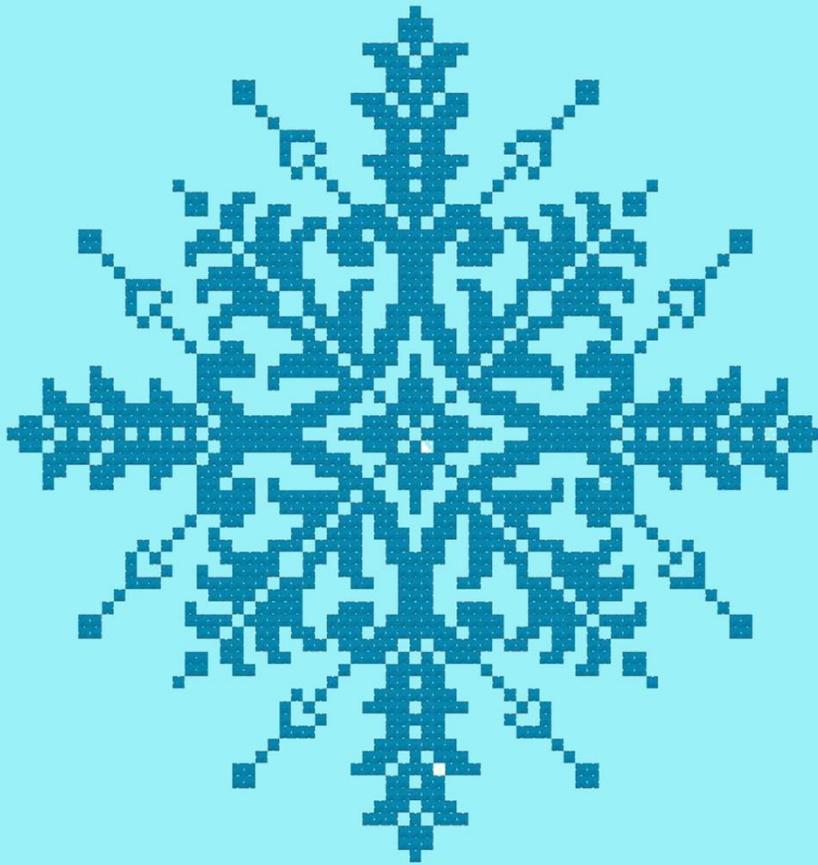


# *Winter Born*



PF Case

Winter Born  
Revelations: Book One  
By  
PF CASE

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Published by PF Case

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## Chapter One

I stared at the destruction around me. Remnants of furniture littered the floors and walls. I tipped my head to the side and stared at a chair leg that stuck out of the wall at eye level. I couldn't tell if it had been deliberately forced there or if it had flown into the surface when the chair had been shattered. This room had seen violence and the walls were painted red with blood. But the blood was the only evidence that a life had been taken in this room. There was no sign of a body or the remnants of a body. One lone handprint left an imprint in the screen of the television. Frowning, I knelt in front of the TV and stared at the cracks that went out from the fingertips and palm and sighed. I wasn't allowed to touch anything until the forensics team made their way through collecting evidence. I could only read the impressions of the emotions until then, but there was a problem. There were none. A murder scene usually left the remnants of terror, pain and anger. Often, I'd feel surprise or disbelief. Occasionally a spirit would linger and whisper its killer's name. There was always something, but this room was devoid of all emotion as if it had never housed human life. If I didn't know that the red substance on the walls was blood, and too much blood to leave a human alive in its wake, I would have believed that the scene had been staged.

I frowned and moved deeper into the house following a long hall that opened into a spacious kitchen. Cabinet doors stood open and cookware lay on the floor amongst shards of broken dinnerware. Knives and forks stuck at odd angles in the walls here. The force required to penetrate the tile covering left them bent at awkward angles. These walls were also spattered with blood. Again, there was no sign of the tell-tale emotions that a murder would leave. The furniture in the living room and the mess in the kitchen screamed that someone had unleashed a hellish rage here. But only the positioning of the items gave that indication. Any human who wandered across the scene would draw the same conclusion. I was here because I wasn't any human and I was coming up empty.

The next room I had to read was on the second floor so I climbed the stairs, careful not to touch the walls or bannister on my way. People, especially children, often trailed their fingers along the wall or bannister as they used the stairs and I knew these surfaces would be full of impressions. I didn't want them to cloud my judgment or muddy my emotions. This house had belonged to a family and they were all missing. The rooms I would have to visit next were the children's bedrooms. I didn't want memories of laughing youngsters sliding down the staircase to haunt me as I made my readings of their rooms. I opened the first door on the right and stepped into the room that had belonged to the seven year old daughter. I looked around at the same signs of destruction. The stench of blood that soaked into the carpet and dried on the walls hit my senses like a sledge hammer. I was sure that I'd find emotions here and was shocked to find the air was as empty as the first floor. I let my eyes drift over a blood soaked teddy bear that lay on an open coloring book. Crayons were scattered across a half-finished picture as if the girl had been sprawled here, coloring happily as she clutched the toy to her chest. But this picture was my imagination and not an impression of what had occurred before the deaths. I glanced up and found my attention caught by a doll house on a low table in the corner. I walked over and knelt before it shocked at what I saw. The furniture in the doll's living room was broken, one chair leg sticking through the wood of the wall just as it had been in the real house. A red substance covered the room and I leaned forward and sniffed. The killer had used blood to

recreate the scene in the house. The only notable difference was the small figure of the doll family father lying in the center of the pool of blood. I shifted my eyes to the kitchen and found the same recreation with the addition of the mother doll sprawled out in the middle of the floor. Lifting my eyes to the second floor I saw that this room had also been recreated. I frowned as my eyes drifted over the baby's room and the blood soaked crib.

I pulled my handheld from my belt and pressed the open button. "Jarvis, did anyone notice the dollhouse in the girl's room?"

A faint static filled the room before a voice answered. "No one mentioned it Sabina. What about it?"

I sighed. "The scene has been recreated" I said. "Make sure the techs get independent samples of the blood from each room and bag the toys. We might get lucky and find fingerprints."

"Sick bastard" Jarvis replied, swearing under his breath. "Any luck so far?"

"No. I'm going to the baby's room. You can have the crew come in downstairs." I put the handheld back on my belt and stood. I hated crime scenes in general, but even more so when babies and kids were involved. I really didn't care much for human adults, but I had a fondness for children. I couldn't avoid the next room, though I suspected I'd get no clues there either. I walked across the hall and stepped over the baby gate that blocked the open doorway. I knew the blood would be in the crib, given the scene in the dollhouse, but it didn't stop the angry shock that overwhelmed me. This entire house was as devoid of emotion as it was the human family that had once lived here. Someone had killed them with brutal efficiency and I had no idea why. Sighing, I turned and walked back the way I'd come. I paused at the living room door long enough to see the technicians at work. "I want to touch the television when you're done" I told Jarvis. "And after the lab finishes with the doll house, I need to see that too."

Jarvis turned a cool stare my way. He reacted as well as I did when we had child victims. "I'll call you when the room is processed. Wait outside." I nodded and left the house.

Once outside, I was not surprised to see the human spectators glancing nervously at the fading light in the sky. Many humans were afraid to be outside after dark since The Revelation five years ago. Even the curiosity aroused by the dozen or so police cars and emergency vehicles wasn't strong enough to dampen the fear of the creatures that they now knew walked amongst them. I moved to the side of the porch and dropped onto a wicker chair to wait. I could feel their excitement, fear and curiosity flowing out of them like a gentle flow of air. If I got closer it would become as annoying as a gale on the lake in February. I pulled out a pack of cigarettes and shook one into my hand, not breaking my stare from the spectators as I lit it and drew the smoke into my lungs. They watched me warily. Despite the jacket I wore that announced I was a member of the Supernatural Investigation Unit, they weren't sure if I would be a danger to them. The SIU was a relatively new elite branch of the police and it was charged with investigating any crimes that were believed to be linked to the supernatural. Many of its members were not human. I had been recruited after The Revelation when I'd become suspect because of my ability to solve crimes more efficiently than other officers in my precinct. They had believed that I was also a supernatural. But I wasn't a supe. I was merely a psychic human, able to read the emotions and impressions that human souls left behind as they lived and died.

I ashed my cigarette into the yard. The Revelation had been a surprise. I'd been on duty, sitting in a sports pub having dinner with Murphy, my partner of five years when the television services had been hijacked by the supes. We were on our dinner break and joking about the outcome of the local college game. Murphy and I had been friendly and worked well together. The man always smiled. His wife and kids were also perpetually smiling. They were the happiest family I'd ever met. The last thing I told him before the game ended was that he'd lose his shirt if he'd bet on it. It wasn't a psychic prediction. I couldn't see the future. I could only read emotions in objects and locations and get imprints of the actions that had caused those memories. Murphy always bet on his alma mater and they had the worst team in the league. You didn't need to be psychic to know he'd lose. I always said the same thing and he always had the same answer. "Have a little faith, Knight. This will be their year."

The TV had gone dark for a moment before the game was replaced with an emergency broadcast message. The pub had gone silent when the screen filled up with the images of three men who announced that they were representatives of the council that governed the vampires, Werens and Fae in the country. I'd stared at the men and frowned as I studied the Fae. He looked familiar to me though I couldn't remember meeting him. He was tall and blonde and looked like he might be twenty five, but you couldn't judge the age of a supe by the way they looked. He wore his hair short and the subtle points of ears were clearly visible. His blue eyes were large and round and framed with thick dark lashes. They were also very stern, as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. If not for the ear points, he could have been mistaken for a celebrity spokesman or a male model. The man was gorgeous. But since he was making the announcement, he was likely a very old man. I found his image disturbed me more than the reactions to their announcement, but I didn't know why. I felt a knot of anxiety grow as I struggled to place him and couldn't explain the sudden feeling of sadness and panic that I felt when he spoke. His voice tugged at me. Assuming it must be Fae magic, designed to soften the human's reaction to the announcement, I shook off my reaction with effort and turned my attention back to what was being said. The supes magic didn't work well with me, most likely due to my psychic abilities.

They'd gone on to explain how the supes lived amongst humans and had done so for as long as humans had walked the earth. There was nothing to fear, they assured. They were merely making their presence known because it was getting harder to hide their existence as technology grew. I had been surprised by The Revelation, but not the information. I already knew that humans weren't the only species on the planet and it didn't trouble me, though I kept the knowledge to myself. I recognized supes for what they were when I met them, and I'd met many in my lifetime. Not only could I tell who the supes were, but I could distinguish vampires, Werens and the Fae from each other. There were several supes in the bar that night, watching the reaction of the crowd while the humans watched TV. Two Werens sat at the bar drinking beer and a vampire and Fae were in a booth, nibbling on wings as they watched the crowd. That Fae, I noticed, had used glamour to round the points of his ears to blend in with the humans. The reactions in the pub had been mostly disbelief and laughter until the next interruption was an emergency broadcast from the President who stood with the same three and confirmed their revelation. He explained that similar broadcasts were taking place in every nation of the world. I had to give the man credit. He kept the appearance of calmness though his voice shook and his face was pale. He urged the country to remain calm and to wait for further broadcasts about what this meant for humanity.

That had thrown the people in the pub into a state of panic that had erupted into the streets. The next few days had been a living nightmare for the world. People pulled neighbors into the street and beat them as suspected supes. Some humans were staked and others were burned alive on impromptu stakes when they were suspected of being witches or vampires. Within a week, silver bullets were being pulled out of dead and injured humans as well. Chaos had ruled for a month before the supes had imposed a sort of martial law to bring the human population under control. It had taken a year for the panic to subside enough for the control to be lifted, and the SIU was born from the need to respond to human concerns about policing the actions of creatures that were likely beyond the reach of human laws. I had not been surprised by this either. The only thing that surprised me was that humans were included in the squad. The government insisted that every supe have a human partner. This was in response to the anti-supe lobbies that had begun almost the moment that the announcement was made. They were willing to admit that supes were needed to police the other supes, but didn't trust them enough to sanction a fully supe police force. And there were restrictions on what the SIU could do. We weren't allowed to interact with any human suspects. When humans were involved, the investigation was transferred immediately to the regulars, the human police force. When supes were involved, they were turned over to the Council.

The Council was a powerful supe organization whose members remained mostly a mystery to us. There were a few visible representatives, of course, but the general belief was that they were lower in the hierarchy than the actual leadership. They appeared to function like the president's press secretary. They managed PR for the supe community and made a show of being deferential to the human leaders while their own leaders remained hidden. Most of the human officials held a thinly veiled fear of the Council. They'd never been overtly threatened, but the memory of the year of supe control wouldn't fade anytime soon. When the Council decided that it had enough of the riots and panic, the world had been subdued overnight. That left a well-deserved distrust in human memories. It wasn't easy to know that you ruled your species due to the benevolence of a more powerful group. I really believed it was more disinterest than benevolence. I doubted that most supes cared much about what happened to humans beyond their own selfish needs for the species.

I sighed and took another long hit off my cigarette. The Revelation had made things easier for me in way, I supposed. I'd spent my life hiding my abilities, knowing first-hand how people responded to the unexplained. The Revelation had brought the path I'd chosen for myself into clear focus. I'd finished high school with honors in a school that allowed advanced students to simultaneously attend college. By the time I had my diploma in hand at seventeen, I'd also completed my sophomore year of college. I'd finished my degree in forensic psychology at nineteen and had gone straight into the police academy. By the time I was twenty five I'd made detective and at thirty had cleared more cases than any of my colleagues. Never once had my mental health or fitness to serve been questioned. Then the supe bigwigs had decided they were tired of hiding and my life had been turned upside down. The government began to worry about how many supes held strategic places in the police forces, military and government. Anyone who held a position of authority in any organization had been forced to prove their humanity. Ironically, only the humans had difficulty doing this. The supes had been hidden for eons and had the experience and means to continue if they chose. I wasn't so lucky.

I became the subject of scrutiny. How was I so successful at solving cases? I'd revealed then that I was psychic and able to read a crime scene, hoping to put their minds at ease. I'd withheld the fact that I had always known that supes existed. I could sense their otherness in the energies they emitted. But the questions continued. Could I read suspects' minds? Did I use magic or thought control to influence confessions? Murphy, my partner of five years had refused to work with me after that. My locker had been vandalized and the tires of my car had been slashed on more than one occasion for the first six months. Eventually the harassment had stopped as suddenly as it had begun. I'd been placed on desk duty and subjected to a battery of tests to classify my species, although I'd repeatedly informed them that I was a human with just a little something extra. Finally convinced of my humanity, they'd subjected me to a battery of psychological tests that had done little more than piss me off. I'd finally been deemed human and 'normal' and Captain Ichabod Simon had approached me when the SIU was in its first stages three years earlier. I'd worked with Simon when I was in uniform and thought he was good man, though he remained suspicious of me even now. He'd offered me a position on the team and I'd welcomed the assignment, finding that I was accepted more by the supes than by my own species. I was also more comfortable with supes. I could read their emotions too, but it wasn't the onslaught I felt from humans who were by far the most emotional species on the planet.

The emotional onslaught was one of the reasons I disliked humans as much as I did. They could go from happy to sad to angry in the space of a minute. Interacting with them left me with psychological whiplash and a headache. They could also stare you in the face and lie you to without batting an eye, never realizing that their dishonesty wafted off of them like the odor of spoiled milk. I never lied, even when it was in my best interests to do so or if it was to spare someone's feelings. My college roommates had learned to not ask my opinion if they didn't want to hear the truth. Does my butt look fat in these jeans? Don't you think my boyfriend is handsome? Do you think I'm mean? All of these questions became taboo with me. I had the reputation for being obnoxious and tactless, but I didn't believe I was. I just found myself unwilling to be dishonest. I wasn't sure if that was a trait left over from an early childhood of religious training or if it was because I could smell lies and worried that I'd carry that stench with me. If you don't want my opinion, don't ask became my motto. The worst encounters were when I dated though. Did I do something wrong? That question still sent shivers up my spine and was the primary reason I'd given up on dating in my early twenties. I was not one to say, it's not you, it's me. I would open my mouth and it's definitely you would spill out. Men didn't like to hear they were boring, ineffective in bed, not smart enough or a variety of other reasons that I found to end relationships. I could add ice queen to my list of better qualities too, I supposed. In the end, it became easier to just avoid humans as much as possible and the SIU had provided that opportunity.

I butted the cigarette on the sole of my boot and shoved it into my pocket as I saw Captain Simon pull up and park near the lawn. He crossed to the porch and stared at me. "Knight" he bit out. "What can you tell me?" I could feel anxiety roll off the man as he watched me with thinly veiled anticipation.

I shook my head. "Nothing yet. There was no emotion in that house at all. I'm waiting for the team to finish so that I can touch a few items to see if I have better luck."

He frowned and stared out over the heads of the crowd that was starting to dwindle as the last rays of sunlight dimmed. "What would cause that?" he asked. I'd explained the way my gift

worked after The Revelation. Murder left an imprint on the environment that I could read as clearly as written text on a page. He knew how odd my declaration was.

“I suppose a lot of supes would have the power to hypnotize their victims and control their emotions” I told him. “Vampires and the Fae certainly could. I don’t think Weres can, so we might be able to shorten the list of suspects. A powerful witch could probably do it too.” I frowned. “I have no idea if a human could do this. I doubt it though.”

He nodded. “That’s what I was afraid of” he admitted. Despite the use of supes in the SIU, there were very few murders that could actually be attributed to them. Their representatives assured the authorities that despite their reputations they were mostly peace loving pacifists. I suspected that the reality was that they didn’t leave incriminating evidence behind when they committed a murder or that the mysterious Council quickly covered it up.

Simon moved to the porch and sat across from me. “Did Jarvis tell you anything yet?”

I shook my head. “He’s still in there. He should be finished soon.” As if on cue the front door opened and Jarvis stepped outside. He frowned as he moved across the porch and joined us, dropping to sit on the porch rail across from the captain.

Jarvis was tall and had the thick muscular frame that was characteristic of a Were. If you didn’t know what he was, your first thought would be that he had the prettiest and most unusual eyes a man could have. They were the color of honey and I supposed that most humans would describe them as hazel. I’d seen women at crime scenes fawn over him when he first arrived. He was incredibly handsome, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. His skin was the color of milk chocolate and he had an infectious smile. I was often amused at how the attitudes of these women changed when he did something that clued them in to his otherness. I was also amused how long it took them to realize that he was a supe when I could tell right away. They might not notice the way his nostrils flared when he investigated a scene or the way his eyes glowed amber when he was angry, but his general aggressive nature was hard to miss. And heaven help you if he was angry because of something you’d done. He stalked a crime scene with barely contained aggression. I’d seen his Wolf only once and that had been enough for me. He’d been pushed too far by another SIU supe, a Were from another pack who had challenged his authority at a scene. How the two had managed to keep from killing each other in the resulting fight had been beyond me. But Jarvis had merely forced the other Were’s submission before returning to human form and continuing with the investigation as if the fight had never happened. He was a good friend and a remarkable man. I’d trust him with my life.

“I can’t help any more than Knight” he said as he held out a hand in my direction. I rolled my eyes and pulled my cigarettes from my pocket and shook one onto his palm before dropping my lighter with it. He lit the cigarette and pulled on it before turning his attention back to Simon. “I can only smell the family in the house. The blood belongs to them so you can be sure this is a murder scene and not an elaborate hoax. Whatever did this didn’t leave any obvious clues to follow.”

“What do you think of the dollhouse?” Simon asked us both.

“I think the killer is deranged” Jarvis said.

I shrugged. "I think you should have warned me about it before I went in. It's the strangest part of the scene and caught me off guard" I said. "I'm hoping that he felt something when he recreated the scene and that it will give me a few clues to go on. I'll check it for impressions when the lab finishes."

"You can go into the living room now" Jarvis told me. "The humans are in the kitchen."

I nodded and stood. "I'll be back soon." I held my hand out and Jarvis returned the lighter which I dropped in my pocket before reentering the house. Jarvis had a tendency to absentmindedly tuck the lighter into his pocket so I had to be vigilant in getting it back.

The television was covered with chemicals that had been used to lift the impression of the print from the screen. Grimacing with distaste, I removed my latex glove and pressed my hand along the ridges of the print. The air rippled around me and the small hairs on the nape of my neck stood on end. I glanced around the room, almost expecting to see the spirit of the man that had died here. After a moment passed with no further impressions I traced my fingers over the cracks in the screen. I froze as I had the momentary sensation of being watched again and turned to look once more. I was still alone in the room. I moved my fingers again to touch the cracks that extended out from the palm. Nothing. I frowned and looked around me once more. I would try again later with the toys and crayons from the child's room. Whatever had done this, I was fully convinced had not been human.

## Chapter Two

I arrived home a little after three a.m. and went straight to the bathroom to shower, as if the water could wash away the unpleasant memories of the house. I'd tested everything but the dollhouse before I left the scene and the only sensation I'd gotten was that momentary feeling of being watched as I examined several of the items in each room. I couldn't say for certain if it was my reaction to the macabre scene or if it was the only emotion that the humans had felt before they were killed. The day team would go in at sun up and they had a witch and a medium. With any luck they'd be able to recreate an image of the killer or perhaps communicate with the dearly departed and get an ID. In the meantime, the lab would process the dollhouse and I would sort through the information on the family to see if there were any clues in their pasts or their social networks that would help us determine who had wanted them dead. The only thing we knew for certain was that the family had been human and the killer had not been. We needed to at least narrow down the species to be able to move forward.

I worked lather into my hair and closed my eyes as the water rinsed the suds away before moving to let the spray work the tension out of my shoulders. I gave up after a moment and turned off the water. I made quick work of drying off and slipped into sweats before towel drying the remaining water from my short blonde hair and running my fingers through it to tame it into submission. I studied my appearance as I brushed my teeth. I was thirty three but didn't look it. I stared into the clear blue orbs of my eyes and wondered if age would be able to dampen their brightness or turn them milky with cataracts. If it would, it was still years in my future. I hadn't appeared to age over the last decade. I never wore makeup. In part this was because I lacked the patience, but mostly it was because I didn't need it. My color was good. I had what my mother had called a berries and cream complexion. I was pale, as most blondes are, but I had a healthy pink hue to my skin and my lips looked like I'd added a dash of lipstick, even though I hadn't. My eyes were large and round and my lashes were thick and full. I was definitely pretty, but my looks had always been more of an annoyance than a pleasure, especially since I looked so young. I was trying to succeed in a profession that was still predominantly male. Being pretty usually meant that others assumed you slept your way into promotions. I was just thankful that I wasn't also voluptuous. I had curves, but I was also muscular and a little on the thin side for my 5'6" frame. If I'd been built like a pin up girl, big boobs, tall and with well-defined hips, I'd never have made it to detective. Before joining the SIU, I'd had to work harder to be taken seriously. For whatever reason, supes were more attractive than humans. Since they never looked their age, my youthful appearance was also not an issue. I had gone from being the pretty girl on the team to being the plain Jane and that suited me just fine.

I padded barefoot through the apartment to the kitchen and opened the fridge. I was hungry but a quick glance reminded me that I'd forgotten to grocery shop this week. I sighed and pulled out a lone carton of left over Chinese. I couldn't remember when I'd ordered Chinese, which was not a good sign. One whiff of the remains meant the garbage disposal would finish the lo mein. The freezer held no better prospects so I turned to the cupboards. Annoyed beyond belief that I didn't have as much as a pack of ramen noodles, I stood in the middle of the barren kitchen and looked around. I had three choices. I could ignore the hunger that gnawed at my stomach, go to an all-night grocer or hit one of the restaurants or drive thrus that stayed open late. I decided on

the grocery run as a long term solution and a drive thru for immediate gratification and returned to my room to find socks and grab my running shoes.

The store was only a few miles from my house and I'd make quick work of the trip. If I was lucky, it wouldn't be packed with supes who tended to favor shopping at night. And supes drew the attention of human fans as well. The last thing I wanted was to be stalked by a Goth teen who believed me to be a vamp. I was pale to be sure, but I was human pale, a trait that was completely due to my family's Northern European heritage and not the result of reanimation after death. I pulled into the parking lot and sighed with relief. There was only a scattering of cars in the lot so it looked like I was having some luck at least. I grabbed a cart from the bin near the door and began to quickly fill the basket.

"You're out late for a human. Aren't you afraid of becoming someone's midnight snack?" a voice said behind me as I filled a bag from a display of apples. I glanced in the direction of the voice and frowned.

"What do you want Michael" I snapped before turning my attention back to the displays of fruit. "I'm hungry and I'm not in the mood for your crap tonight."

Michael laughed. "Ah Sabina, if you only knew how much your disinterest feels like a challenge you might rethink your reaction to me, especially when you're dressed to kill." He swept his eyes over my sweats and I reached subconsciously to smooth my hair into place when he gave it a curious once over.

I snorted. "I thought you people had superior eyesight. And I'm not trolling for a one night stand. I'm starving. What do you want Michael?" I asked again as I added a bunch of bananas and a bag of grapes to my cart before moving on towards the dairy section. I had my hand on the cooler door when I stopped and turned to face him, my eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Did you follow me here?"

He grinned. "Of course. I was on my way to talk to you when I saw you get into your car." He looked around the store. "I eat out so it isn't like I buy many groceries, you know."

I turned back to the cooler and grabbed a gallon of milk and a quart of half and half. "I'm not telling you anything so you've wasted your time" I said as I added them to the basket. "Why don't you go bug Jarvis or Simon?"

"And miss the chance to interact with my favorite SIU member?" he said as he took the cart from me and began to push it along beside me as I moved towards the yogurt.

I scowled at the man. He was annoying and handsome. Or maybe he was annoyingly handsome. I could never be sure. "I can't tell what I dislike the most about you" I told him. "Is it that you're a reporter or that you're a vamp? Or maybe it's just your personality. You're kind of obnoxious, you know."

He grinned. "I know. Thanks for noticing. But so are you so don't complain too loudly. But come on Sabina, you can get rid of me easily enough. Just answer my questions."

I shook my head. "I really can't help you Michael. You have Simon's official statement and that's all I know." I felt a tickle behind my eyes and punched him. "Get out of my head batboy" I said. "It won't do you any good to try to read me. I don't know why you keep trying."

He laughed. "Because it annoys the hell out of you" he said. "Will you at least promise me the story when you solve it?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Why do you bother Michael? You don't have to keep up the human appearance since The Revelation. Why do you keep working for the station as a human?"

"I enjoy it" he told me. "We don't work because we have to work at my age. We do it to stay engaged and keep busy. Besides, I look amazing on camera, you have to admit."

I smiled. I could admit that to myself but never to him. He was conceited enough. He was a stunningly beautiful man. He had dark brown eyes that could melt a woman's heart and black hair that made you think about running your fingers through it. His broad shoulders and narrow hips made you think about where else you might run those fingers. But I had never been interested in following through on any of that animal attraction. Michael was nothing more than a friend and we both wanted to keep it that way. He liked to tease, but I could read that his interest was also merely friendship. "Maybe it's your conceit that I dislike the most. But fine, I'll agree to that much. When we know who it is, I'll make sure you get the story first. Now go away and let me finish shopping."

"I'll just keep you company" he told me with a grin. "You never know what kind of beasties will come out this time of night. You might need protection."

I rolled my eyes at him and snorted. "I'm not telling you anything. Give it up."

He nodded. "I believe you. But I wanted to talk to you about something else if you don't mind."

I shrugged, picked up several steaks and dropped them into the cart. "What now?"

"What have you heard about the HFL?" he asked. "Do you know if they're moving into the city?"

I frowned. The Humans First League was gaining popularity in the states, I knew. They marketed themselves as a human interest group that was focused on protecting human rights through political means and denied any involvement in defamation against or any attacks on the other species. But the SIU suspected them of being involved in the burning of several homes that belonged to local coven members in the area. "We don't have any proof they're in the area" I admitted "but we suspect it. Why? Are you doing a story on them?"

He shook his head. "No. I won't give them any press. I've been asked to gather data but haven't had much luck."

"We have supes in the SIU, including vamps" I told him. "Why don't they gather the data?"

"Because I can pass. They can't. I thought since you were human, you might have a better clue about their behavior. I think they'd see you as a good potential recruit."

I frowned. Michael was right that he could pass for human. I had met him the year I became a detective when he'd been covering the story of a local serial killer and had known immediately that he was a vamp. But he hid his aggressive nature better than most of his kind was able to and he lacked the tell-tale paleness that most vamps had. When I shook his hand, I'd been surprised at how warm he'd been, and he'd read my surprise. He'd also seen the flare of annoyance when I felt the tickle that let me know he'd tried to read my thoughts and I'd read his surprise when he failed. He'd waited for me after work and confronted me with the knowledge. We'd developed an easy friendship over time, once he realized that I would keep his secret. After the Revelation he'd remained hidden, assuming that his ability to pass as human would come in handy. "I'd still like to know how you pass" I told him. "Why are you so warm?"

"I don't know" he admitted. "I always have been. I've been poked and prodded enough by our scientists and they can't figure it out. If I knew, I'd tell you."

"I guess you're just a freak like me" I told him. "And humans think I'm a supe. The HFL wouldn't try to recruit me. But I don't really know anything about the HFL. I imagine they're like every other hate group, small minded and bigoted. Read the literature on those groups and you should get an insight into their psychology. Off the record, we're pretty sure they burned the coven members out, but they didn't leave any evidence. If I hear anything, I'll let you know." I studied him. "Will the supes let the SIU take care of them?"

He sighed. "It depends on how much they do before we find them. The witches are ready to spell them into the next dimension already."

"If that happens, I don't need to know" I told him. I had no beef against the supes and generally disliked any member of the fanatic fringe. There were good and bad members of every species. Targeting supes for what they were was as irrational as targeting humans for their race or sexual orientation. If the supes took care of the problem, I wouldn't blame them. I moved to the next aisle and began to load cereal and bread into the cart.

"That's why I find you so interesting" Michael told me. "You have more affinity for the supes than you do your own species. Why is that?"

I shrugged and dropped the cereal I was holding into the basket before moving to the deli and ringing the bell to get someone to come to the counter where the lunchmeat was stored.

"Humans are annoyingly whiny" I told him. "They cause trouble and then expect leniency when they're caught. At least the supes own their sins when they commit them." I turned to the teenager who arrived to assist me and asked for several pounds of sliced meats and cheeses.

"How much food do you need?" he asked me in dismay.

"Cupboards are empty Michael. And I'm hungry. Don't feel like you need to keep my company."

"I wasn't kidding about the beasties" he told me. "I'll tag along and follow you home."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Is there something I should be worried about?"

“You should always worry Sabina. There isn’t much a human can do to defend against most supes.”

“You’ll have to follow me through the drive thru then” I told him as I took my packages and turned towards the front of the store to check out. “And then go home. I’ve got work to do before I call it a night.”

He nodded and helped me load the groceries onto the conveyer belt. “Not a problem. You have my cell if you hear anything.”

“Michael followed me to the grocery store last night” I told Simon and Jarvis the next night when we sat together in the captain’s office. “I promised him the story on the killings to get him to leave me alone.”

Simon snorted. “Did that work?” he asked.

I shook my head. “You know Michael. Did we learn anything today?”

“Not a thing” Jarvis said. “But the lab released the doll house. They’re delivering it here in an hour. Maybe you’ll get lucky.”

“What did you learn about the family?” Simon asked as he sipped on his coffee and grimaced.

“Why do you drink that stuff when you get here?” I asked. “You know it’s old.”

“Eternally optimistic. The family?”

I nodded. “Dad worked for a construction firm. He drove heavy equipment. Mom stayed home. They appeared to be an all American family. The daughter was in second grade at the local elementary school and the two year old was just a two year old. They were very involved in their church and both parents taught Sunday school.” I shrugged. “As far as I can tell, they didn’t even lie on their taxes. If they had enemies, I don’t know how they earned them.”

“So you think it was random?” Jarvis asked.

“Seems to be” I said. “But who knows? Maybe they were just really good at hiding their secrets.”

Simon took another sip of the coffee and frowned. “Someone wanted them dead and someone targeted them.” The phone rang and he reached for it. “We just need to figure out what attracted the killer’s attention.” He lifted the receiver and stood as he listened. Jarvis was on his feet too and I sighed. His Were hearing let him hear both sides of the conversation and from the grim expressions the men wore I knew it wasn’t good news. I stood as well.

Simon scribbled an address on a piece of paper and handed it to us. “We have another one” he said. “Knight, you go in first again. Maybe you’ll get lucky.”

I arrived a few minutes before Jarvis and Lionel, his human partner. The victim lived in a third floor walkup in a poor working class section of town. The previous victims had lived in a

neighboring suburb. I pulled on my latex gloves as I took the stairs to the apartment. The forensics team was already there, waiting in the hallway until I'd done my walkthrough. Jarvis and Lionel walked over to join them as I entered the apartment.

This man's lifestyle didn't compare to that of the family. While their house had been a sprawling four bedroom colonial on a large well maintained lot, the apartment was small and cramped. I walked through the living room and entered the kitchen. A door opened onto a narrow platform that led to the fire escape. Just like the house, there was no sign of forced entry. The living room and kitchen were clean which left only the bathroom and bedroom to check for remains. I expected to find whatever was left of him in the bedroom and was surprised when I opened the door to the small bathroom and saw the carnage there. The tub and toilet were coated with blood as was every inch of the floor and wall. I stepped into the room and closed the door behind me. Unlike the house that had broken furniture and dishes, the bathroom was intact with the exception of the medicine chest. I wondered about that for a moment but then had a thought. If the killer had broken the porcelain fixtures, the room would have flooded. Given the use of blood in the dollhouse, I believed that blood might be important to the killer. Satisfied that there were no emotions to be read here, I left the apartment and joined the others in the hallway.

"Nothing" I told them. "He was killed in the bathroom. I'll meet you back at the precinct."

Three hours later they were back at the precinct and their luck had been no better than mine. I stood outside with Jarvis, sharing a cigarette. "You know these things will kill you" Jarvis told me.

"Is that why you bum so many of them Jarvis? Saving me from myself?"

He snorted. "Nope. I figure it's just a matter of time until you become pack or join some other supe family" he said. "I like to smoke. It calms me down."

I snorted. "Then why don't you invest in a pack or two and let me bum from you?"

He grinned. "They're expensive Knight. Why would I want to buy? So when are you going to take me up on the offer and become pack?"

"I'm not ever going to become a supe" I told him. "I'm weird enough already. What I am going to do is finish this and go inside and see what I can pick up off the dollhouse. Coming with me?"

He nodded. "We're not weird" he said. "We're enhanced, maybe, but that doesn't mean weird. And you like supes better than humans."

I chuckled. "You were born a Were. You've had a pack your entire life. Your wife and kids are Weres. I, on the other hand, am the only human I know who can do what I do. That makes me weird, trust me."

"And you're a good cop because of it. I would have been fine having you for a partner." It was common knowledge that Murphy had dumped me when he'd discovered I was psychic. My SIU colleagues were as incensed by the idea just as the normal units backed Murphy up on the decision. He snorted. "I don't know why Simon doesn't team you with someone now. You need the back up. I've told him this often enough."

“He doesn’t think I face risks with what I do” I said. “I think he lumps me in with the canine members of the human squad. I just sniff out and interpret emotions. He doesn’t send me into hot scenes alone.”

“He lumps you in with the supes, Knight. He won’t give you supe, because he believes you’re a supe. He won’t give you a human on the off chance he’s wrong. He forgets you’ve proven yourself to be human so maybe you shouldn’t be. If you’re going to have protection, you need to provide it yourself. If you want to join the pack, let me know. My alpha would be happy to let me turn you.”

“Michael’s offered too” I told him. “I think I’ll just keep my humanity if it’s all the same.” I dropped the cigarette to the pavement and crushed it out with the toe of my boot. “Let’s go play with the dolls.”

I took the stairs to the fourth floor with Jarvis at my back. It wasn’t the first time he’d offered me the pack and it likely wouldn’t be the last. I knew that a lot of humans would jump at the chance for the enhanced strength and relative immortality that the supe world had to offer. I knew Jarvis’ partner Lionel had asked often enough. But I’d seen enough of the bad side of life to find it unappealing. My own parents had abandoned me when they’d discovered my abilities. They’d been a God fearing pair, dragging me and my three siblings to one crazy religion after another. They’d handled snakes in the deep south and shaved their heads and sold pencils at the airports in the north. They’d taken us to traditional religions too. They’d done time at churches, Buddhist temples, Hindu mandirs and Muslim mosques. They’d tried every religion they’d come across that caught their fancy, but the moment they’d been faced with the truly unexplainable, their daughter’s psychic abilities, they’d dumped me off at the door of a children’s home and shook the dust from their feet. I’d been six years old.

I’d spent the next twelve years in and out of foster homes that offered varying degrees of acceptance and nurturing. I’d escaped the horror stories of abuse and neglect that you often heard about, but I hadn’t escaped the lack of love and commitment. It wouldn’t take long before my abilities scared or confused the family and I’d be moved again. I’d learned to keep my talents a secret for a good reason, and as a result had learned to keep my distance from humans. Once Murphy had learned what I could do, he’d dumped me as quickly as my parents had done. The worst thing about both abandonments was that I’d been able to feel their rejection and it had left me shaken and annoyed. I couldn’t understand why they didn’t just accept me as I was. I hadn’t done anything to earn the attitudes that rolled off them. My talents set me aside from humans and my humanity kept me separate from the supes. Living alone for seventy or eighty years wasn’t too bad, but multiplying that by a hundred made it less appealing. I was happy to stay mortal and live a human lifespan.

Jarvis stood near the door and watched me as I circled the doll house. Each of the items was on the table in its own numbered evidence bag. I unsealed the bag that held the house and pulled the edges away to allow me to place my hand inside the first room, the one that had held the replica of the living room where the father had died. I had been right to have them test the blood in each room separately. This room had been stained with the father’s blood. I pressed my hand against the stain and closed my eyes. I watched the scene unfold behind my lids. A pale white hand placed the father doll on the floor and disappeared, returning in seconds with a container of blood that he poured over the figure. The hand began to withdraw before snapping the leg from

the toy sofa and pushing it through the wall before the vision faded. I repeated the actions with each of the rooms and saw the same focused actions of placing the doll and spilling the family member's blood.

I turned to Jarvis. "All I got was a pale white hand" I said.

"How pale?" he asked.

I frowned. "Vamp pale, but I can't say it was a vamp. Let me see what I can get from the dolls."

I opened the bag that held the blood soaked father and tipped it onto my open palm. I froze as a sensation of delight rushed over me. The emotion was suffused with the purest evil I had ever felt. I'd gotten glimpses of evil in my life, but nothing like this. Most murders were crimes of passion, evil acts committed by normal people. The emotions were often rage or jealousy. When I'd tracked the serial killer that had resulted in my introduction to Michael, I'd felt evil and insanity. That man had killed twenty four women before he'd been caught and the evil he emanated had been nothing compared to what radiated from this doll. I dropped it into the bag and rubbed my palm on my thigh. "I'm not touching the others" I told him as I shivered. "That was some seriously bad karma."

Jarvis frowned. "What did you pick up?"

"Evil" I said with a shudder. "Pure, unadulterated evil." I sighed. "Let's tell Simon."

## Chapter Three

I pulled into the precinct lot the next day and put the car into park. I stared at my reflection in the rear view mirror and scowled. My eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep and the blue circles under them were nearly the shade of my irises. As if that weren't enough to put me in a foul mood, my joints ached from fatigue and I had a persistent headache thrumming behind my eyes, another sure sign that I was overtired and needed food. I tried unsuccessfully to smooth down my hair which had a life of its own and spiked out in random places. I'd been up until almost noon pouring through the files on the newest victim and comparing it to what we knew of the family. The only thing they seemed to have in common was that the adults were goody two shoes. The newest victim was a single thirty year old Jewish man who had founded a non-profit in the community where he lived that provided free after school and weekend activities for the neighborhood kids. He worked long hours to provide tutoring and enrichment programs for the kids and their families. He was well liked, respected and his death was being mourned by the entire neighborhood. If he had enemies, they were as hidden as the family's.

I hadn't been happy when Simon called at three, only moments after I'd managed to shake the memory of the doll enough to get to sleep. He'd ordered me in on my day off but wouldn't tell me why. More than a day without sleep was enough to leave me grouchy which put me at risk for a major loss of control. "Just get in here now Knight. Now" he'd growled before slamming the phone down in my ear. That had been all I'd needed to push me over the edge and put me in a mood that would rival any crap the Werens could toss around. I'd tossed on sweats and left the house without bothering to make myself presentable. Frowning one last time at my appearance, I grabbed the carry out cup of coffee from the cup holder and climbed out of my car, slammed the door with satisfaction and stomped across the parking lot. I scowled at the desk sergeant for good measure as I waited for the elevator.

"Knight" Jarvis called when I stepped out of the elevator. "You look like shit."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I guess I need more than two minute's beauty sleep. What bug crawled up Simon's ass that pulled me in here on my day off?"

Jarvis fell into step beside me. "I have no clue but the office has been crawling with vamp brass all afternoon and one of them is in with Simon waiting for us."

I leaned around the man to peer at Simon's office. The blinds were closed over the windows that served as his walls so I couldn't see who he had with him. "Who's in there?" I asked Jarvis.

He shrugged. "He's just some bloodsucker in an expensive suit. I haven't met him yet, but he looks about as pissed off as you." I stared at him, realizing he was telling a half truth. He met the unspoken challenge without providing any more clarification on the subject.

"Great. Sounds like political bullshit. They don't usually let humans see them out in the daylight. This day keeps getting better." Most of what humans believed about supes was untrue, a series of myths that the supes had started themselves. Vamps inability to face the sun was just one of those myths that gave humans a false sense of security during daylight hours. We stopped in front of Simon's door and Jarvis knocked once.

“Come in” Simon growled and he pushed the door open and we walked through.

I stared at the vamp that stood when we entered. I didn’t know him but he radiated power. I sized him up. He was tall and well-built, what a surprise. I had yet to meet a supe that wasn’t a perfect physical specimen but this man set the standard for perfection. He was dressed in a suit that probably cost more than a month’s worth of my salary. He had white blonde hair that was cut fashionably short, ice blue eyes and chiseled features. He looked like he belonged on the cover of a magazine or in Hollywood, not standing here in Simon’s office glaring at me like I was his worst nightmare come true. I met his gaze and returned his scowl without concern, but was caught off guard by a tinkle of familiarity. The moment passed and I continued to glare at him. He didn’t look tired or hungry so he could be the first to break the stare.

Simon cleared his throat. “Nathaniel, this is Detective Sabina Knight and Detective Jarvis Corkin. Sabina, Jarvis this is Nathaniel. He has a few questions to ask about the investigation.”

“You called me in to answer questions?” I snapped, turning my glare on Simon. “Jarvis could have done that or I could have done it over the phone.”

“No Detective” Nathaniel told me. His voice was deep and held a touch of agitation. “I needed to talk specifically to you, not the Wolf. And I needed to meet you in person.”

Jarvis snorted. “Then why call me in?” he asked. “I have work to do.” He looked from Simon to me and laughed. I saw the expression that Simon flashed at my friend and scowled deeper. “You think I can soften her edges when she’s this tired and hungry? You know what she’s like. Dream on.”

I snorted. “What do you expect him to do? Gag me and sit on me to get me to listen? Just tell me what you want so I can go home and sleep.”

“I had hoped he would keep you civil” the captain told me before turning to Nathaniel. “She isn’t at her best when she’s tired” Simon apologized, shooting me a frustrated look. “Sabina, rein it in and act your age.”

Nathaniel smiled sarcastically at me. “I believe the Wolf is here in case you need protection from me. Your captain isn’t the trusting sort” he told me. “You do not.” He looked at Jarvis. “Stay if you like but you aren’t needed here. I only need to speak to your colleague if she can manage a moment of civil conversation.” His irritation at the meeting was equal to mine and I wondered what Simon had done to annoy him before I arrived. I had the sudden realization that I shouldn’t take this personally and felt some of my bad temper with the vamp slip away.

Jarvis grinned. “I’ll stay. This might be entertaining.”

I glared at the Were before turning to face the vampire and trying to keep the venom out of my voice. “I’m running on caffeine and nerves Nathaniel, after an excruciating shift last night. This is as civil as I can manage. Don’t take it personally. What do you want to know?” I was truly trying for civil, but my voice came out in clipped tones that showed my fatigue.

Nathaniel studied me like a bug under glass. He appeared to study every aspect of my face, focusing on each detail before moving on to the next as if he was storing my features in his

memory. I resisted the urge to try to smooth my hair again. Finally, he returned his gaze to make eye contact and spoke. “Why do you believe a vampire is responsible for these murders?”

I frowned at Simon. “I never said a vamp was responsible, did I? Is that why he’s pissy with me? Did I tell you it was a vamp?”

Simon blushed. “I assumed...”

I turned back to Nathaniel, cutting him off before he could explain. “What I said was that the hand I saw was pale white.” I pointed to his hand. “Like yours. I did say vamp white, but I didn’t say vamp. I have no clue what species the killer is beyond being sure he isn’t human. The only other information I have is that the killer is truly evil. Is that all you need to know?” He stared at me again and I frowned when I felt the sensation behind my eyes that told me he was trying to invade my thoughts. I smirked at the surprised expression on his face when he found he couldn’t. “You don’t trust me?” I asked him. “I can’t imagine why not. I’ve told you what I know. If that’s all, I’m going home to get some sleep.”

Simon cleared his throat and glanced away when I turned to face him. “There’s a bit more Sabina. Nathaniel is going to join the investigation in case there is a vampire involved. He will be your partner for the duration.”

I stared at Simon in surprise. “You’re giving me a partner? Since when?” It bothered me that Simon didn’t give me a new partner. I felt like I needed to prove myself in some ways. I wanted to send a message that I was a good partner to have on your side. I also knew that the regulars believed that there was something wrong with me because I didn’t have a partner and I had a suspicion that the supes in the SIU felt sorry for me. Supes formed a territorial bond with their partners. The pair was inseparable and their friendship was strong. Sometimes I guess I felt sorry for myself too. And I was more than a little thrilled at the opportunity to work with Nathaniel.

“Since now” he said, not meeting my gaze. “And it will be temporary. Nathaniel will work with us until we know for certain that a vamp isn’t involved.”

I narrowed my eyes at the vamp. “Are you SIU?” I asked.

“For now” he told me, still eyeing me suspiciously. Vampires really hated it when a human could withstand their abilities. I thought it served them right for believing they were superior beings and enjoyed his discomfort.

I nodded and looked at Simon. I knew it would do no good to argue with him, but I was tempted to do so anyways, just for the sake of arguing because I was crabby. But I was also interested in what the vamp would think about the investigation. Power like he had meant old and I imagined he’d be able to provide a wealth of information that might help us close the case faster. And I felt a little tingle of excitement about having a partner again. If we were compatible, I would enjoy having someone to work with. Despite the tension of our meeting, I thought working with him would be a good experience for me. “Fine.” I turned back to Nathaniel. “Since we have to work together, you’ll do me the favor of staying out of my head. It won’t do you any good to try to read me and it pisses me off when my partner doesn’t trust me. You want to know something, ask me. I won’t lie to you.”

He studied me, surprised once again by my reaction to him and I felt his earlier agitation begin to diminish. “You aren’t going to object to being partnered with me? Your captain seemed to believe you would.”

“And he probably told you that it wouldn’t do me any good to protest, didn’t he?” Nathaniel nodded. “Then why waste my breath? Besides, I’m looking forward to working with you. We can use all the help we can get with this case. If you’re any good, it will be worth it to have you on the team.” I turned to Simon. “Are we done for now?”

“No, we’re not” Nathaniel told me. “I want you to accompany me to the houses where the murders occurred.”

“It can wait until tomorrow” I said. “I need sleep right now. I’m useless to you without it.”

He smiled. “Sleep in the car. We’ll go today.” I could tell he was used to giving orders and having them followed. He’d learn that I really disliked taking orders.

“You just said you were my partner, not my boss.” I glared at Simon. “This is my night off. Let Jarvis and Lionel take him” I told him. I worked to control my irritation to keep from being rude. “Seriously Simon, I’ve had less than five minutes sleep. I won’t be any good today.”

He shuffled papers around on his desk, refusing to look at me once more. I felt guilt from the man as he refused to meet my eyes. I narrowed my eyes in suspicion and wondered what other surprises I had coming before I could finally go home and sleep. “Just go Knight. It won’t take long and you can sleep after. You’re just getting his reactions. You don’t have to read the scene again.”

I sighed and turned on my heel and left Nathaniel to follow me. “What are you holding over Simon’s head?” I asked when the elevator opened and we stepped inside.

“What makes you ask that?” he said, smiling a little as he hit the button for the ground floor.

I snorted. “There’s no logical reason to drag me out tonight. I won’t be able to help since the atmosphere is empty and I’m too tired to be good company. In case you hadn’t noticed, fatigue makes me crabby which is hardly a sign of the SIU putting its best face forward.” I studied him. “So tell me how you’re twisting his arm.”

He shrugged. “I’m not. He is simply providing a diplomatic courtesy. It doesn’t hurt to have a favor to cash in when the time comes. He earned one today. And I was also in a bad mood when I thought you’d accused one of my kind without enough evidence to support the claim. So I am equally guilty of not making a good first impression.” He studied me again. “And you aren’t being that difficult.”

I snorted. “I’m not difficult at all. But I am exhausted, so let’s do this quick so I can get back home.”

We walked to the parking lot and when I turned towards my car he stopped me. “We will take mine. You’re too tired to drive.” He motioned to the reserved spots near the front of the building. “Why can’t I read you?” he asked when I was settled in the luxury automobile and fastened into the seat belt.

“I assume it’s because I’m psychic” I said. “I haven’t met a vamp yet that could read me. Fae either for that matter, though maybe some can. I wouldn’t take it personally.”

“I have read other psychics” he told me as he pulled into traffic. “I have never met a human that I couldn’t read.”

“Well you have now and that suits me just fine. I don’t need you crawling around in my head. It’s bad enough that you’re attractive enough to be distracting without you being able to read any lustful thoughts that pop into my head” I told him.

He laughed. “Are you always so direct Detective Knight?”

I snorted. “I’m usually called tactless and no, I would normally keep something like that to myself. But I’m tired and hungry and being passive aggressive. It was supposed to annoy you to be thought of as a pretty boy. I didn’t mean it as a compliment.”

His laugh deepened and he shook his head. “So you lied and there is no need for me to wonder if you are having lustful thoughts about me?”

I grinned. “I never lie. I may occasionally omit the truth, but if I say it, you can be sure it’s true. Since you obviously don’t mind having your physical attributes acknowledged, we may as well change the subject. Why do you have to see the houses today?”

“To see if a vampire is your killer” he told me. “If it is a vampire, we will take over the investigation.”

“Do you know any really evil vamps?” I asked. “Whoever did this is scary off the charts evil.”

He smiled. “I thought most humans believed that all vampires are scary off the charts evil” he said.

I studied him. “I’m not most humans and you aren’t evil. I sense a healthy dose of arrogance and power but no evil. In fact, you seem to be a pretty decent man.”

“You can read me?” he asked, surprised.

I shook my head. “Not the way you guys read humans. I just get emotions and personality traits from your aura. I don’t read minds. It’s more like I’m a really good judge of people.” I shrugged. “Supes are a little harder to read unless they’re off guard. You likely were tonight because you were annoyed. What did Simon do to get you worked up?”

“He suggested that we are not controlling our kind and also informed me that you would not be willing to work with a vampire. He took a bit of persuading and I found his accusations to be a bit annoying. And you believe I have not done evil in the time since I was turned?”

I snorted. “Doing evil and being evil are two different things. Most people are capable of evil acts but that doesn’t mean they’re evil. Our killer is true evil. Do you know any truly evil vamps?”

“I believe you need to explain the difference in doing evil and being evil” he said. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

I sighed. "When I was in uniform, I took a call where a man killed his wife in a fit of jealous rage. He discovered she was having an affair and lost it. When he realized what he'd done, he called us. When we got there he was on the floor sobbing over her body. He committed murder, an evil act, but he wasn't an evil man. He lost control in the heat of the moment and felt sorrow and remorse afterwards. This killer commits the evil acts and they bring him joy. When I held that doll I felt his satisfaction with what he did. See the difference?"

He nodded. "I see. And you saw nothing more than a pale hand when you held a doll?"

I nodded. "It was just a normal looking hand except for the paleness. I saw it when I touched the house. I only held the father doll. That's when I felt the evil. I didn't want to experience it again so I left the others alone. He arranged the scene in the dollhouse with care. Did you look at the photos?"

"No and Simon didn't mention the dollhouse. If there were photos, he withheld them. Tell me about it." I described the dollhouse to him and the actions I'd viewed when I touched the bloodstains on the floor and held the doll.

"And he didn't do anything similar at the second site?"

I shook my head. "But there were no dolls there. If there had been, maybe he would have. I think the blood was important to him."

"That would be true of a vampire" Nathaniel said as he pulled into the driveway of the first house."

"How will you be able to tell if it's a vamp?" I asked as we walked up to the door and I cut the tape before sliding the key in the lock.

"I'll smell him" he said. He followed me into the living room and frowned when I turned on the light. "This was not the work of a vampire" he told me.

"You don't smell him? Maybe you will in one of the other rooms."

He shook his head. "I don't need to smell him. There is too much blood. My guess is that this is all of the blood from the body minus what you found in the dollhouse. If a vampire had done this, he would have drained his victims by feeding from them. No vampire would waste this much blood. You might find drops, not gallons."

I frowned. "I think that whatever did this controlled the victims. What could do that besides a vampire?"

"Why do you believe that?" he asked as I followed him into the kitchen.

"There are no emotions here" I said. "There should be fear at the very least in the kitchen. How could he do this in the living room and not bring the wife running?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "I have no idea. If the wife did come running, she could be controlled then. A vampire couldn't throw a blanket of control around the house. He has to be in the same

physical space. Would the initial reaction of fear and shock leave an impression for you to sense?"

I nodded. "Yes. It would be intense and it would linger. Emotions permeate our surroundings. They can be overwritten, sort of like a file on a computer hard drive, but they're always there if you know how to look. The more intense the emotion is, the stronger the residue it leaves behind. There is none of that here."

"And does your power ever fail you?" he asked.

I tipped my head and considered him. "As far as I know, it hasn't yet. Why?"

"Humor me" he told me as he reached into his pocket and pulled out an ancient gold coin. He put it in my hand. "What can you read on this?"

I closed my eyes and focused on the metal in my palm. After a moment I handed it back to him. "This is the last coin you earned in your human life. You were happy with the sum but you never got to spend it. My guess is that you were turned when you were headed home because I also feel pain and fear. Was it the man that hired you?"

He dropped the coin into his pocket. "No. He was just a human. You are correct. I was headed home and my sire intercepted me on the road. If you can read this coin that is more than one thousand years old, why do you believe that you can't read this house?"

I shrugged. "There's nothing here to read. Your emotions imprinted on that coin. If there were emotions here, I'd be able to read them."

He nodded. "Come with me" he said and he turned and walked deeper into the house until he came to the basement door. I followed him into the basement and looked around. There was a large carpeted family room that was filled with toys and books and comfortable furniture. I looked at him in surprise. "I knew the playroom was here. Simon did tell me the layout of the house and where the humans were killed, even if he didn't share the photos. Have you tried to read this room?"

"No. I only went in the rooms where the people died. I try to avoid everyday emotions, especially when children are involved."

He pointed towards the bookshelves. "See if you can read the emotions on the books or the toys."

I pulled a picture book out of the shelf and held it in my hands. After a moment, I shook my head. "Nothing."

"Does that seem reasonable? You read my pleasure and fear from an ancient coin that is more than a millennium old. Wouldn't you imagine that the books would hold the pleasure of a shared family moment that happened within the last decade?"

I frowned without answering and put the book away before moving to the toy box. I picked up a well-worn stuffed doll from the top of the box and held it. "Nothing. I don't understand."

“Is it possible that the emotions were wiped from this entire house?” he asked. “Perhaps they did experience terror, but the killer took the emotion with him.”

“But how?” I asked. “And why? I’ve never encountered anything like that before.”

“I don’t know” he told me. “Let’s go to the next house and see what we find.”

Nathaniel surprised me by pulling into a coffee shop after we finished at the second crime scene. “I know you’re tired” he told me. “Caffeine will keep you awake a little longer so that we can talk.”

“I think I’m fully awake now. Adrenaline took care of that” I told him. “But I won’t complain about the coffee.”

He motioned me towards a table and I sat and watched him walk to the counter and place our order. It had never occurred to me that the emotions had been wiped from the houses. I had assumed that the lack of emotion meant the absence of emotion. I thought of the dead children and hoped he was wrong even though my gut told me he was right.

He carried the coffees back to the table along with a thick sandwich stuffed with turkey and vegetables and sat it and a coffee in front of me. “I hope you like turkey. Double cream, right?” he asked.

“How did you guess?” I asked as I pulled the lid from the cup and blew the steam across the coffee before taking a sip. I bit into the sandwich and chewed the bite as he watched me. “Perfect and I was starving” I announced after I swallowed.

“I didn’t guess. You carried your mug into my car. I smelled the cream but no sugar. And I heard your stomach rumble.”

“Handy talent” I said with a grin as I took another bite of the sandwich. “Must suck to pass trash cans and sewers though.”

He smiled. “You learn to block what you don’t want to notice” he told me. “How long have you had this talent?”

“My whole life, though I didn’t know what it meant until I was five or six.”

“How did you first recognize what you could do?”

I frowned. I didn’t like to dwell on the past, but I supposed he’d revealed as much about himself when he’d given me the coin. Most vampires didn’t discuss their ages but he’d let me know that he was older than a thousand and given me a glimpse into what his change had been like for him. And for some reason, I felt like I could trust the man. I sincerely hoped I wasn’t deluding myself because I found him so attractive. “I didn’t know I was weird until I freaked my parents out. Before then it was just natural to me. We didn’t have a lot of money so most of our toys and clothes were used. I’d tell my parents that a doll was happy or a teddy bear was sad and they thought it was just a kid thing. I had a lot of imaginary friends that were really lingering spirits, but we didn’t know this then. They just thought I was creative. Then one day they took us to a new church and I told them the man who was talking to us was lying and didn’t believe what he

was telling them. I told them I could smell the lies. They weren't happy with me and I think that's when they began to suspect that I wasn't normal. Then a few months later I told them that the man who used to live in the apartment we were looking at wanted me to tell the police that the landlord had killed him over a gambling debt. The landlord got really upset and made us leave. My dad found out that the man had been murdered a few weeks before and called in an anonymous tip to the cops. When the landlord was arrested, it scared them and they abandoned me." I shrugged. "That's when I realized that I could do something that other people couldn't. I had to learn to hide it. It took a few years but I finally managed until The Revelation forced my secret out."

He frowned. "Where are your parents now?"

"I don't know and I don't care" I said as I sipped on the coffee.

"So you became a cop because it seemed a natural way to use your talents?"

"Yes, and I was happy until The Revelation. Then they started to wonder if I was a supe because my solve rate was so high. My partner dumped me. I got harassed and put on a desk for a year. I finally convinced them that I was just a psychic human and they recruited me for the SIU. Why do you ask?"

"I'm curious" he told me. "I've never met another like you. No psychic has ever read that coin. You aren't the first one I've tested."

I snorted. "And here I thought you were just proving a point about the house you sneaky bastard. Do you debunk psychics for a hobby?"

He smiled. "No, and I was proving a point but killing two birds with one stone. We have occasional uses for psychics and often have artifacts that need to be read. It was a convenient way to test your power. And there is the fact that I can't read you. You are unique for a human."

"That's me" I agreed. "So are you part of the vampire's equivalent of the SIU, like a vamp cop?"

"Something like that" he told me. "I lead a team that settles internal disputes. That's why I'm working with you now. It wouldn't be good PR to have a vampire linked to these murders."

I nodded. "Now that you know it isn't a vamp, are you calling it quits?"

He frowned. "No. I believe that you will need all the help you can get with this case. It isn't likely that the human system will be equipped to deal with the killer if you find him."

"I imagine that's true" I agreed. I studied him. "We don't turn supes over to the human system you know."

He smiled. "I know. You turn them over to me."

"Ah" I said with sudden understanding. "You're the leader of one of the vamp intelligence groups that Simon is always muttering about. No wonder you said he would owe you a favor." I chuckled. "How much will he owe you for saddling you with me?"

“That’s actually the favor I’m repaying Sabina. I agreed to help with this case in exchange for the chance to work with you if you proved to be as talented as we heard you were. I believe that your services will be useful to us in a few cases we’re working on. I’ve asked to have you on loan for a few days. Does that bother you?”

“I don’t have an issue helping you solve vamp crimes as long as I don’t end up on a dinner plate for my efforts.”

He laughed. “I can promise you that I’ll keep you safe. Simon predicted you’d have trouble with this arrangement too. He doesn’t seem to know you very well.”

I grinned. “Oh, I’ll have a few words for Simon. I don’t like being bartered away without being part of the discussion. But in reality, I’m a cop. I won’t help you hunt down innocent people, but if you have a crime you need help with, I’ll lend a hand. What do you need me to do?” He studied me and I felt his surprise. I smirked. “Are you worried that I’m being too helpful? You’ll find I’m pretty easy going, actually, despite my attitude tonight. Let me get enough sleep and keep me fed and I’m practically a joy to be around.”

“You are a curiosity Sabina. You have not reacted at all as I expected you to react. I was given the impression that you would be less than happy helping with vampire business or working with even a temporary vampire partner. Oddly enough, joy to work with was not a descriptor that your captain used”

I stared at him, confused. “I can’t imagine why you were given that impression. I prefer to work with supes. It’s the humans that make my ears bleed. Simon is well aware of this. And I do tend to be bossy, but I don’t really think I’m difficult if you can discount that lack of tact thing. Maybe he reacted to what you need from me. What do you need?”

“I have a few objects that I would like you to read, but not until you’re well rested. In the meantime, we can discuss your killer. Does that trouble you?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. It will help if you prepare me for memories of intense cruelty, but other than that I don’t mind reading objects. Simon must not want me to work with you. If you were right that he kept Jarvis there for my protection, he must not trust you. Or he might be afraid you’ll lure me away to work for you full-time.”

Nathaniel sipped his coffee and smiled. “That is also what I suspect. Do you have any theories at all on who your killer might be?”

I shook my head. “I know the killer isn’t human. Other than that, I’m in the dark.”

“I will arrange for us to meet with a friend tomorrow. He may be able to help. Bring the crime scene photos with you, including those of the dollhouse. Why do you think Simon withheld those from me?”

“Most likely because he thought it was a vamp. If he didn’t trust you, he might have assumed you would cover it up. He may head up the SIU but I don’t think he’s fully comfortable with supes.”

Nathaniel smiled again. "Perhaps. Make sure you insist that we have all of the photos. My friend will be able to tell us if there is significance to the actions with the toy or if it was just a moment of whimsy on the killer's part. Finish your coffee and food and I'll drive you home."

I shook my head. "I need my car. Take me back to the precinct."

"I'll pick you up tomorrow and drop you at your car at the end of your shift. You are too tired to drive yourself tonight. It will be safe enough in the lot. If you need it before work, you can call my cell and I'll arrange to have it brought to you. Give me your phone."

I fished in my pocket and handed him my cell and watched as he programmed his number and hit the call button. When his phone vibrated, he stored the number in his address book and handed my phone back. "Call me if you have any problems before I pick you up."

"Do you think I'll have problems?" I asked as I stuffed my phone back into my pocket and took another swallow of coffee.

"If you attract the killer's attention you will" he told me. "It is likely a small risk, but it's best to be prepared."

## Chapter Four

I stood in the bookstore the next night, letting my eyes flit over the titles without touching them. I kept my hands shoved into my pockets while I waited. These books were old and dealt with the occult. I had no doubt that I'd be flooded with a myriad of impressions if I ran my finger over the spines and that some of them would not be pleasant. I avoided touching unfamiliar objects for just this reason. I heard a door open behind me and turned my attention back to the room, frowning when I saw that Nathaniel was watching me with interest. He lifted an eyebrow at my scowl before turning to address the shop owner, the motivation for our visit to the store.

"Isaac" Nathaniel said, extending his hand to the man. "This is Detective Sabina Knight. She is a member of the SIU and we are working together on an investigation."

I took the man's offered hand. "Nice to meet you" I said. "Do you have a private room where we can talk or do you need to close the store?"

Isaac smiled and motioned me towards the door that he had just exited. "We can speak in here." He turned towards the back of the store and called out "Billy, I'm in the back and don't wish to be disturbed." I felt a wave of anxiety drift out of the stacks.

"Got it Boss" a man's voice called out. I was glad he decided to stay in the back. The last thing I needed was to deal with another human tonight, especially one who appeared to be anxious around supes.

I entered the room and took a seat at a round table. "Can I offer you tea?" Isaac asked us. I declined but Nathaniel accepted and I tapped my foot in irritation as the man moved around the office to turn on an electric water pot and gather supplies. Nathaniel watched me with amusement and I frowned. "You are no more patient when you are well rested Sabina, though you look considerably better" he mused.

I snorted. "I only have this lifetime Nathaniel. I don't like to waste it."

Isaac chuckled. "Enjoying a cup of tea is not a waste of time Detective. Nathaniel informed me that you want me to look at crime scene photos. Tea relaxes the nerves and might help with the task."

"Are you nervous?" I asked. "I don't get that sense from you."

He smiled. "And what do you sense from me?" he asked.

"Intrigue" I told him. "I think you're wondering what it is about the crime that would bring us to your door." I glanced around the book cluttered office. "Are you a witch?"

"No, I am human. I am a historian and an expert on the occult." He looked like a historian, I thought. He was older than me by several decades and in at least his late sixties and his shoulders were beginning to look rounded, most likely from a lifetime of leaning over books. His hair was graying and thinning in the back and he wore reading glasses pushed low on his nose. All he needed was leather patches on his elbows and a pipe to complete the costume of the

consummate academic. He carried the teapot and two cups to the table and sat one in front of Nathaniel. “And I am intrigued. I assume that Nathaniel suspects the occult is involved in your crime.”

“Supes aren’t part of the occult” I said, looking at Nathaniel. “I’m not sure what he thinks you can help us with.”

Nathaniel smiled. “But rituals are. I believe that these killings have elements of occult rituals. Isaac should recognize them if I am right.”

Isaac sat and held out his hand. I reached inside my jacket and pulled out an envelope that held the photos from the house and placed it on his outstretched palm. “Most practitioners of the occult are human” he began as he flipped through the photos. “They come in looking for spells that will win them money or love or success. Some want books that deal with the dark arts. They mistakenly believe that selling their souls will bring them power over others, but these individuals are in the minority.” He paused when he came to the photos of the dollhouse and frowned as he spread them out over the table. “Nathaniel said you received impressions from these toys.” I nodded and told him about the hand that had placed the dolls before covering them with blood and about the jubilation I’d felt when I touched the father doll. He nodded. “And what did you pick up from the other dolls?”

“I didn’t touch them. The evil on the first one left me feeling...” I searched for a word. “...soiled, I suppose. I didn’t want to experience that again.”

He sighed. “You will need to touch the others. You need to determine if the emotions were the same with all of the victims. Do you suspect the father was killed first?”

I frowned. “We don’t know. I suppose we assumed that based on human psychology. A human would kill the father first since he would be seen as the strongest threat. If he recreated the scene accurately, the father was killed first.”

Isaac nodded and gathered the photos together before shoving them into the envelope and handing it back to me. “But you don’t suspect a human killer. Why is that?”

“The level of destruction was too high. A human couldn’t drive forks through expensive tile. And there were no bodies or body parts. Add the color of the hand to that, and it seems to rule out humans.”

He nodded and took my hand. “You are very pale Detective.”

I snorted and pulled my hand away and placed it over Nathaniel’s for comparison, forcing myself to ignore the tingle of attraction that the touch inspired. I couldn’t afford to let myself be distracted by the man. He stared at me surprised and I shrugged. I had no problems touching supes. Why should I? But I knew that most humans would avoid contact with them like the plague, as if being a supe might be contagious. I had a feeling I’d just shattered another of his mistaken beliefs about me. “Not when you compare me to Nathaniel. You can see the pink hues and the blue of my veins compared to the alabaster quality of his. The hand I saw looked more like his than mine.” I moved my hand away from his. “This hand was as pale as a vamps and maybe more so.”

“Does the dollhouse hold any significant clues Isaac” Nathaniel asked. “Any idea why he’d go through the trouble of restaging the scene?”

Isaac shrugged. “There are no occult ties that I know of. It is likely that he enjoyed the killings and merely took the opportunity to recreate them. Or perhaps he left them to assure the SIU that the victims had been killed on the property since there were no remains other than blood. There was nothing similar in the second victim’s house?”

“No” I said. “But the apartment belonged to a single man. There were no dolls.”

“Let me see those photos” he said and I handed him the second envelope. He hesitated over a photo and handed it to me. “What do you see here?” he asked.

I took the photo and examined it. It was from the man’s bedroom. It showed an unmade bed. There was a light indentation on the pillow and sheets. “We assumed he was asleep and either woke to use the toilet or was awakened by a noise in the bathroom. I see a mussed bed.”

He nodded and pointed to the lower edge of the photo. “And this?” he said.

I stared at the photo. His finger had tapped a row of shoes at the foot of the bed. There were six pairs lined up in a row. The only thing odd about the photo was that the right shoe in every pair was turned with the toes towards the bed while the left was turned to face the bureau. “I just see shoes” I said.

He nodded. “This is a protection spell to ward off evil spirits” he said. “The shoes face in opposite directions to confuse the spirit about the owner’s location. It is believed to protect the soul as it wanders in dreams.”

“Really?” I said as I looked at the photo with renewed interest.

“Really” he answered with a smile. “Did your team look under the bed?”

“I don’t know. There was no blood in the bedroom, so maybe not. I try to stay away from the everyday emotions when I read a scene. They tend to overwhelm me so I didn’t enter this room.”

He nodded. “Take a look. I suspect there is a pentagram there that is most likely drawn in salt. You should find personal items on each of the points for added protection. Now, did you find any signs of anything odd in the house?”

“There were no odd shoe alignments, but the family was involved in a Christian church. They had religious symbols everywhere.” I pulled out the first envelope and sorted through the photos until I found one that was taken in the master bedroom. A large crucifix hung over the bed. I handed it to him.

He nodded. “And were there also crucifixes in the children’s rooms?”

I frowned. “Not that I recall.” I sorted through the photos again until I pulled out photos of the rooms. “They both have prints of that guardian angel painting but no crosses.” I tapped the framed picture on one of the walls. An angel stood protectively over two young children who

were crossing a narrow bridge over rushing white water. The bridge looked unstable. The paintings were splattered with blood.

“So your victims were good people. The family was devout and the man was dedicated to helping his community. Your killer appears to be targeting the innocent.” He tapped the photo of the man’s bedroom again. “And at least he appeared to know that he was being targeted. Go back to the apartment and look for the pentagram. If it is there, try to read the objects that he’s left on the points. They may give you clues on what he feared.”

“Whatever did this wiped the emotions from the house” Nathaniel told him. “Wouldn’t the apartment be the same?”

Isaac shook his head. “The pentagram should have left the objects untouched. Look in his cupboards and living room for signs of oddly placed objects. Look for spilled salt in the cupboards and pentagrams under the furniture. I believe that he may have been killed in the bathroom because this is the only room that he forgot to protect. He may have only been visible there.”

I frowned. “And the family? If you suspect an evil spirit, wouldn’t their faith have protected them?”

Isaac smiled. “Faith protects the soul and not the body. I suspect that the dollhouse may have been an attempt to bind the souls.”

“You believe the killer wanted their souls?” Nathaniel asked incredulously.

Isaac shrugged and tapped the photo with the shoes. “This man believed that something wanted his soul. It is possible that he was correct. If these people were killed by the same being, it is likely that the dolls were used to break the spiritual protection for the family.” He smiled at me and squeezed my hand, appearing to sense that my thoughts had turned to the dead children. “It would not have worked. Their souls were safe. The innocence of children is untouchable. If the parents truly believed in what they practiced, they were also safe.”

“So the dollhouse was arranged on the off chance that the parents had doubts in their faith?” I asked.

“It isn’t uncommon for humans to question their Maker, even when they go through the motions of faith. It would be a rational step.”

“I thought you said the dollhouse wasn’t ritualistic” Nathaniel said. “Now you believe it was?”

He nodded. “I didn’t suspect until I saw the shoes. I can’t say with absolute certainty that this is the case, but I suspect it. It would explain the use of all of the family members’ blood. So…” he leaned back and sipped on his tea. “You need to handle those other dolls. If he killed them oldest to youngest, I suspect you’ll notice a difference. And you need to take another look at the apartment.”

“Thank you Isaac” Nathaniel said as he stood. “May I call you if we have more questions?”

“Of course Nathaniel. I’m always happy to help if I can. It was nice meeting you Detective.” He stared at me as I gathered the photos and stood. “Detective, if I give you a gift will you promise to keep it with you?”

I raised an eyebrow as I studied him. “Not if it’s a severed chicken foot” I said drily. “And only if you tell me why and don’t expect a favor in return.” Nathaniel turned his gaze on me again and studied me closely. “I don’t like owing favors” I told him with a shrug.

Isaac chuckled and moved to his desk where he pulled out a long drawer and ruffled through the contents. A moment later he handed me a small leather pouch that was closed with a long drawstring. The ends of the string were knotted to form a necklace. “This contains a mixture of herbs and small semi-precious stones” he told me. “It is a protection amulet. I believe you may need added protection while you search for the killer. Keep it on you at all times. And I do not require repayment for the gift.”

I laughed. “One shower and the herbs are gone” I said.

He shook his head. “It won’t be damaged by water.” He dropped it over my head. “Do not remove it Detective. Nathaniel can protect your body, but not your soul.”

I dropped the pouch inside my shirt. “I’m not likely to be hunted” I told him. “I’m not really an innocent.”

He smiled. “You believe that because you are not naïve, but you are an innocent” he said. He clapped Nathaniel on the back. “Your partner is another matter.”

Nathaniel smiled. “She has already decided that I am not evil Isaac.”

“Evil is not the opposite of innocent, Nathaniel, as you well know. Be very careful while you hunt this killer.”

I frowned. “Do you know what he is?” I asked.

Isaac nodded. “Dangerous” he said as he showed us out.

“Apartment first?” Nathaniel asked me when we were in his car.

“Food first” I told him. “You may not need it, but I do. If you’re hungry, find a meal while I eat. I’m not on the menu.”

He laughed. “I fed before I picked you up Sabina. I’ll nibble on something to keep you company.” Another myth about the vampires was that they couldn’t eat food.

“Your kind did an amazing job with the rumor mill” I told him as he guided the car into traffic to follow directions to the restaurant I’d suggested. “People might suspect you are a vamp because you’re so pale. But when they see you eating food or out in daylight, they’ll relax.”

He nodded. “The rumors have helped a great deal with our survival over the ages” he agreed. “The most convenient myth is the one about holy objects though. Humans needed to feel as if they could protect themselves as well as identify us.” He grinned. “It has saved my neck a few times.”

I nodded. "The Revelation surprised me" I said. "I expected the supes to stay hidden during my lifetime. Michael didn't even hint it was coming."

Nathaniel frowned. "Michael? Do you mean the warm blood?"

I laughed. "Warm blood? Your kind gave him a nickname?"

He shrugged. "It's what he is. He is rare and the quality makes him well known. How do you know him?"

"I met him during a case I was working on about a year after I joined the force. He realized I knew what he was. We had a very tense chat and then became friends."

"You knew about us before the Revelation and never said anything?"

"Don't sound so surprised. What was I supposed to say? I wanted as normal a life as possible. I couldn't very well have that if I told humans that there were all kinds of supes living amongst us, could I?"

Nathaniel pulled into the parking lot and turned to stare at me. "How did you know what we were?"

I shrugged. "You send out different vibes than humans. I don't know how to explain it. You don't look different, if you discount the pale skin of the vamps and the increased heat of the Weres. Then you all have that aggression thing going for you. But you appear human enough to humans."

"But you are human" he told me. "Aren't you?"

"I am human. I just have something extra." I opened the car door and he stopped me with a hand on my arm. I turned back to look at him.

"You were smart to keep the knowledge to yourself. You would likely be smarter to continue to keep it to yourself."

"Why? Since The Revelation the supes aren't hiding anymore."

He shook his head. "Of course they are. Don't make a habit of announcing that you can recognize non humans. Some of us don't want to be recognized."

I frowned. "Only you and Michael know. Is my secret safe with you?"

"Yes, Sabina. Is it safe with Michael?"

"It has been so far" I told him. "Enough cloak and dagger. I'm hungry."

"You need to dress differently tomorrow night" I told him as we climbed the stairs to the apartment after we left the restaurant.

"What's wrong with my clothes?" he asked, frowning down at his tailored suit.

I snorted. “Nothing’s wrong with them. It’s a nice suit and you look very GQ. But you get too much attention. You should get an SIU jacket from Simon tonight and pair it with jeans.” I grinned. “Unless dressing like this is one of your hidden weaknesses.”

He smiled. “I can blend in” he told me “if you believe it is necessary.”

“We’ll get fewer hinky looks when we’re working” I told him. The staff and customers at the restaurant had watched us closely while we ate. “We stick out like this.”

“They assumed I was your date” he told me as he smirked. “Most women wouldn’t be troubled by that.”

“Yeah, right, Mr. Studly” I said. “Why are all supe men so conceited? They were wondering why a rich guy was in that dump. Then they started wondering what you were since you were sitting with an SIU agent and they got nervous. Didn’t you read any of them? If you were in an SIU uniform, they wouldn’t have given us a second glance.”

He frowned. “I don’t make a habit of reading people unless I have a reason. It is intrusive.”

“You tried to read me the minute we met” I countered as I moved to cut the tape that had been replaced over the apartment door after our last visit here.

“I had a reason. I believed you were hiding information” he agreed. “Were you?”

“No. I might have if Simon hadn’t asked me to talk to you. But it won’t help us any if we aren’t honest with each other. Besides, I’m honest to a fault like I told you.” I turned to consider him. “Are you hiding anything from me?”

“No. You are right that partners need to trust each other. I will share anything I discover with you.” We moved into the living room and I started to kneel in front of the sofa to peer under it until he stopped me. “Allow me” he said with a grin. He lifted the furniture from the floor with ease and held it off to the side.

“Show off” I muttered, making his grin widen. “And there’s the pentagram.” I sighed. I took a camera from my pocket and snapped several photos. “Should we bag the objects or should I get the techs back before I touch them?”

“If Isaac is correct, and he has been so far, then these will be protected. They should only hold evidence of the victim. Do what you do and then call for the techs.”

I nodded and knelt beside the pentagram. Each of the five points was covered by an object. I examined each of them before picking up a small ceramic rabbit from one of the points. “He’s had this since childhood. His Zaydeh gave it to him when he was five or so. I can feel love and joy in it.”

“And fear?” Nathaniel asked.

I shook my head. “No. Just the memories of childhood.” I replaced the figurine and picked up a button from the next point. “This is odd” I said. “It’s a button from a favorite suit. It doesn’t hold much emotion.” I reached for a Star of David. “This is from his bar mitzvah. It also holds

only childhood memories, though they're more muted than the toy." I worked through the other symbols and stood. "With the exception of the rabbit, these don't appear to have been that important to him. They were just relics of familiarity."

Nathaniel lowered the sofa and pulled out his cell. "Isaac" he said when the man picked up. "Would you expect each of the objects on the pentagram to be equally important to the man?" I waited during the pause while Isaac answered. "And if they're not?" he asked and another long pause followed. "I see, thank you." Nathaniel hung up and frowned at me. "Isaac said that each of the objects should be equally important to the man. Without that emotional bond, the protection wouldn't work."

"I think it did work and that's why he was killed in the bathroom. Let's check out the bedroom. If there's a pentagram in there, then I'll bet good money the objects worked" I told him. "I'll start with the shoes" I said when we entered the small space. "Cross your fingers that he didn't have a foot fetish."

Nathaniel chuckled. "I hope not for your sake" he told me as I picked up the jogger that was at the end of the row.

I frowned. "Now I sense fear" I said. "It isn't as strong as it should be if he was truly afraid for his life. But he was definitely afraid when he placed these here." I went down the line of shoes and by the time I reached the end looked up, confused. "There is nothing from the last shoe. The fear lessened with each placement. By the time he finished, he was fully calm."

Nathaniel nodded and lifted the bed to expose the pentagram. "I have a theory on that, but let's see what you find here before we discuss it."

I snapped several photos before reaching for the first object, a thin gold band. I overbalanced and threw out my hand to rest on the floor to keep from toppling into the pentagram and gasped. I was overwhelmed with the man's fear when my hand made contact with the salt. I could see his hand shaking as he poured the crystals onto the floor and heard the faint murmuring of words that I suspected were prayers. I pulled back my hand and looked up at Nathaniel who watched with interest and what I thought might be concern. I reached out and picked up the ring. "This was his mother's wedding band. There is only love and grief here." I worked around the circle and discovered varying degrees of old emotions, but nothing like the fear I'd felt in the salt.

"Back to the sofa?" he asked as he lowered the bed and I nodded.

"The salt holds his fear" I told Nathaniel as I put my finger on the edge of the drawing. "Let's check the kitchen." The cupboards were filled with spilled salt and each shelf held so much fear that my bones trembled with it. "He knew he was being stalked" I said. "He was terrified. Call Isaac and ask him if all salt will hold the fear or if it had to be used as a protection spell."

I waited while he made the call. "Isaac says that salt is a purifier. Any salt would hold the emotions if there are any to be found. I guess this means we're headed back to the house?" he asked when he hung up the phone.

I sighed. "We have to, but I can tell you that I'm not looking forward to the idea."

He squeezed my hand sympathetically. “It will be in the kitchen. You won’t feel the children’s terror, will you?”

I shook my head. “But the mother’s will be bad enough if she knew her children were in danger.” I sighed. “What’s your theory?” I followed him across the parking lot and waited as he started the engine before turning an expectant gaze his way.

“I believe that he was able to take all but the strongest emotions from the objects. The ring held his love for his mother and grief at her death. The toy held the love for his grandfather and the joys and innocence of childhood. The other objects may not have been as powerfully linked to his soul. I think perhaps he began to calm as he placed the shoes, believing that the ritual would work. This is likely why you felt a diminishing return as you moved down the row.”

“So the salt didn’t protect the objects like Isaac thought they would?” I asked. “But the salt held the fear of his death. Why might that be?”

“He’s troubled by that Sabina. He told me to make sure that you don’t remove the amulet.” He frowned. “I think you should stay with me until this is over.”

I snorted. “Nope, I’ll pass. I’ll get one of the witches to charm my apartment and not forget the bathroom.”

He grinned. “I suspected you’d say that. Call Simon and tell him what we learned. Have him send the tech team out. Tell him we’ll canvass the neighborhood tomorrow and I want to look at the community center where he worked.”

I nodded and turned my attention to the call while he drove. We worked well together, I decided. He was methodical and thoughtful in his approach and valued my input as well. A lot of the older creatures I encountered tended to view females as objects but he appeared to respect my abilities and my intelligence. I also appreciated having someone to watch my back and be concerned about my welfare. And he was smart. It was nice to have someone besides myself to discuss theories with. I could get used to having him as a partner. If Simon could find someone who was similar, I might be happy to be paired again. I would have to talk to him about it when the case was over.

The salt in the kitchen screamed through me and left me shaking with the terror it had absorbed. Another plus in Nathaniel’s column was that he’d allowed me to sit in silence with my eyes closed as he drove and hadn’t questioned me on it. I had felt the woman’s terror in her death and it had been far worse than the fear that had guided the man’s hand as he shook out his protection charms or what had accompanied his death. And her terror had been for her family and herself which had magnified it even more. I’d waited on the porch and smoked a cigarette while Nathaniel had looked in the children’s room for signs of salt. Even if he’d found some, I wouldn’t have touched it. There was a limit to how much emotion I could withstand.

I opened my eyes when the car came to a stop. “Where are we?” I asked, looking out at my surroundings when he rolled down the window to greet a guard that sat in a small building at the gate in a large stone and wrought iron fence.

“My home” he told me. “Hello Andrew. We won’t be here long.”

“Good evening Nathaniel.” The gate swung open as he punched several buttons on a low instrument panel. “Call when you’re ready and I’ll have the gate open.”

“Why are we here?” I asked looking around with interest as he pulled onto the long tree lined drive that led up to a mansion.

“I need a few things and I thought we could take a break before you face the dolls again. I have several of those objects here and you can read one for me. It won’t be like the salt and it will provide a needed distraction for you.”

I nodded. “Works for me. Nice house. I guess you don’t stay poor after a few millennia, do you?”

He chuckled. “Some do, but not if you’re smart. I’m very smart.” He pulled up the circular drive and stopped in front of the main entrance. I reached for my door handle and was surprised when the door swung open before I could touch it. I looked at the hand that extended to help me out of the car. The human it was attached to noticed my uniform at the same moment I noticed his hand and withdrew it with a smile, guessing correctly that I would not want to be assisted from the vehicle.

“Roger, leave the car” Nathaniel told the man. “We won’t be long. Have Mrs. Strumson bring coffee to the parlor for us please and then meet me upstairs.”

“Of course Nathaniel” Roger said as he turned to hold open the door for us.

“This way” Nathaniel told me as he took my elbow and guided me down a marble floored corridor and into a room on the right. Now that he knew I wasn’t repulsed by him, he seemed to take a lot of opportunities to make physical contact. I wondered if it bothered the vamps that most humans were reluctant to touch them. Michael was also eager to make physical contact and often took my hand in his when we chatted. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be back in one moment.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets as I walked around the large library. Sofas and chairs were scattered around the room and gave the impression that the man entertained here on occasion. Book filled shelves lined the walls and I stopped to read several of the titles before moving to gaze out the window at a neatly maintained garden. The late fall chill meant that the spring plants were dormant for the season, but splashes of color filled the areas where fall and winter blooms thrived. I smiled at the garden. I thought it was perfect.

“Your coffee Detective” a woman’s voice announced and I turned to see a middle aged woman set a tray on a low coffee table. I watched as she poured a cup and added a generous portion of cream before setting the creamer back on the tray.

“You’re a gem Mrs. Strumson” I said as I moved to pick up the cup. “I can use this about now.”

The woman gave a quick bow with her head. “Let me know if you require anything else.” I watched as she left the room.

“How’s the coffee?” Nathaniel asked when he returned a moment later. He carried a small wooden box with him and sat it on the table near the tray.

“Perfect like everything else here. I really love your garden. Are you surprised?”

He smiled. “No. But it’s still nice to hear.” He poured a cup for himself and glanced to where my empty hand remained shoved in my jacket. “You didn’t touch anything?”

I shook my head. “It’s like reading minds for you. It’s too intrusive. I only touch belongings when I need to.”

“So you imagine the belongings I keep in here will hold too many personal revelations?” he asked.

I shrugged. “They might or they might not.” I pointed to a globe in the corner. “If I touched that, I might see you looking up a reference point which would not be a problem. But I might also see you mourning a lost love or remembering a time that you prefer to keep private. I have no way of knowing until I touch the object. So I don’t touch.”

“That must have been challenging as a child” he said as he sipped his coffee and watched me over the rim of the cup.

I laughed. “You have no idea how erotic people find kitchen counters and tables to be” I said. “I got used to the shock of it eventually, but I also learned that some things are better undiscovered.”

He chuckled and flipped open the box. “Hopefully, you won’t be scandalized by this.”

I peered into the box and saw a gold medallion on a long chain. I frowned. “This looks very old. It will likely hold a lot of emotion if it’s important to you.”

“It isn’t mine. It will likely hold a lot though I am most interested in the last memory it holds. Can you read it?”

I nodded and lifted the medallion from the box. “It was given as a gift” I said a moment later as I lowered it back to the velvet cushion. “The woman who owned it, Simone, was being parted from her lover. She gave it to him as a remembrance until they were reunited.”

He smiled. “And did you see the lover’s face?”

I snorted. “It wasn’t you. Why do you have it?”

“I have it so that you can identify the lover. There is a dispute about the current ownership of the woman’s belongings.”

“His name is RaFael” I said. “He wasn’t very tall and had dark hair and eyes.”

Nathaniel grinned. “Excellent” he said as he pulled out his cell and placed a call. “The medallion belongs to RaFael. He has told us the truth” he said and disconnected. Seeing my quizzical expression he smiled and sipped his coffee. “When a vampire dies without a proclaimed heir, his or her belongings go to the one who killed him or her. RaFael claimed ownership of this woman’s belongings by virtue of their relationship but there were no witnesses to stand for him. Another vampire, the one who killed her, challenged his rights. You’ve just settled the dispute for us.”

“So you needed me to play probate judge?” I asked. “I thought you needed me to solve crimes.”

“This would have been a crime if RaFael had lied. He would have been executed. So you were really playing jury on a capital offense.”

“That was easy enough” I said. “What’s next?”

“The rest will wait for another day. Why don’t you have a partner? You don’t appear hard to work with to me.” He smiled at me. “In fact, you appear the opposite. You are intuitive and thorough in an investigation and appear to manage difficult emotions without the normal human reactions. And you haven’t argued with me once.”

I snorted. “Did Simon tell you I was hard to work with?”

He laughed. “He might have mentioned that you are argumentative, bossy and obnoxious. And you were glowering like an angry pit bull when we met. I suppose I made an assumption.”

“I was just tired. I’m easy to work with as long as my partner isn’t a fool. I got along with Murphy until he dumped me. We worked well together before that. As for being bossy and argumentative, I have to own that. I am.”

He laughed again. “And why don’t you have another partner since that was more than five years ago?”

“Jarvis thinks that Simon sees me as a supe and underestimates my need for backup. He pairs supes with humans to protect the humans and satisfy the powers that be. The humans don’t want to work with me and, if Jarvis is right, then he couldn’t pair me with a supe. I just think he believes I don’t need back up since all I do these days is read crime scenes.”

“Why don’t the humans want to work with you?”

“I’m not sure. They may want a supe that can protect them. Or they may be uncomfortable around me because I’m human but different. I think it’s easier to accept another species than it is to accept a person that doesn’t fit any reference frame. Simon works to keep the peace so he doesn’t force the issue.”

“Why haven’t you insisted on a supe partner?” he asked as he studied me.

“Why would I? He won’t capitulate so it would be a wasted effort. I tend to agree that I’m not in much danger. But I was just thinking that if I worked as well with someone as we seem to work together I wouldn’t be opposed. You’ve reminded me what it’s like to have someone to bounce ideas off of. That’s the one thing I miss about Murphy. Jarvis does that some, but he isn’t my partner. We don’t always work the same scenes.”

“Why not request him as a partner then?”

“He smokes all my cigarettes and badgers me to join the pack. I like him fine in small enough doses though.”

Nathaniel frowned. “He’s offered you the pack?”

I nodded. “And Michael’s offered to turn me as well. They’re my friends and tend to be protective.”

“I see” he said as he stared at his coffee. “And you’ve declined both offers, obviously.”

“I have. And why the suspicion?” I smirked at him when he looked at me, once again, with surprise. “I read emotions, remember?”

“Men don’t make this offer out of friendship Sabina. They have ulterior motives and likely want you.”

I laughed. “No they don’t. Jarvis has a mate that would rip him apart if he looked at me twice. And you know how Were mates are with each other. He’d never look twice. And Michael is a flirt, but he doesn’t mean anything by it. If he wanted more, he’d have made that known by now.”

“Then perhaps they want your skills. If they sired you, they would have a claim on your loyalty that they don’t have now.”

I shook my head. “Wrong again. I’m a very loyal friend and they both know it. They don’t have to use subterfuge to gain it. You aren’t one of those men that believe that men and women can’t have platonic friendships, are you?”

“No I am not. But they are not human men. They are supes. Michael is a vampire and not likely to flirt unless he is pursuing a woman. That isn’t something we do. Why are you so certain that human rules apply?”

“Interesting theory on Michael, but you’re wrong. Supes are more straightforward than humans. I know where Michael and Jarvis stand with me. I can’t say the same for Simon. Human emotions are a lot more conflicted and scattered.”

“And what do you believe Simon thinks of you” he asked.

“I don’t always know. I think he respects my talent but I also creep him out a little. He can’t pigeon hole me in a neat classification like he can the supes. He knows the vamps can read his mind, but he isn’t sure about me. So he’s never really relaxed around me. He avoids me as much as he can.”

I looked up as Roger entered the room. “You’re all set” he told Nathaniel. “Do you need anything else?”

“No Roger, thank you” Nathaniel said as he put down his cup. “Are you relaxed enough to continue with the dolls?” he asked.

I put my cup on the tray as well. “Not really, but they can’t be avoided. We can go.”