when her thoughts went skittering into different time periods. Why was it getting more difficult to keep her thoughts in the present?

For a few moments she stared at the dark wetness on her hand. Sweating. She was sweating because she ran a long way. Someone had something of hers and.....

No, she was on a case. Her client was Michael, a vampire. She didn't like working for vampires. Vic leaned her head against the seat and closed her eyes. She felt off balance. Opening her eyes she stared at her hands that were gripping a steering wheel. Glancing at the passenger seat, Ariel was dressed as a gentleman with her top hat and gloves resting in her lap. Ariel liked to dress in men's clothes and it excited Vic. It wasn't until after Vic became enamored with her that she found Ariel also had a dark side that liked to visit dangerous places at night. Dangerous as in places people of the night hung out at. Ariel wasn't a vampire nor a ghoul...not then.

Ariel confessed that a vampire had been stalking her for many lifetimes and sometimes she would play with the idea of becoming one. Tonight, Ariel was going to commit to the transition. She teased Vic with hints of hot passion and sex that she would never forget. Vic didn't want any part of it and most of all, didn't want Ariel to go. Their argument became so intense that Vic ran her vehicle into a tree. It stunned Vic and when she returned to herself, Ariel was gone. Vic was determined to stop Ariel and followed her to the night spot.

Vic touched her forehead again. Her hand came away with blood. Vic looked at the wreckage below her. Her body was in the crumbled-up car. There was no way anyone could survive that.

The first time they had gone to an all-night blood fest and it scared her. Ariel was with everyone that night and as frightened as Vic was of the violent sex, her arousal for Ariel moved to a new intensity. The nights Ariel went without her to the club Vic was sure Ariel spent time with others sexually, though Ariel said she didn't. Since Ariel wouldn't swear to anything Vic knew she had. Ariel said she would give her many chances to follow and held up her cane. What did that mean?

Michael was hunting for a cane. What ever happened to Ariel's cane? Did Ariel break the rules and encapsulated her hair strand even when she said no?

Vic's heart pounded at the thought of seeing Ariel again. What did she look like after all these years? As a vampire was she only dressing as a man or did she pose as

both. Vic brushed her hair into place and looked around for anyone that she might recognize outside of the bar. There were no cars besides hers in the parking lot.

"What's happening?" Vic asked confused.

"You're looking for a cane," Moore told her matter of factly. "Listen, you need to be careful when you go to that bar tonight. It's hardcore vampires. Sex and blood fests. They don't always check their blood donors and end up on a bad trip. Some of their donors think it's a kick to get high to get their benefactors high on their blood. It's really irresponsible."

Vic glanced at Moore. This was the most he had ever said to her. Everything seemed to be changing and breaking down. Vic took a deep breath and stared outside of the windshield. It wasn't the 1890s and the old model T-Fords weren't filling the parking lot. Was she too early? How long had Muddy Waters been running a vampire bar? Was he responsible for Ariel's transition? Didn't things happen for a reason?

Vic glanced at her watch. Midnight was when everyone would be here. Would Ariel be here too?

She started up the car and drove back to her office. She needed to change clothes and get ready for this evening. What would she do if Ariel was there? Would she recognize her? How dangerous would it be to have sex with her? Why was she even considering it?

Chapter Six

Vic looked at Night Owl after she finished dressing in same leather outfit from the previous day.

"What do you think? Will I look like one of the crowd, NO?"

"You'll fit in with someone," Night Owl said.

Vic went out into the front room where she could hear Allie moving around.

"Allie," she said surprised. Allie had changed into some serious Goth clubbing clothes. All black with her nail polish and lipstick matching.

"I'm not going to let you go alone. No telling what dark hole you may fall into."

"You think this is something like Alice in Wonderland?" Vic asked.

"It's Vic in Vampireland. Michal can forget who he's come with and lose his bearings. I'm going to make sure you don't get lost."

"Well, let's get to the cinema. Something should be happening there tonight if only a handful of ghouls fight over who goes first."

"And you tell me I'm cold," Allie mocked.

When they arrived at the club the fog was rolling in thick.

"Great atmosphere. Well come on. We're not going to be able to see anything out here," Allie said.

Vic breathed in the damp mist and thought about all the chemicals that were in that inhale and would probably cause cancer in about twenty years. She wasn't expecting to be around that long, so it didn't matter.

The booming music was how she found the front door. She flashed her ID and gave over two crummy tens that had seen better days. Turning the first corner the vibration hit her head on. Leaning forward, as if fighting a wave, she moved past the first group of Goths that were looking over those that were on the dance floor. Where she wanted to go was somewhere above the main floor so she could look down on the crowd.

Turning from the bar she weaved her way on to the floor so she could access the stairs that went to the rooms and balcony on the second floor.

The stairs were crowded with traffic and body jams. As she passed the groups it was easy to feel that there were no vampires among them. Moving slowly through the

people she finally was able to find a place against the banister overlooking the floor. There was a pattern for the crowd she realized. There were two long lines that were outside of the dance floor. Staring until her eyes adjusted, she could see darker figures under the overhang.

"They're giving blood," Allie said. She handed Vic a soft drink.

"Don't I get something stronger?" She was thirsty and drank half the glass in one gulp.

"You're driving," Allie said.

"What are they giving blood...oh," she paused when it dawned on her what it could mean. She stared hard at the front of the line to see what the two people were doing. It became clearer as she focused on them. Blood was being given and taken. Pouches of blood were lying on a table near. A hand with fingers covered in rings reached out from the darkness and removed one of the pouches.

"Looks like Michael's here," Allie said. "Let's give him a few minutes and then see just why he wanted us here."

"Us?" Vic searched for Michael where Allie was looking. She didn't see Michael. "I told him I wasn't going to let you come to a vampire bar without a chaperone. Wait here."

Vic sipped from her soft drink and looked around her. If they were getting so much blood there had to be more vampires around, yet she didn't feel anyone yet.

Two Goths were swaying near her as if listening to their own music, because what was pounding out didn't have anything to sway to. Vic chuckled thinking about love and listening to a different drummer.

"My name's Robin and this is Cain," the woman said.

"I'm Vic."

"You here alone?" Cain asked. His lecherous smile got a playful nudge from Robin.

"No. I'm here with a friend, Allie." Vic looked for where Allie had gone.

"Is Allie a member?" Robin asked.

"Is he waving at you?" Cain asked.

Vic looked to where Cain was looking.

"Michael." Relieved, she waved back.

"You know a real vampire, and by first name," Robin said, sounding envious.

"Well, I'm here because he asked me...."

"Say no more. We don't meddle in vampire business unless asked," Cain said.

Robin nodded smiling at Cain.

"You two don't look quite Goth or ghoul," Vic said.

"We're checking the scene out. We've studied about them and...well we're writing a book on Moody Waters..."

"Muddy Waters," Vic corrected.

"No, there is a Moody Waters. She's a real Vampire of the olden days," Robin said.

"She's bringing in some new vampires tonight." Cain gestured to the lines of people giving blood. "They're collecting enough for everyone that is ready for the transition. There are a dozen vampires that have followers ready to transition so it was decided to make it a big night. The moon is full, and the night is hot." Cain took Robin's hand and squeezed it.

"Just what's involved in a transition?" Vic asked curiously. "A bite on the neck and blood?"

"And Sex," Cain said. "It's beyond what you can imagine."

"And you'll never be satiated again," Robin gushed.

"You mean this one night of sex is going to be the one you'll remember as the best?" Vic laughed, thinking that was what all addicts said of their first, and then chasing after a replay for the rest of their lives.

"They're partially right about the sex," Allie said. She joined them on the balcony. "It's revitalizing."

"Really?" Vic said, not interested.

"Haven't you ever had a climax that had your eyes rolling back into your head?" Robin asked looking at Cain seductively.

"My climaxes have been pretty straight forward. Legs tremble, heart beats to a crescendo and boom! Melt down. I don't recall any rolling of eyes behind my head or my partners," Vic said. "And not invigorating but exhausting...in a nice relaxing way."

"Well, your body, soul and spirit give off a powerful energy that can be sucked up and rechanneled into your lover who has an intense charge of energy," Cain explained.

"Hm," Vic said.

"She's here," Robin said breathlessly.

Vic looked around wondering who had her veins throbbing. Cain stood up with just as much anticipation and by the bulge in his leather pants, it was someone he had more than a passing interest in.

"I'm going to get some water," Vic told Allie. Allie accompanied her to the bar and ordered herself a Bloody Mary with a lot of Tabasco sauce.

"Geeze, Allie. Aren't you afraid your heart is going to stop with all that hot sauce?"

"No. Michael's here with a male friend. He said for us to keep our eyes open for anyone with a cane. You do know vampires are known to be bisexual, right?" Allie asked suddenly.

"I didn't think about it. It's not like I'm interested in going to bed with one, least of all Michael. He's not my type, Allie."

"Michael will only have sex with people that have explosive climaxes. He can sense that in people," Allie said watching Vic's face.

"And you're telling me this because?"

"Because you were wondering about the woman he picked up at the bookstore. He brings out in women a passion that they may never feel again."

Vic wondered why that conversation came up between Michael and Allie because Michael was the only one who would have known she was thinking that. "Please don't tell me you're going to nominate him for sainthood for rescuing dowdy women...and men too...from the boredom of a normal sex life," Vic said.

Allie smiled and handed her her water bottle from the bartender.

"Let's make our rounds and look for people with gold canes," Vic said. "I might add, there are more than a handful of them. I think it's the going uniform of Vamps for tonight."

Irritably Vic glared at the person that jabbed her in the ribs. He moved on and Allie too, but Vic was staring at the guy that just poked her with a cane. It was Bob, the guy that was at the front door. Vic pushed her way after him.

What was he doing with a cane? Maybe Muddy Waters never had it. Vic hesitated at the dark hallway entrance. Some people may not mind walking in total darkness, but she did.

"Where are you going?" a voice demanded.

Vic looked over her shoulder. Muddy Waters looking huge in his vampire getup stood with three of his night snacks. Their eyes were glassy and there was no movement from them as they stood very still waiting for Muddy Waters to continue his progress.

"I was wondering why it's so dark," she said.

"Come on down and see, Victoria. You've been curious enough to come this far," he coaxed.

Don't look in his eyes, she reminded herself. Her talisman was burning a hole in her skin.

"I'm not that curious." And she scooted past Muddy Waters and his minions, back onto the main floor.

Vic headed outside for some fresh air. Finding the exit turned out to be more difficult than she thought it could be. Exit to her meant exit out of the building, however, that wasn't the case. She found herself in a room with a lot of pillows on the floor and withering bodies. The image reminded her of her one and only experience at one of these orgies.

The heat and energy in the room made her uncomfortable. Backing out the way she had come in she bumped into an unyielding surface. Turning to see who she walked into her eyes rose to a set of red mesmerizing eyes.

Willingly she walked with her master and waited for him to state his desire. Lips on her bare shoulder brought an unbearable heat of desire that crept up into her throat in a cry. Other lips covered hers and swallowed up her loud groan of passion as hands and mouths covered her naked body and sought to bring her to the rumored explosive climax but when she thought she was there, all motion stopped. When she felt it had expired, again they brought her to a point where she thought she would burst and again they

stopped. When she didn't think she had the energy to rise so high again, she did and this time those damnable eyes watched her waiting to take the energy from her climax. Vic closed her eyes and denied the stealing of her soul and spirit in that moment of holy energy.

"Vic! Are you alright? I was looking everywhere for you?" Allie grabbed her arm and helped steady her.

Vic opened her eyes and could see the lamp light and beyond that the lights to the city. Breathing in deep she tried to clear her mind of the tendrils of someone else's control.

"I'm fine. It was just too crowded in there."

"Michael spoke with Muddy Waters. He doesn't have *the* cane."

"Bob the doorman. I saw him walk into the back with one."

"Wait here. I'll tell him. Are you going to be alright?"

"Yeah. I'm going to wait in the car."

Vic walked to the car as if she were drunk. Her fingers wrapped around the knotted bundle of rocks in her pocket.

"This is the last time I get mixed up in these strange cases," she told herself.

"Then where's the fun in life?" a voice next to her asked.

Vic looked down at the dwarf. "I'm too old to be seeing things," she said.

"You want to be blind?" the dwarf asked. "I've been watching out for you since you were young. You finally start seeing me again and you would rather not see anything at all?"

"I didn't see you when I was young."

"You certainly did, until you were five. And a lot of other things most humans don't see."

Vic shook her head indicating that she didn't remember any of that.

"It's the club house. The energy with so many werewolves, vampires and enduines shakes loose a person's blinders if they have the ability to see. Oh, oh. A vampire. We don't get along too well so keep our secret, eh?" The dwarf was gone.

Allie and Michael joined her.

"You said the doorman, has it?" Michael asked. He waved his hand over her, and it was like taking a deep cleansing breath. Her thoughts became clear with a realization that she had been here before and her energy was revitalized.

"I saw him walk down a dark hall with it," Vic said.

"Go home. Your work is done for the night," Michael told her. "Allie, make sure she's home safe. She's been touched."

Allie looked at Vic closely. "You didn't go into any of the rooms did you? I told you not to leave the main room without one of us with you."

"I came outside for air," Vic said impatiently. "I want to go home."

"Scoot over. I'm driving."

"Why?"

"Because you've been given something that makes you really sleepy and dopey. You remember Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs?"

"Dwarfs. Not them again," she said as her head hit the seat and she fell asleep.

Chapter Seven

"I don't remember anything, NO." Vic held an ice pack to her head.

The front door dinged, and she wished whoever it is to go away.

"What are you doing with that ice pack?" Allie demanded.

"I have a headache," Vic said and simultaneously NO said the same thing.

"NO you should know better than let her pick her treatment," Allie said. "You have a head cold not a hangover."

"This ice pack makes my head feel better," Vic mumbled.

"Give me a few minutes and I'll make you feel a lot better," Allie said.

When Vic opened her eyes, Allie was staring down at her holding a cup of steaming tea. Vic could smell the mint.

"I don't have a head cold, otherwise I wouldn't be able to smell the mint tea."

"Mint? I put eucalyptus jell under your nose so your breathing would improve," Allie said.

In disbelief, Vic touched her upper lip, smearing the goop.

"Sometimes I find it difficult to believe you were a PI that tracked dangerous criminals to their liar," Allie said. "So, what happened that has you so out of focus?" Allie asked.

"Too many drugs and people at the club. I had to get out of there before I believed the hallucinations."

Allie nodded then handed her a paper napkin to wipe the jell off her finger and nose.

The fumes made Vic's eyes water.

The phone rang and Allie went to answer it. Vic sipped the tea tasting the eucalyptus goop more than the mint tea.

"Did you take on a case when I was gone?" Allie asked when she returned.

"Just one. Erica asked me to follow Dan from work to wherever he went from work. It was three days. No problems. And I was paid in full."

"Well Dan's gone missing and Erica wants you to find him. She's a vampire with friends. You were and are aware of that, right?"

"Vampire?" Vic nearly dropped the cup on the table. That confirmed her suspicion. "Neither of them was a vampire when I took the job. I did feel something had changed when a vampire paid me off."

"Victoria, you're leaving a trail of vamps. Are you getting a bonus for this recruitment?"

"I'm not recruiting anyone! Vampires make me...nervous."

"Are you going to take the job or not?" Allie asked.

"You make the appointments. What do you think?"

"Victoria, if that was so, you wouldn't have taken on a job while I was away. I explicitly told you not to. You can't see trouble when it's biting you on the neck."

"If something is biting me on the neck, I'm past trouble," Vic said.

"Don't we know that," Allie and NO said.

"I'm feeling out of sorts and you two are ganging up on me. Just what am I supposed to be doing?" Vic said, frustrated.

"Well, it's about time you asked the right question," Allie said. "Now you need to answer it."

"You're no help at all," Vic said. "I don't understand a word you're saying."

Allie threw up her hands and went into the kitchen. Vic looked at NO who had his cat nip in his teeth. He turned and went back into the bedroom.

"What did I miss?" Vic asked.

Not getting any answers or insight from staring at the leaves sitting at the bottom of her teacup she set it down and grabbed her fanny pack, keys and a bottle of water. She would head to her favorite coffee shop and watch the rain.

It was pouring rain as she ran to the carport. It was taking too long for her to figure out why the convertible's top wouldn't come up. She had no problem with it previously.

"The hell with it." Vic stomped out from under the cover of the car port and ran through the rain to where she parked her own car. There was a tow jack on the back wheel and wet tickets stuck under the wipers. Vic kicked the front tire angrily. She had forgotten to keep up her spell on the car.

Wet and miserable, she kept walking down the sidewalk, avoiding running into people with big umbrellas. She wanted to be wet and miserable.

What was she supposed to be doing?

She devoted her life to helping others...of course she picked and chose who to help. It would be foolish to help those she couldn't help.

Vic sat under the cover of a bus stop. Buses went by every thirty minutes. She counted. No one joined her to wait.

"What's with my life lately? I gave up vampire cases and now they're ringing my phone. What am I doing to attract that kind of energy?"

Vic swung her feet back and forth to get rid of the nervous energy she could feel build up. She got that way when an idea was coming up. Something about vampire energy.

"I don't deal with that energy. If I die, I want to move on. None of this hanging around for a thousand years. If I'm going to come back, I want to reincarnate and start over." Vic looked up at the sky through the plastic cover. "Damn. That's a good idea."

It was uncomfortable to go from looking up through a plastic cover to looking up through a coffin, a cement cover, and dirt then to a darkened sky. As though none of them

made a difference she rose up and walked over to Allie who was standing under the tree in a cemetery. She held out her hand and Victoria smiled, taking it. Night Owl was standing in the light as if holding open a door. His bushy tail flickered back and forth, impatient for Vic to cross the threshold.

“It’s the end of this timeline. Isn’t it?” Vic asked.

“Only if you chose.” Allie said.

The building her office/home was on took on a more solid look as the construction workers began to pour the foundation for the first of seven duplexes along that street. It was part of the neighborhood revitalization project.

End