



Saved at Sunrise

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"Do not put yourselves in any jeopardy. Your job is to infiltrate the gang by showing interest in joining, find out if they're using murder as a rite of initiation, and then get out. Alive."

"That's my plan, too." Della Tsang answered with sass looking up at Burnett James, one of the Shadow Falls Academy owners who also just so happened to work for the FRU-Fallen Research Unit-which was basically the FBI of the supernatural world.

"We don't want you to bring anyone in. We don't want you to take care of the bad guys." Burnett continued staring right at her.

Afternoon sun poured into the window of the Shadow Falls office behind him. The crystals sitting on shelves caught the light and cast rainbow-colored mirages on the wall. They danced and shifted as if magical. And maybe they were. Crap like that happened all the time here.

"Actually, Burnett said, drawing Della's attention back to him, "we don't think this is the group, but if it is, with your testimony, we'll have enough proof to get a search warrant and we're pretty damn positive we should find all the evidence we need to convict."

Burnett, six feet plus, with dark hair and eyes, was a hard-ass who worried way too much, but being a vampire like herself, Della respected him and his hardassness.

She just wished the respect was mutual. Seriously, didn't he trust her? Didn't he know she could friggin' take care of herself? Did he really have to go over this again?

"I understand, sir." Steve, the brown-haired, brown-eyed, great-bodied guy sitting next to her spoke up when she didn't. For the first time, Della noticed his voice held a hint of a Southern accent that wasn't just Texan.

Della glanced over. Steve gave Burnett his complete attention. What an ass-kisser.

Steve was evidence that Burnett didn't trust her. Why else would Burnett insist Steve go with her? She didn't need the shape-shifter. He was just going to slow her down.

"Wait," Burnett said, pacing across the office again. "Let me rephrase that. I don't want you to just get out alive. I want you to get out just the way you went in. Not wounded, not bruised, and for God's sake, don't leave any dead bodies behind. You got that?"

"Now you're taking all the fun out of it," Della smarted off.

Burnett growled. "I'm not joking and if you can't take this seriously then get your vampire butt out of here, because I'm not playing around."

Della slumped back in her chair, knowing when to shut her mouth. She really wanted to do this assignment for the FRU. Wanted to win Burnett's respect. Everyone needed someone to impress. And since impressing her parents wasn't an option anymore, she'd settle for Burnett.

Not that impressing anyone was the only reason she wanted to go. Even before she'd been turned into a vampire, she'd considered a career in criminal justice-something that allowed her to kick butt. Of course, her parents had frowned on that. They had her earmarked to be a doctor. They had her earmarked to be a lot of things.

But not a vampire.

Not that they knew what she was. The way Della figured it, if they went bat-shit crazy just because she'd stopping eating rice-which after being turned tasted like curdled toe jam-how the hell were they going to accept that she was a blood-drinking vampire? The answer was obvious. They wouldn't, couldn't accept it.

Lucky for her, she'd been accepted into Shadow Falls-a boarding school for supernaturals-and didn't have to worry what her parents thought about her choice of careers, or whether she ate her rice or not. And yet ... now Della couldn't help but question if they ever thought or worried about her at all. Did they sit down to eat dinner and notice her chair was empty? Did her mom ever forget and set an extra plate at the table?

She doubted it.

Yes, they came to the parents' day visitations, but they were always the first to leave, and eager to do it. Especially her father, the man Della had spent her entire life trying to impress.

A daddy's girl, her mom used to call her.

Not anymore.

No doubt her sister had taken over that role.

Turning vampire hadn't been Della's choice. It was one of those things life slapped on your ass and you just had to accept it. Which meant she'd had to accept that her family would never be able to accept her. Not that it really bothered her. Not anymore.

She was so over it.

"Am I making myself clear?" Burnett asked, yanking her back to reality.

"One hundred percent," Della said, working hard to keep her attitude from spilling over.

"Yes, sir." Steve nodded.

Yup, an ass-kisser.

"Okay, you got your orders?" Burnett said. "You know where to go and what your cover is? They expect you to meet them at four in the morning. Don't be late, don't be too early. Don't let them lure you back to their compound. The policy, if they follow their own policy, is that three of the members will meet with you to talk. You get the information about joining, you get out."

"Got it." Della held up the brown envelope. And you've gone over this ten times.

"Then go get your things." Burnett eyed Della. "And please, don't make me regret sending you on this."

"You won't," Della said.

Della and Steve stood to leave.

"Steve," Burnett said. "Give me a few minutes."

Della looked from Steve to Burnett. What the hell did he need to talk with Steve about that couldn't be said in front of her?

Burnett shifted his gaze to Della and then cut his eyes to the door.

Frowning, Della shot up from the chair and left. She stopped about fifty feet from the porch, holding her breath and not moving a muscle. Hoping Burnett wasn't still listening, she tuned her own vampire hearing and waited to discover what the hell was up. The afternoon sun spilled over the trees, casting shadows on the ground as she stood frozen in one spot.

"I'm trusting you to keep Della safe," Burnett said.

Della inwardly growled at Burnett's chauvinistic approach and fought the need to rush back in there and give him some lip. I'm the one who's gonna have to protect his butt!

"I do not believe this is the gang we're looking for." Burnett's voice carried well. "Or I wouldn't be sending you two. This is just a clearance check. But that doesn't mean this group isn't dangerous."

"Don't worry," Steve's deep voice answered. "I'll keep her in my sight at all times."

Like hell you will. She already had a plan of doing a little side trip, and she didn't need Steve tagging along.

* * *

At six that evening they arrived at the cabin the FRU had rented them right outside the vampire compound. To call the place a dump would have been like calling one of those roach-coach vans fine dining.

Of course, she and Steve were supposed to look like a couple of supernatural teen runaways. She supposed it would have looked suspicious if they'd rented anything with even part of a star attached to its reputation. But damn, this was supposed to have been a fun trip.

She wasn't a prima donna, but sleeping on a mattress that was more dust mites than filling, with sheets that looked as if they hadn't been changed in a year or so wasn't her idea of fun. The bed's covers were half on and half off the mattress, and the pillow sported an indented greasy spot in the center as if someone with not-so-clean hair had slept there.

Or maybe died there.

As disgusting as that thought was, one even worse hit. Someone had probably done the humpty dance on that bed.

Yuck.

She could probably get a disease sleeping on it.

Walking back into the tiny living area, she found Steve staring at the sofa with about as much distaste as she had while gaping at the bed.

"Come to think about it, I'll take the sofa," she said. "And I don't want to hear any shit. There ain't no one going to get past me."

They had flown here. Not on a jet. Him as a Peregrine falcon-which meant he was fast-and her as a, well, a vampire-which meant she was faster. Vamps and shape-shifters being the only two species who could really fly. Well, an occasional witch, but Miranda, her Wiccan roommate, swore they really didn't travel around on brooms.

However, Steve and Della's mode of transportation also meant they really hadn't spoken since they'd left Shadow Falls, with the exception of when they'd first walked into the cabin and he'd insisted she take the bed. And why? Because if someone came through the door he would stop them.

That downright pissed her off. She almost called him on being a complete chauvinistic pig, but then realized that if she wanted to sneak out later, she wouldn't want him traipsing into the living room before morning and finding her gone.

Since he came across as the type with manners, and morals and stuff, who wouldn't come into a girl's bedroom-at least not without an invitation-she'd kept her mouth shut.

Face it, she'd take the odds of him finding her gone to the odds of those mattress germs finding her body, hands down.

Steve cut his soft brown eyes to her and a knowing smile spread his lips. He ran a hand through his brown hair, which he wore a tad longer than most guys. The strands fell right back into place, looking instantly styled. She doubted he went to some professional salon to get that look, but it almost appeared like he did.

His smile widened and he tucked one hand into his jeans pocket. The stance made the muscles in that arm bulge. "So what you're saying is that the bed is worse than the sofa?"

"I didn't say that." She tried not to laugh, but something close to it slipped out of her mouth. She tried not to stare at his crooked smile and what it did to his lips and eyes. Or how his muscled arms looked like a safe place to fall. She'd give anything, even half a bra size to make him ... ugly. And unlike her two roommates at Shadow Falls, she didn't have much bra size to offer.

She continued to stare at him. She could have dealt with an ugly guy much better than one who looked like he'd just walked off of some men's soap advertisement. And hell, she thought, breathing in his aroma, you'd think after spending the last two hours as a bird, he wouldn't smell like he used some spicy-smelling men's soap, but he did.

He smelled ... awesome, and that ticked her off, too.

If she were a witch like her bigger-boobed roommate, Miranda, she'd change him into a repulsive fowl/foul-smelling guy. And she'd also make him less ... nice. She didn't like nice.

The only nice person Della had grown fond of was Kylie. And she was so nice, even Della couldn't hate her. Well, right now, Della did hate her. Hated her for leaving. And if she didn't get her butt back to Shadow Falls soon, Della was going to drag her friend back kicking and screaming. Sure, Kylie had gone to meet her newly discovered grandfather and learn more about her species, but plain and simple, she belonged at Shadow Falls. Someone had to keep Della and Miranda from killing each other. And no one was better at that than Kylie.

"We could both sleep on the sofa," Steve said, and damn if he didn't sound serious.

"Not even in your dreams, bird boy!" she snapped.

"Ouch," he said and chuckled. "I only meant your head at one end and mine at the other. Only our feet would be touching."

"So you've got a foot fetish, do you?" she asked before she could stop herself.

Humor brightened his eyes. With him positioned right in front of the bare window, and the last rays of the setting sun beaming in, she got a good look at those eyes. Were those flecks of amber and green in his brown pools?

His gaze lowered to her Nike-covered size sixes. "I don't know, I haven't seen your naked feet."

Hearing him say the word naked with what sounded like a deep Southern accent,

deeper than Texas, made her stomach flutter like she was twelve again and had never been kissed. Good Lord, what was wrong with her? Since when did she find a Southern accent seductive?

She stuck one foot behind the other. "And you won't see them naked," she snapped, not liking that they'd been here less than five minutes and they were already ... flirting. At least it felt like flirting.

And Della Tsang didn't flirt.

Not anymore.

His gaze rose from her feet. "We'll see about that," he said.

They stood there staring at each other for a second. Then he spoke up. "You want to go grab a bite to eat?"

She frowned. "I brought a couple pints of AB positive with me in my bag." Which she needed to put in the fridge. While most vamps preferred their blood warm, Della liked it better cold. When your core temperature was 92 degrees, you appreciated things colder than yourself.

"Yeah, but I need food. Something hot and greasy. Nutrients for whatever the hell is gonna go down tomorrow morning."

Steve had been set up to play as her shape-shifter boyfriend, a guy she'd met after running away from home. They didn't allow anyone but vampires into the gang, but if she got accepted, and he could prove his worth to them, he would be brought in as an "extra." Basically someone they sent out to do their dirty work. Which was part of the reason it pissed her off that Burnett insisted he come. Extras were considered expendable.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you," she said.

"That just warms my heart." He put a hand over his wide chest. "Come on, go with me to grab a burger."

He made it sound like a date or something. Frowning, she was about to call him on it when she remembered seeing a Walmart not far from there and close to some fast-food joints. She could pick up a set of sheets, a blanket, and some extra-strength Lysol spray and maybe be able to sleep on the bed. That meant she could skip out on the foot-loving, Southern-speaking Steve. She wouldn't be gone long. She only needed a peek. A peek at the life she'd been cheated out of.

"Fine." She lit out of the room.

He lit out with her, and within seconds had transformed into a hauling-ass Peregrine falcon. She wasn't certain, but she thought she'd heard this was one of the fastest birds that existed. It wasn't a half-bad-looking animal, either. Its feathers were a blend of browns, tans, and black. Its eyes were striking, round, with large black pupils that seemed to take everything in. And when it stretched out its wings, it almost looked like it had leopard spots.

Della didn't know a whole lot about shape-shifters, but she'd heard once that one sign of their power was they could shift quickly. He'd shifted into a bird pretty damn quickly. Not that she was impressed or anything.

Sort of like flirting, Della Tsang didn't get impressed. Not about guys.

Not anymore.

Not since she'd turned vampire, turned cold, and had her heart shattered into tiny little bitty pieces by the guy who was supposed to love her forever.

* * *

Della landed with a thud on the pavement in the back of Walmart. Steve, still a bird, landed elegantly beside her. His wings stretched out wide.

Immediately, he started turning back into human form, and as always when a shifter turned, sparkly bubbles began floating around. One of his transformation bubbles lingering in the evening air popped on her arm and sent a tiny electric current up her elbow, zinging like she'd walked on carpet and then touched something metal.

"What are we doing here?" Steve asked, looking confused.

"Bedding and disinfectant." She brushed off her elbow then looked up. The sky was darkening, and the stars hadn't yet come out to play. Lifting her nose in the air, her vampire sense of smell caught the hint of werewolf under the strong scent of motor oil.

"Something wrong?" Steve asked.

"A few werewolves, but not too close."

He frowned. "Damn, let's grab what you need, snag me a burger, and get the hell back."

She smirked. "You scared of a couple of werewolves?"

"Scared, no. But we don't need any trouble right now." He started walking.

She moved with him. "Sometimes trouble is fun."

"Yeah, but let's save our energy for any trouble that finds us tomorrow."

"Anyone ever accuse you of being boring?" she snipped.

"No, but I'll admit, I'm more of a lover than a fighter."

She kept an eye on the dark shadows, making sure something didn't lurk there.

"Please, that's so lame."

"Lame, but true." Humor sounded in his voice.

"I'll stick with lame," she muttered.

She imagined him smiling again, but afraid she'd be pulled into his smile, she didn't chance looking at him. Hearing the laughter in his voice gave her stomach flutters. Or was she just hungry and needing some blood?

Entering the store, they made fast work of buying two flat sheets, a couple of pillowcases, two blankets, and some disinfectant. And Steve tossed in a bag of chips. At the fast-food place next door he got his burger to go, but he wolfed it down as they left the joint to find a desolate spot for him to transform so they could head back.

He'd finished the burger when they started down a dark alley behind the strip center. She noticed he stuffed the sandwich wrapper in his pocket. The guy didn't even litter, never mind the alley was covered in trash. They only got about ten feet down when they heard a scream.

A life-or-death-sounding scream.

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Della stopped, her gaze zipping around to locate the screamer. Steve jerked her into the dark shadows. A woman suddenly appeared at the other side of the alley running like the devil was chasing her. And he might've been, because someone slapped the pavement right on her heels.

A male someone.

"What are they?" Steve whispered, standing so close she could feel his words against her cheek.

They were too far away to note the pattern in their foreheads which marked a person's species-something all supernaturals could see-but Steve obviously trusted her sense of smell. She inhaled and tried to find the scents in the air besides the spicy male soap that filled her nose. "Humans."

"Good." He took off down the alley.

The girl screamed again as the attacker tackled her. Della, plastic bag in tow, beat Steve to the scuffle. The man on top of the female shifted back and forth, using the woman as a punching bag. Della snagged the creep off the obvious victim and tossed him a good five feet in the air. Not enough to kill him, but hopefully enough to hurt when he came down.

Blood oozed from the woman's nose and mouth. "You okay?" Della asked and crouched beside her. When the scent of blood filled her nose, Della had to work at not letting her eyes start to glow from hunger.

"Yeah." The woman sobbed out the word. "He's my husband, but he's drunk." She wiped blood from her lip. "He gets mean when he drinks."

But he wasn't the only one drinking. Della could smell booze on the woman's breath.

"This wasn't your problem," a deep voice seethed from behind Della. If she hadn't been so intent on the woman, she'd have heard him coming.

Della glanced up. Looming over them stood the drunk husband, who she obviously hadn't thrown nearly hard enough. Of course, that could be fixed.

He reached for Della, fury in his eyes and alcohol on his breath. "But you made it your problem now, bitch!"

Before she could shoot up, Steve caught the man by the arm and swung him around.

Fists started flying. Della heard what sounded like a few punches hitting bone. She could swear the jerk got a punch in on Steve. Bolting to her feet with plans to end the fight, Steve ended it first. He threw a hard right. The woman's dear old husband took that right directly to the face and fell over cold.

It would have been nice to savor the moment of success, but a pair of flashing blue police lights appeared at the end of the alley. Steve turned to Della. "We need to get the hell out of here."

Della grabbed her bag and they took off at a sprint. In the distance she heard the cops yelling for everyone to stop. They didn't. They couldn't.

Burnett hadn't been specific about them not getting arrested, but she had a feeling he'd frown upon it.

"Police! I said stop," the policeman yelled again. Footsteps echoed behind them, making their way down the alley.

They cut the corner into a side alley, and Della didn't know if they had time to get the hell out without the officers seeing their escape.

* * *

The refrigerator at the cabin didn't have an ice machine. She supposed she should be glad it had one ice tray with five pieces of ice in it. She emptied the five tiny cubes into a new pillowcase and handed it to Steve. His eye was almost swollen shut. "Hold it against your eye," she said.

They'd gotten away from the police, but barely. She stared at Steve's injury.

"Why didn't you change into something and maul his ass?" she bit out.

"You don't transform in front of humans," Steve said. "That's the number one shape-shifting rule."

"I'd think the number one rule would be to protect yourself."

"You'd think wrong," Steve said.

She shook her head. "They were both drunk, who would've believed them?"

He cut his eyes up to her. "What about when the cops showed up?"

She frowned, seeing his point, but still not liking it. "Put the ice on your eye." After a second she said, "So you're supposed to let them use you as a punching bag?"

Steve dropped the ice from his face. "He got one punch in, and who was the one on the ground when we left?"

Della groaned. "You should have let me handle him."

Steve ignored her and reached up to touch his eye. "Hey ... this will look good for tomorrow. I'm a badass shape-shifter, not afraid to fight."

Della rolled her eyes at him the way Miranda rolled hers at everyone. "But you just broke one of Burnett's rules. You're gonna come back bruised."

Steve grinned. "I'll tell him you did it."

Della plopped down on the old pine chest that served as a coffee table. "He'd know that wasn't true, even if he couldn't hear your heart lie. If you pissed me off, I wouldn't have stopped at a black eye. You'd be black-and-blue all over."

"Now that's just an outright lie. I don't think you'd hurt me." His Southern accent came out again.

"And you'd be wrong." She paused. "Where are you from?"

"Where do you think I'm from?" He smiled as if her question pleased him.

And she knew why. She'd shown some personal interest in him. She shouldn't have done that because he might think she actually liked him or something.

"I think you're from somewhere where they talk funny," she smarted off, and shot up to get her blood from the refrigerator. She found a cup, rinsed it out-twice-poured her dinner into it, and sat down at the kitchen table.

He dropped into the second chair at the table. "I'm from Alabama. My parents dragged me to Dallas two years ago."

"You don't like Texas?" she asked and frowned when she realized she'd done it again, shown a personal interest. Then again, maybe she should give herself a break, they were on a mission together, and she was pretending to be his girlfriend. If someone asked something, she should be able to answer it.

"Since I went to camp this last summer, I do. Before that ... not really. The school in Dallas was some fancy prep school-not even for supernaturals. That school fit my parents' way of thinking and life, but I don't do fancy schools very well."

She couldn't see him in one, either. Not that he didn't seem smart, he did. But he was just easier going than someone who wanted to put on airs.

A few more questions popped into her mind, but she hesitated to ask. She turned her cup in her hands.

The silence must have felt awkward to him as well, because he continued. "My dad's a CEO for an oil company, Mom's a doctor. And I'm an only child who's not supposed to care what I want but to just grow up, become what they want me to be, and make them look good in the human world."

"They're shifters, too, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, but you'd hardly know it. I don't think my mom has shifted in a couple of years. Dad does it just to relieve stress, but they like living in the human world."

"And you don't?" Della asked, thinking about how often she wished she could go back to the human world and be one of them. Sure, she appreciated the powers, loved knowing she could kick ass. But she wished that gaining these powers hadn't meant

losing so much of her life. Or rather the people who were in her life.

"I don't want to run off and join a damn compound or anything, but I'm proud of what I am. I can abide by the rules, not exposing myself in front of humans. I don't have a problem with rules, but I don't want to hide from this part of myself."

"I don't blame you." She didn't think she could hide, either. Not now.

"I'm not really complaining about them," he said. "I mean, as long as we don't have to see each other very often we forget that we're all disappointed in each other."

She knew all about the feeling of disappointing your parents. Exhaling, she looked at the pillowcase, which was bunched up at the end and held the five pieces of ice. He'd brought it with him to the table, but wasn't using it. "You should use that. That's all the ice we have."

He put it against his eye and stared at her with the other. "What's your story?"

"No story here," she lied.

He leaned his chair back on two legs. With half his face hidden behind the hanging pillowcase, he looked accusingly at her with his uninjured eye. "Liar."

She swallowed and stood, picking up her cup.

It didn't stop him from talking though. "You think I don't see you on parents' day? You look completely miserable when you see them come in." He dropped the ice from his eye. "The only time you look more miserable is when you watch them leave."

She frowned, not liking that her feelings about her parents had been so visible.

"You're not fae, you can't read my emotions. So stop trying." She took two steps and then looked back. "I'm calling it a night."

He dropped his chair down. "It's still early." Their gazes met. "I'm sorry I said what I did. I just thought ... I told you about my parents and ... We don't have to talk about that. Choose a subject and we'll talk about whatever."

Ignoring the soft pleading in his voice, she went to the Walmart bag she'd dropped on the sofa. She pulled out one sheet, one blanket, and snagged the other pillowcase. "We have to be up at three thirty. Don't bother me."

* * *

She sprayed the bed three times with disinfectant, made it, and then used the old bedding to make it look like she was under the blanket. If he peeked in, he'd hopefully assume she was out cold-pun intended.

It was, Della thought, the thing she hated most about being a vamp. Drinking blood she could handle, but when someone accidentally brushed up against her and flinched at her body temperature, she felt ... like a monster.

She knew why, too. It had been the thing that kept Lee from touching her after she'd been turned. You just don't feel right, he told her. You're cold. I think you're still sick.

A crazy thought came. Would Steve not like how she felt? She pushed the thought away, because seriously, it didn't belong in her mind. Tilting her head to the side, she listened for the shape-shifter. When she'd been making her bed, she'd heard him doing the same to the sofa. He must be sleeping now, because she could only hear the very subtle sound of someone breathing.

The conversation they'd had earlier about his parents floated through her head and

whispered across her heart with a tug of emotion. He almost sounded resigned to the bad relationship with his parents. Or was he just pretending-like she so often did?

Realizing she'd let Steve consume her thoughts, she blew out a deep whoosh of air. Then moving to the window, she quietly raised it. She stood there just a second, listening to the night's song, before she climbed out. She perched on the ledge a long second before she took off.

The dark, September air felt cool, cooler than her skin. Her hair whipped around her head and scattered across her face, occasionally obscuring her vision. A sound, a slight wisp of air came from her left. Was something following her? She raised her head to catch any scents. She didn't sense any other creature, but with so much wind coming at her, she wasn't sure if her sense of smell was accurate.

Without slowing down, she glanced back. Nothing but the night chased her.

She considered how close she was to the vampire compound and the rogue gang. Fear danced on her skin, but she pushed it aside. If it was them, she already had a cover for being there. Surely they would ask questions before they attacked. She hoped.

In a few minutes, she spotted the lake that ran by her parents' house and started descending. Her heart shifted from fear to something even more uncomfortable. Grief.

She came down a block from her house at the neighborhood park. Her black jeans and black tank top helped her blend into the darkness.

Moving in the shadows so no one would spot her, she saw lights on in her parents' dining room. Either her family was eating late, or they were playing board games. Her mom loved board games.

Easing between the bushes and the house, the neighbor's dog, the crotch-smelling canine, Champ, barked from the neighbor's backyard. Then Della heard laughter.

Her father's laugh.

Her heart gripped and her throat tightened. She hadn't even seen him smile since she'd left for Shadow Falls. Easing in ever so carefully, she looked into the window.

The scene looked like something from a movie on the Family Channel, a family spending time together. A family she really didn't belong to anymore.

Tears prickled her eyes when she saw them. Her mom, her sister, and her dad playing Scrabble. They looked so happy, so ... complete. Didn't they miss her, even a little bit?

A twig snapped behind her, and her heart rose to her throat. Della swung around. Champ, the mix of Lab and German shepherd, stared at her, or was he staring in the window? His tail slowly started thumping.

"How did you get out?" she whispered to the dog as she felt a tear slip down her cheek. He lowered his head, whimpered, and rubbed his snout against her knee. "What? No crotch smelling tonight? I'm hurt."

The canine looked up at her as if he actually missed her. How could that be, a neighbor's dog missed her when her own family didn't?

Moving out from behind the bushes, Della gave the dog another scratching behind his ears. She brushed a lingering tear from her eye and took off.

In less than five minutes, she landed at Lee's house. When the garage door opened, she flashed to the side of the house. As the car pulled out, she saw Lee in the driver's

seat.

Where was he going? On a date? Her heart knew it. Her heart also said that she should just go back to the cabin. She didn't need to see it.

But she did.

Kylie had told Della a thousand times that she needed to move past Lee. Maybe this was the answer. Maybe if she saw Lee with someone else, she could let go. She could stop hoping that he'd come to his senses and would run back to her, begging for a second chance.

She followed him to a house on the other side of the subdivision. She waited for a few minutes in the shadows, still hoping maybe she'd been wrong. Maybe this was just one of his friends.

When he walked out with a girl, an Asian girl, at his side, the knot in Della's chest came back. This was the fiancée. The one he'd told Della his parents had pushed him into marrying. Seeing this should have been enough. Seeing how she clung to his arm. She should have left right then, but no. When they got in the car, she followed them to the restaurant.

The Red Dragon. It was a restaurant owned by some friends of Lee's parents. His mother had tried to get Della and Lee to go there several times. But Lee always said he didn't want to eat Chinese food. He had enough of that at home.

Why did he want Chinese food now?

She landed in front of the restaurant while Lee parked the car. She hid behind the tall dragon statue waiting to see them walk past. A hungry-looking kitten came slinking around the building. "Don't have anything. But there's a Dumpster in the back, I can

smell it from here," she whispered and then she heard footsteps.

They were holding hands and the girl, Lee's fiancée, wore a big smile, her eyes bright with laughter. As they walked in the door, Della caught a whiff of Lee's cologne.

Anger surged in her chest. She'd bought that cologne for him last Christmas. Didn't he remember? Did he even care? How could he wear it for this new girl when Della had given it to him?

She waited a good ten minutes, telling herself to leave. Telling herself it was over. But when she tried to fly away, instead she swung around and headed inside.

She told the hostess she was looking for someone and walked past her into the spicy, sesame-scented air. She walked past a large fish tank with colorful fish swimming in circles as if looking for a way out. She continued past a couple and noticed the sound of plastic crinkling as they opened their fortune cookies. Perhaps she should snag one to see her own future.

Because God only knew what she planned to do when she found Lee. Part of her wanted to rip his heart out for using the cologne she'd given him to impress another girl. The other part wanted to drop to her knees and beg him to at least tell her he missed her.

All this time she'd believed Lee was engaged because his parents forced him into it. Now she didn't know what to believe. This didn't look forced. He actually looked ... happy.

Leave. Leave. Leave. The voice of reason screamed in her head. But then she saw them at the back table. Candlelit table. Romantic table. She heard them talking. Not in English, but in Mandarin.

Della spoke Mandarin. Her father had made sure of it. But Lee had never spoken to her in that language. Right then Della knew for certain, she wasn't tossed aside because she'd turned into a vampire. She'd been tossed aside because she was half white.

She heard the girl talking about names. Names they would give their first child. Lee leaned in and kissed her. A romantic kiss that kicked Della right in the gut. From the happiness she heard in Lee's voice, and the way he kissed the girl, Della suspected this choice had been as much his own preference as his parents'.

A waiter must have dropped a tray of food because a loud clatter sounded right behind Della. She knew she should turn and flash away at the sound of the crash, but it was too late. She watched in horror as Lee pulled his hand away from his fiancée's and looked up. She saw his eyes widen at the sight of her. Was it a good widen or an "oh shit" widen? She didn't know.

Leave! Don't stand here and look pathetic. But her feet felt concreted to the restaurant floor and pathetic was all she could feel. Her gaze locked on his as he stood up and started moving toward her. Right toward her. And she knew she looked even worse than pathetic.

She looked pitiful.

Sad.

She looked alone and heartbroken.

Embarrassment and shame washed over her. But she didn't have time to let it engulf her. Someone grabbed her around the waist and pulled her close. Shocked, she looked up at ... at Steve. He smiled down at her.

"I missed you already," he said and then he kissed her. Not a simple sweet first kiss, but one that involved tongue and ... lots of desire.

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Della felt the embarrassment seep out of her as something else seeped into her. And it wasn't just Steve's tongue. It was ... passion. It was the feeling of being alive. It was hope that her sad little life wasn't over. Since being a vampire, since she'd lost Lee, she'd thought she couldn't feel this anymore. Or maybe she just thought she wouldn't feel it anymore.

Someone cleared their throat. Realizing the familiar disapproving sound came from Lee, she put a hand on Steve's chest and reluctantly pulled back.

She met Steve's eyes briefly. She knew he'd kissed her to save her ass, but she also knew he'd enjoyed it as much as she had. The evidence was there in his warm brown eyes. Even with one of those eyes bruised, she saw the just-been-kissed heat in his gaze.

She turned to Lee. Only to realize she still didn't have a clue what to say to him. "Uh, hey. I..."

"What are you doing here?" Lee asked. "Besides making out in the middle of a restaurant?"

Hadn't he just been kissing his date?

As crazy as it was, Della saw something in Lee she hadn't seen before. Her dad. Or at least his disapproving attitude. Had Lee always been that way and she just now noticed? Or had he changed?

"What's wrong? Can't you talk?" he asked.

His words ran amok around her head and she couldn't decide how they made her feel or how to respond. And if she did decide she wasn't sure her tongue could take speaking orders, it was still in shock at having just had company-Steve's tongue.

"We were having dinner," Steve answered for her. "Actually, we're celebrating our three-month anniversary." His gaze went to Della.

"Three months?" Lee asked as if annoyed she'd started dating so soon. But hell, the guy was engaged. Where did he get off thinking ... She opened her mouth to say something again but Steve jumped in first.

"I'm sorry," Steve said. "I didn't introduce myself. You must be an old friend of Della's. I'm Steve...?"

Lee ignored Steve and looked at Della. "I thought you were at that school."

That school? Could he not even remember what school she'd been attending? "I am." She finally got two words out. "We ... just slipped out."

"So you met him at school?" Lee asked and damn if he didn't sound upset. Anger started to spark inside her again. He had no right to be upset. None!

Steve spoke up again. "Love at first sight." He glanced at her and ran his warm hand around the curve of her waist and pulled her a little closer. His gaze shot back to Lee. "Still don't know how I got so damn lucky." If so much honesty didn't resonate from his voice, it might have sounded false. For a second she wished she had listened to his heartbeat-another little vampire talent. Had Steve been interested in her at first sight?

Lee's fiancée rose from her chair behind them and stopped at his side. Della couldn't help but notice how pretty she was-pretty in a very traditional Asian way. Her hair was longer, sleeker, and blacker than Della's. Her facial features were doll-like.

Beautiful and perfect-a tiny nose, a bow-like mouth, and slanted black eyes that sparkled with intelligence. No doubt, Lee's parents had chosen well.

Or had Lee chosen her? Had he planned to break up with Della all along? He'd seemed pretty happy sitting next to her until Della showed up.

Not that he looked too happy now. He frowned when the girl slipped her arm through his, but he did the right thing and introduced them. "Mei, this is Della, and her ... friend." The word friend came out sounding like a four-letter word. "Her friend who obviously likes to fight, if his black eye is any indication."

Della tensed, ready to tell him that Steve got that black eye standing up for her. Something she suddenly realized that Lee had never done. Not even with his parents.

"Actually," Steve spoke up again, "we were just wrestling around in bed and Della got me in the eye with her elbow."

Lee's shoulders tightened and all Della could think was, Go Steve.

Mei looked up at Lee and seemed to see his reaction. A tightness pulled at the girl's brow as she glanced back at Della. Della recognized that tightness as plain ol' jealousy. She'd felt it tug at her own brow every time she thought of Lee with someone else. Oddly, now Della felt ... What did she feel? Angry. Hurt. Sad. But she didn't feel jealous. That meant something, Della knew that, but now wasn't the time to contemplate it.

"We should..." Her words got hung up when she met Lee's eyes again. The sad feeling swelled in her chest and she realized a better name for that emotion. Grief. She had loved Lee. Loved him with everything she had. And she'd given him her all-her heart, her body, her mind. Now she'd lost him. And now she grieved for what used to be.

"Go. We should go," Steve finished for her. "I already took care of the bill." Steve let go of her waist and held out his hand to Lee. "It was a pleasure to meet you."

Lee didn't take it. Which was super-awkward and not like Lee. He normally wasn't rude. Or was he? Had she missed that about him, too? Della nodded at the couple and when Steve's arm found its way back around her she let him guide her away.

They left the restaurant and it took a few seconds of the cold fall air hitting her face to realize she was still holding onto Steve. Holding onto him as if the ship of her life had been capsized. As if he was the only thing floating in the stormy waters to cling to.

The sense of weakness, feelings she could easily drown in, washed over her and sparked another flicker of anger. A big one this time.

She pulled away. Confusion bounced around her gut. The grief clung to her heart as tightly as she'd clung to Steve just a few minutes ago, but then the anger she'd experienced earlier returned. She opened herself up to that emotion. Anger she could handle, anger she could run with. So she let it roll around her, washing away the other emotions that made her feel weak and vulnerable.

She looked at Steve, who appeared happy, just the opposite of how she felt. "You followed me," she accused him.

The slight smile in his eyes dimmed. "I was obeying orders," he said. "We were told to stay together at all times."

"Damn it! I don't give a shit about orders. I don't like to be followed." A heaviness filled her chest and she recognized it as guilt. Guilt for ...

"Then don't run away again," he said matter-of-factly and started walking to the back of the restaurant.

Damn it. Guilt for acting like an idiot with the person who'd just saved her.

She caught up with him. "I'm not finished talking!" she seethed.

He came to a quick halt and swung around. "But I'm finished listening. You can get mad all you want. I was trying to help." He took off again.

"I said I wasn't finished!" She flashed forward and shot in front of him, putting a hand out to stop him. When her hand met his warm chest, it reminded her just how cold she was and she pulled it away. She glanced up at him, he looked about ready to give her hell, but she spoke first.

"Thank you!" she growled.

His mouth opened as if to say something, but nothing came out. No doubt he was shocked at her declaration. And damn it, but she knew how he felt. She hadn't meant to say that-not that he didn't deserve to hear it, he did, but ...

"Wow." He finally spoke. "I don't think I've ever heard anyone express gratitude in such a pissed off, angry tone."

"That's because I am angry. I'm furious. You followed me. Then you ... you kissed me, with tongue, in front of everyone."

His brown eyes lit up with a smile again. He leaned in a little closer. His warm breath stirred against her forehead. "And it was really good, wasn't it?"

She glared at him and took a step back.

"Okay, if it's not for the kiss, what are you thanking me for?" he asked, sounding puzzled and yet interested.

Once again she shared his feeling, the puzzled one, that is. "I don't know," she seethed. But then instantly the answer dawned on her. He'd saved her from looking pathetic, from looking like a heartbroken ex-girlfriend.

"You are a real piece of work, Della Tsang." He reached out as if to brush a strand of hair from her cheek.

She didn't know if that was a compliment or an insult, but she slapped his hand just in case.

He laughed. "It really wasn't bad for a first kiss, you know. Usually they're kind of awkward. But that ... that wasn't awkward. It was hot."

She thought about the kiss, the warmth of his mouth, the feel of his tongue. How he had tasted. "I'm glad you liked it, because it was your last," she snapped.

She turned to fly off. Her feet weren't all the way off the ground when she heard his reply.

"We'll have to see about that."

She gritted her teeth, continued toward the cabin, and fought the fear that if she wasn't really careful, he might be right.

And that would be wrong.

Wouldn't it?

* * *

Three thirty couldn't have come any slower. The new sheet, pillowcase, blanket, and

Lysol helped, but she kept waking up every few minutes. With the cabin out in the woods, the only noises were a few animals. It should have been a fine place to get a good night's sleep. However, being a vampire and basically nocturnal, she never slept well at night.

Last night she'd blamed most of the tossing and turning on the thought of bedbugs. Funny how the idea of bedbugs kept shifting to Steve's kiss. Then Steve's kiss led her to think about her mixed-up, crazy feelings about Lee.

Was she over him? If so, why did it still hurt? But if she still loved him, why wasn't she jealous of Mei? Then Della's thoughts went to her mom and dad and sister playing board games without her. For some reason thinking about Lee and her parents helped block out the thoughts of the kiss.

Still in bed and staring at the stained ceiling, Della heard water running, which meant Steve was taking a shower. Before she'd gone to bed she'd given the shower a good spray of Lysol, and took a quick stand beneath the spewing water herself.

When she'd left the shower, Steve had been sitting on the sofa, staring at the bathroom door. Staring as if he hoped she'd be wearing something sexy.

Poor guy had been disappointed. Or she had thought he'd been for about two seconds, until his gaze had lowered and then traveled up again as a slow sexy grin appeared in his eyes.

"You were right," he'd said. "And you were wrong."

She liked the part about being right, but...? "Wrong about what?"

That seductive smile shifted to his lips as his gaze lowered again, and stopped on her bare feet. "Right that I have a foot fetish. Wrong about me never seeing your naked

feet."

She used those naked feet to run off to the bedroom. The second after she slammed the door, he'd called out that they needed to talk about the mission. She called back that they could do it in the morning. Then she'd dropped into bed.

Even five hours later, remembering the way he'd looked at her-at her feet for God's sake-made her feel all fluttery inside. Now, as the sound of water from the shower filled her head, so did images. Her mind went to him standing under a steamy spray of water. And she had the oddest desire to see his naked feet. And other things.

She groaned and pressed her palms into her eyes. Why couldn't he be ugly?

Taking a deep breath of resolve, she told herself to get over it. Besides, today was a new day. Slipping out of bed, she brushed her hair, and adjusted her bra. Feeling a tiny bit more in control, she went into the living room to wait her turn in the bathroom. She needed to brush her teeth, and they had to go over the plans for their mission. Then they needed to go do what they had to do. Catch themselves some bad vampires.

She didn't have time to think about how hot Steve was, or how his kiss had melted her insides like butter on a steaming ear of corn. It was time to think about kicking rogue vampire butt, not Steve's cute butt.

Drumming her fingers on the top of her knees, she saw the file they had to go over with their instructions sitting on the sofa. She really didn't need to review it. She'd read it a dozen times and memorized it. Because vamps could read a lie in a person's heartbeat, they'd come up with a form of the truth that hopefully wouldn't read as a lie. She, Della Tsang, had been turned vampire and was sent to a special boarding school. She wasn't big on the school's rules, so she and her friend Steve the shape-shifter had run off. But due to the known difficulties of obtaining blood for her, they

had decided to join a gang.

The bathroom door squeaked open, and Steve walked out. He was ... he was half naked, and bam, she was back to thinking about his cute butt. And ... her gaze lowered. He had socks on.

For some odd reason, she recalled that someone had told her that Steve was already eighteen. He looked eighteen, probably a year older than Della. Muscles rippled over his chest and arms. She knew he worked out, but most of what he had appeared natural.

Her breath caught in her throat for a second. She'd seen him swimming and without a shirt, but something about seeing all that bare skin and him being freshly showered brought back the flutters. Brought back the memory of his kiss and of how his warm hands had felt in the curve of her waist.

He met her gaze and smiled as if somehow reading her mind. Moving to the chair, he slipped on a dark green T-shirt. Thank goodness.

"You ready to go over everything?" he asked.

"Need to brush my teeth." Need to find my self-control and I'm pretty sure it's in the toilet. She popped up and ran to the bathroom. When she came back three minutes later, she'd taken her frustration out on her teeth. There wasn't a speck of plaque on her pearly whites. And while she didn't find her self-control in the potty, she'd given herself a good talking-to about not acting like some hormone-crazed teen.

Sure she was a teen, and probably hormone crazed, but she didn't need to act like it.

Steve had the open file in his lap when she moved to the living room. She sat down on the opposite side of the sofa and he started going over the info.

She didn't tell him she already knew it because he might need to hear it. Five minutes later, he closed the file. "Okay, the thing to remember is if they insist I leave, I'll shift and hang around. I won't leave you."

Della cut her eyes to him. "Heartwarming, but if they insist you leave, I'll be fine. I can take care of myself. Besides, they know you're a shifter, Steve. Don't do anything that will ruin this."

"I won't do anything to ruin it. But I'm not leaving you." His tone came out determined, protective. "I'll be careful. They won't realize it's me."

"Yes they will. What about them knowing you're a shifter don't you get?"

He stared at her a long second before speaking. "So they're smarter than you, huh?"

She tightened her eyes at him. "What's that mean?"

"You didn't know I was there last night. You saw me twice."

She studied him, feeling puzzled. "I don't..."

"I was your neighbor's dog and then I was the kitten. If a shifter is careful what they become, we blend into the environment and are never suspected. Why do you think we're one of the most powerful of the supernaturals?"

First, they really weren't one of the most powerful supernaturals, vampires were, not that this was a competition. Then all of a sudden her chest tightened and her face heated remembering her short interaction with the neighbor's dog. Hadn't she said something about him not smelling her crotch?

"Don't do that to me anymore." She stood up, went to the door, and glanced back over

her shoulder. "It's time to go."

* * *

Della and Steve landed in the designated spot of the state park five minutes later. A clearing, secluded from any road or human life, and surrounded by trees. A place where anything could happen and there'd be no witnesses. Della scanned the area, seeing only tall pines mixed with a few oaks and tons of thorny underbrush.

She didn't like it.

From just looking, one would think the area was abandoned. Only a few stars lit up the night sky. But one good nose of air told her the truth. They were here.

Hidden.

Waiting.

But for what?

To attack?

And while her nose couldn't count, she sensed there were more than three of them.

Did the gang somehow know Della and Steve were assisting the FRU? Or was this just the way the gang welcomed all potential new members?

A sense of danger brushed over her skin. As exciting as it was, fear crowded her chest. She remembered the pictures of those who had died at the hands of suspected vampire gangs. A mother and a child. An elderly woman. If this was the gang advocating murder for initiation, who had taken innocent lives, they needed to be

stopped and the risk was worth it. Sure, Burnett didn't believe this was the gang, but he had to have doubts or he wouldn't have sent them on this mission.

"They're here," Steve whispered.

"I know," Della said.

A stirring of underbrush sounded to their right and then one to the left. And then behind them. Della spotted another vamp coming out from the trees right at them.

Friggin' great.

They were surrounded.

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"What a warm welcome," Della said, refusing to acknowledge her fear.

"She's sassy," said someone behind her.

"We can beat that out of her," said the vamp walking toward her as he eyed her up and down.

"I wouldn't try," Della said.

"I second that," Steve added, his voice deep and filled with warning.

The rogue tightened his gaze to check their patterns. "So you brought your pet with you, huh?"

Della heard Steve inhale and she reached over and touched his arm. Surely, he knew to let her deal with this.

"He's not my pet," she growled, offended for him more than she realized.

"Ah, I see," the lead rogue said, a filthy twinkle in his eyes. "So you're giving it up to this joker?"

"We've swapped bodily fluids if that's what you're asking," she countered, confident, and suddenly grateful they'd exchanged spit last night during that hot kiss.

The vamp grinned. "I like your spunk. Maybe you and I can swap some bodily fluid sometime."

Steve tensed beside her. "I wouldn't count on it," he said.

"And I'll second that," Della said.

The vamp frowned as if disappointed he couldn't intimidate them. "You do realize first you will have to prove yourself worthy. If you are accepted, then your shifter here will have to prove himself, and even then he will only be considered an extra. Extras ... don't last very long."

The rogue's insinuation struck a punch to Della's nerves, but she focused on what was important. The whole "prove yourself worthy" comment.

Was it going to be this easy? Was he just going to tell her right now what she had to do and they could leave? A tiny part of her hoped it wouldn't be so simple. She already disliked this guy and wouldn't mind teaching him a lesson.

"Exactly how do we prove ourselves?"

"Do you know how to fight?"

Hell, yes. "I can hold my own," Della said.

His gaze shifted to Steve. "Looks like shifter-boy likes to fight," he said, obviously referring to Steve's black eye.

"I can hold my own, too," Steve said.

"How strong of a shifter are you?" The rogue studied him as if assessing him.

"Strong enough," Steve answered.

The rogue laughed. "Then why did you stay human to fight? You're obviously not as strong as you'd like to believe."

"Don't let a little bruise fool you," Steve said, tilting back on his heels.

Della heard the confidence in Steve's voice, and while she'd assessed his ability to transform quickly, she honestly didn't know his strength. Yet somehow she sensed that like her, he was holding his cards close to his chest. Not cowering down to them, but not letting them know exactly what they were up against if they picked a fight.

The rogue laughed as if he didn't believe Steve. "Well, follow us. We have a little game going and we'll see how well you two do."

"What kind of game?" Della asked and cut her eyes around, taking in all the rogues circling them.

"A little hand-to-hand combat. If you do okay, we'll see about your pet. You game?"

"Now?" Della asked, remembering in detail how Burnett told them not to be lured anywhere. Already the vamps had proven they weren't good to their word because they'd stated only three of the gang members would meet them for a nonconfrontational interview.

"Now," the rogue said, pulling a knife from a side holster and wiping the blade on his dirty jeans. The guys to her left and right pulled out their knives as well.

Della heard a low growl, and although she didn't know shape-shifters growled, she knew it came from Steve.

She also knew that refusing the rogue's invitation wasn't an option. It was go, or have some hand-to-blade combat right now.

"Let's go, then," Della said, hoping whatever came next would provide a better escape.

Steve glanced at her and in his gaze she read his mind. I don't like this.

Well, neither did she, but she didn't see any other choice. She'd done a quick head count and there were twelve of them. She could probably take on five or six, but she couldn't take on twelve. Not with knives.

* * *

They were led to an old abandoned warehouse. Steve transformed into a black crow and moved slower. The rogues muttered curses that they had to slow down.

Della couldn't help but wonder if his choice of form hadn't been on purpose. Did shifting into a faster bird require more energy? And was he preserving it? Or was his ability to shift into certain kinds of animals a sign of power, and he was downplaying his abilities to the rogues? It occurred to Della that if she was going to work for the FRU, she needed to educate herself on all species.

It would have been helpful to know exactly what Steve was up to.

When they landed, she also noted Steve took several minutes to change. A hell of a lot slower than before. That's when she knew for sure he was downplaying his power to the rogues.

One of the vamps stepped close and said something about wringing the crow's neck. Della moved between him and Steve.

With Steve now in human form, they walked inside a dark building. Della could smell old blood and vampire sweat. While she couldn't see for shit, she could also

smell the bloodthirsty crowd. No longer just twelve rogues to deal with, but more than fifty. Her chest clutched with fear and the realization that maybe she should have taken her chances back at the park.

The lights suddenly flashed on and the crowd hiding in the shadows appeared. In the middle of the room was a boxing ring. Steve looked at her, concern tightening his gaze.

The crowd cheered and Della looked back up. A girl was pushed into the ring. She looked scared, but also determined. Della tightened her brows and saw she was half werewolf, half vampire. Were being her dominant species. She was obviously an extra. And from her stance, Della also assessed she was a willing victim.

"And here I thought I was just going to get to kill a human or two," Della said, praying her voice didn't shake.

"Oh, we do that, too. But we change it up to keep it interesting."

Bingo, Della thought. They could leave now. Unfortunately, she didn't see that happening.

The girl turned and looked at Della with something akin to hatred. Della knew this was the girl she was supposed to fight.

The smell of dried blood in the air warned Della just how far this fight was supposed to go.

She looked at the leader of the rogues who had met them. "It's hard to fight someone I have nothing against."

"When she takes her first punch, you'll have something against her. She's not nearly

as weak as she looks. Sort of like you, I'll bet." He pulled out his knife again. "Go fight her, Miss Sass, and let's see how good you really are."

Della swallowed a knot of fear, but she forced herself to ask. "Where does this end?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, but his smirk told her he knew exactly what she meant.

"I knock her out, it's over, right?" She was hoping.

His eyes brightened with plain ol' evilness. "What fun would that be?" He brought the knife up and stared at the blade. "It ends when one of you stops breathing and becomes a willing blood donor, that's when it's over. So the question is, will we be drinking your blood at sunrise or hers?"

"Hmm," Della said, and worked at keeping the horror from showing on her face. She glanced at Steve. He cut his eyes up to the ceiling. She didn't know what the hell the message was, but she hoped it meant he had a plan. Because, God help her, she couldn't think of one right now. And she was either about to kill someone, or be killed.

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Della got into the ring thinking there would be a bell, thinking she'd come up with a way out of this crap, but nope-on both counts. Before she had a chance to catch her breath, the girl attacked.

Della still didn't have a clue what to do. But when she took a fist to the cheek and it hurt like hell, she decided letting this girl beat the crap out of her wasn't a good plan, either.

Della ducked the girl's second punch. The crowd booed.

The were came at her again and Della grabbed the girl by the arm and unceremoniously tossed her across the ring. She landed hard, but was back on her feet in seconds. As the girl danced around throwing punches like some boxing queen, Della briefly found Steve in the crowd. He glared right at her and then cut his eyes upward again.

The second of lost focus cost Della dearly, for the girl struck again, this time kicking Della right in the ribs. Air whooshed out of her lungs as pain caused her to stumble back. That's when her gaze caught the slight opening in the ceiling, where an air vent had once been.

Okay, now she knew Steve's plan, but didn't he realize that these other vamps could fly, too?

Another foot came at Della's face. She grabbed the leg by the ankle and slung the girl outside the ring. Yelps and cries for blood echoed from the crowd. The girl landed in a group of vamps, but she must have been made of rubber, because she bounced back

up and charged again.

She leapt into the ring. Her eyes glowed the notable orange color of a pissed-off were. She kicked up her foot, Della went to block it. A bad mistake, because she didn't see what the B with an itch had in her hands until it was too late.

The knife came right at Della's heart. Her only defense was to block it with her arm. The blade sliced into her forearm and it felt like a burn, hot, yet cold at the same time. The smell of blood filled her nose.

Her own blood.

She heard the hungry cries from the audience.

The girl took a step back, but only to charge again. The knife was aimed right at Della's chest. A roar, not from the crowd, but from some exotic feline animal, rang in Della's ears.

Fury, hot red rage, filled Della's heart at the same time the knife sank into her chest, right below her collarbone. Amazingly, she felt more anger than pain. Grabbing the girl by the shoulders, she slung her. It looked like slow motion. Felt like slow motion, as the knife sliced its way out of Della's chest. Breath held in pain, she watched as the girl flew away, the knife, still in her hands, dripping blood from the tip of the blade.

Then Della saw the supersized lion, AKA Steve, charging toward the ring mauling anyone who dared get in his way. Go Steve! She pointed up and then with everything she had, she leapt straight into the air, barely fitting through the tight little exit. And right behind her, hauling ass, was a Peregrine falcon.

She continued upward knowing the vamps, at least the ones who could fit through the tight opening, would be behind them. She ignored the burning sensation in her

shoulder. Suddenly aware she didn't hear the flap of a bird's wings, she glanced back. Steve had returned to the roof, transformed into a dragon, and was in the process of breathing fire into the hole in the old building. Damn, but the guy made a nice-looking dragon.

Obviously, the building had some sort of insulation that wasn't fire resistant, because smoke started billowing out of the roof almost immediately.

In seconds, sparkles started popping off around the dragon and Steve was back to being a Peregrine. They flew off hard and fast. She kept looking back, praying the rogues weren't there. Thankfully, only the darkness chased them.

Suddenly, Steve started down.

"No," she screamed at him. "We need to keep going. They'll come after us!"

He didn't listen, but continued down and landed in a dark alley much like the one they'd been in last night. Six-foot-high wooden fences lined the pathway, as if too keep riffraff out. The overflowing garbage cans that smelled like spoiled fruit seemed to hold up the fences, some of which looked rotted. By the time she landed, Steve was already human.

"Shit," he said, grabbing her arm. The sweet smell of her own blood chased away the smell of garbage and filled Della's senses.

"You know," she said, flinching at the pain both in her arm and her upper chest, "you did good."

"You are not going to die!" he seethed.

"Who said anything about dying?" She found it hard to focus on him and she blinked

a couple of times.

"You just complimented me," he said in a low growl. "That tells me how seriously hurt you are."

She grinned and she couldn't hold the gesture in place. "I'm not that bad, am I?"

"No, you're not that bad. Just stubborn..." he met her gaze, "and perfect," he said, but his voice sounded distant. "I need to get you to a hospital."

"No," she said, feeling her knees weaken. "I need blood and I'll heal. She didn't hit any major organs, or I'd be dead. Just get me blood, Steve. That's all I need. Vampires heal really quickly."

He frowned and pulled his phone out. "Don't you dare call Burnett!" she seethed, but her knees folded and she dropped to the ground. "Please," she begged, feeling tears fill her eyes. "I want to impress him. I can't let him down." She batted at her tears and saw Steve looking down at her with compassion.

Relief fluttered inside her when she saw him put his phone back into his pocket. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you," she repeated, but she'd no more gotten that last word out when she smelled the dirty scent that hinted at rotten meat. They had company. Not the rogue vamps.

Weres.

Oh, shit! She really didn't want to die today.

She stood up, her whole body trembled. She prayed she looked a lot more menacing than she felt. There were three of them, big mean-looking dudes. Hair so dirty she couldn't distinguish the color, and clothes that looked just as unclean.

They'd obviously smelled her blood and came looking for a bite to eat.

"Leave," Steve growled at them. "Or I'll kill you." Sparkles started popping off around him. A loud roar filled the dark alley. The lion had returned, only this time it was even larger, the size of a small van.

Two of the weres backed up, but one, obviously the most stupid, started running at Steve, his canines extended, his eyes glowing orange. Steve swatted one paw and knocked the were across the alley. He hit the fence with a loud thud. The two smarter weres ran like hell was on fire and chasing them.

It took Della a second to realize she hadn't done anything. She hadn't even growled at the intruders to help Steve stand against them. But how could she when it took everything she had to stand?

With the echo of the fading footsteps running down the alley, she watched the lion charge at her. But what she didn't understand was why everything was spinning. Round and round the world goes, where it lands nobody knows. Her mind created the singsong words in her head to go with the light-headed feeling washing over her. Just when she was about to get used to the light-headedness, black spots started popping off like firecrackers in her vision.

The last thing Della remembered was falling against the big beast and thinking that even as a lion, Steve smelled like some spicy male soap.

* * *

Della felt someone lift her head up.

Then she heard a male voice with a Southern accent as sexy as the voice was deep. "You either wake up and drink this or I'm going to have to call Burnett. You hear me?"

Wake up, sweetheart."

Sweetheart? Della lifted her eyelids and looked up at the dark-haired, soft brown-eyed guy sitting next to her on the huge bed. He had one hand behind her head and the other holding a cup up to her mouth. It took her a second to realize who he was. It took another one for her to remember everything.

The mission.

The vampires.

The weres.

Steve's kiss.

Oh, yeah, she remembered Steve's kiss.

"Thank heavens," he muttered when he saw her looking at him. "Can you drink?" He pressed the cup to her lips. "Just a couple of sips."

The sweet smell of blood filled her nose and she opened her mouth and sipped. It tasted so good, she took another sip.

Steve lowered her head on the pillow that was so soft it practically swallowed her head. She glanced up at his smile.

"I think you need to drink more, but we'll give you a few minutes," he said.

The silky feel of the sheets against her bare back and the soft pillow surrounding her head told her two things. One, they weren't back at the cabin, and two, she was practically naked.

She moved her gaze around and took in what appeared to be a fancy hotel room. Then she reached down to the sheet that covered her chest and lifted it up an inch to check for clothes.

Yup, naked. Well, practically naked. She still had on her red silk panties. And a bandage over her wound.

She dropped the sheet down against her chest and frowned up at him.

"Where are my clothes?"

"I threw them in the bathtub and rinsed them just in case any weres or other vamps were around. Didn't want them to smell you."

How could she argue with that? She couldn't. Well, she could, not every argument had to be based in logic, but face it, she was too tired to argue a logical point much less an illogical one.

"Ready for some more blood?" He held the cup out.

She wanted to say no, but she knew the blood was the only thing that would help her. Leaning up on her elbow, or trying to, she slipped back into the pillow. She looked up into his soft, concerned eyes and felt ... she felt naked, weak, and vulnerable. This was so not her best day.

He reached down and helped her sit up. She felt the sheet slip down and she barely managed to catch it before it exposed her breasts. He held the cup to her lips and she sipped.

When he pulled the cup away, he smiled at her again-all sweet like. He wasn't even looking at her like she was naked under the sheet like most boys would. He was

smiling at her like ... like she was someone he cared about.

Definitely not her best day.

She didn't want him to start caring. Because then she might start caring about him.
That was dangerous.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back and in few minutes she felt sleep claim her.

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Della felt a tickle against her temple and went to wipe it away. Then the tickle hit the back of her hand.

Her eyes popped open with a start. The tickle was someone's breath, easy in and easy out, wisps of air.

And that someone was Steve.

Steve, asleep in bed with her. Steve, on his side, sharing her pillow.

Steve, not even the least bit ugly, with dark long lashes resting against his upper cheek. His equally dark brown hair lay scattered across his brow.

Asleep, he looked younger, except for his five o'clock shadow. She tried to remember if she'd felt any of that stubble when he'd kissed her last night at the restaurant. She hadn't. But she wanted to run her fingers across his chin now.

Her gaze shifted downward to her chest, to her not-so-big boobs. The sheet had slipped down around her waist.

Frowning, she snatched the sheet up and wondered if Steve had been privy to the view before he'd fallen asleep. Of course he had, she realized, he'd been the one to remove her bra and play doctor when he dressed her wound. A depressing thought hit. Had he been disappointed that she wasn't bigger?

She stared at the two slight mounds now pushing against the sheet-finding a bit of hope that they were a little bigger than they used to be. In the last few months, she'd

actually started to fill out a B cup. Not that she aspired to get to a C cup like Miranda and Kylie. But a full B or B+ would be nice.

She glanced to her left side and lowered the sheet just a bit to see her bandage. It didn't look like a half-assed job. Shifting her shoulder, she realized it must have healed, because there wasn't even the slightest amount of pain. Then she looked at her arm where another bandage was.

She vaguely remembered Steve waking her up and making her drink blood two or three times. She also recalled him telling her yesterday that his mom was a doctor. Was he considering becoming a doctor himself? He should. The boy had what it took.

Reaching up, she loosened the bandage below her shoulder blade to see the wound. The cut still showed, but it was close to being healed.

"It looks good," a deep, sleepy voice said beside her.

She cut her eyes to the guy sharing the mattress with her and glared. "Get out of my bed."

He grinned. "Technically, it's my bed. I rented the room."

She frowned. "It's too early to be logical!"

He chuckled. "Actually, it's not early, either."

She sat up a little, holding the sheet to her chest, and vaguely recalled not being able to sit up earlier. "What time is it?"

He rolled over and looked at the clock on the bedside table. "Six."

"That's early," she said.

"In the afternoon." He ran a hand through his sleep-mussed hair and looked adorable doing it.

"Wait. It's six in the afternoon? Shit!" She sat up straighter. "I slept all freaking day? Burnett's probably livid. I was supposed to check in."

"I did."

She frowned. "You told him I was hurt!"

"No, well I did, but I downplayed it-a lot. I had to tell him you had to fight because the whole burning warehouse and sightings of giant lions made the news."

She recalled him turning into a lion both at the warehouse with the rogues and to fight off the weres. "You were spotted?"

"A drunk in the alley, so it's not too bad."

"Sorry," she said, remembering he was a stickler about following the rules and not shifting in a public place. And yet he'd shifted because ... because she couldn't protect them.

"It's okay." His gaze went soft again, like he cared or something. "We got out alive. And we completed our mission. Now the FRU can go in and make some arrests in the gang."

She nodded. "I'm surprised Burnett hasn't been calling every fifteen minutes."

"I think he would have but he's got another problem on his hands."

"What?" Della asked.

"Supposedly Helen was attacked."

"Helen? Our Helen?" Helen was a bashful half-fae who Della couldn't believe anyone would hurt. "Is she okay? Who did that?"

"Burnett's been at the hospital with her. He said she was okay. I asked who did it, and he said they didn't know. But you know Burnett, he'll get them and when he does they'll get hell."

"Yeah, and I'd like to help him dish out that hell. Thank God she's okay." Della's stomach grumbled, embarrassingly loud, too.

Steve chuckled. "I think you're hungry." He bounced out of bed. "I'll get it for you."

Sitting up, she leaned against the bed's headboard and held the sheet to her chest. She watched him go to the small fridge and pull out a plastic bag with blood. But it wasn't the same blood she'd brought with her on this trip. That blood she'd left at the cabin.

Questions started floating around her head. "That's not my blood. Where did you-"

"My mom worked at this town's ER for a couple of weeks when we first moved from Alabama. There's a blood bank right down the street, that's why I chose this hotel."

His words bounced around her head. "You stole blood from a blood bank?" She shook her head. "You're never supposed to do that!"

"I didn't. Well, not technically." He moved to stand by the bed and handed her a cup.

She took the cup and stared down at it. The wonderful aroma filled her nose. "Is this O negative?" she asked, recalling how good it had tasted when she'd been semicomatose.

"Only the best for you." He sent her a crooked smile.

"I guess you can't take it back, can you? And if you try I might have to kill you." She took a big sip.

He grinned. "Drink up, and besides, I didn't exactly steal it."

She glanced at him from the cup's lip. He continued to stand there just looking at her. "What do you mean?"

"I went in to donate a pint and just left with it."

She licked the last drop of blood from her lips. "You're O negative?" No wonder he always smelled so good to her.

He nodded. With his grin now spreading to his eyes, he said, "You're welcome."

"I didn't say thank you."

"Yeah, but your appreciation was in your eyes."

She frowned, hoping to mask her appreciation. Then sitting up a little more, she drained the cup and set it on the bedside table. "Where are my clothes?"

"In the bathroom. They should be almost dry. I washed them out really good. But before you get dressed I need to put some more ointment on your cuts. One last time."

"I think I'm fine."

"Oh, you're fine," he said and smiled, "but your cut still needs one more dose of ointment." He moved back to the dresser and picked up a tube of something along

with some other supplies.

He sat down on the edge of the mattress, put his supplies on the nightstand, and carefully removed the bandage from her arm. He squirted some medicine on a cotton swab and dabbed it on the cut. She studied the cut on her arm, and like the one on her chest, it appeared almost healed.

Then he reached up and nudged the sheet down. Not low enough to see anything, but low enough to hint at the breast below and to get to her bandaged wound. Gently, he pulled back the dressing and patted the medicine on the cut.

When she glanced up at him through her lashes he was staring at her. "You're beautiful, by the way."

She felt her face heat up. Okay, now he stared at her like a normal boy, thinking about how naked she was beneath the sheet. Yet, instead of being repulsed, she was ... She was relieved to know he didn't find her unattractive. And he'd obviously seen almost all of her, too.

"If you tell anyone you saw me naked, I'll kick your ass."

He dropped the cotton swab on the nightstand and then reached over and tilted her chin up with his index finger. "I wouldn't tell anyone." His voice came out a little deep, and he sounded completely sincere.

He ran his finger over her lips.

"You aren't going to kiss me," she said.

"We'll see about that," he said and then he did it. He kissed her.

* * *

How it went from a simple kiss to him stretched out beside her, the sheet down at her feet and his shirt off, was a mystery. A delicious one.

His mouth moved from her lips to her neck and then lower. She moaned, lost in how good it felt. But when his hand softly, seductively slid down below her waist, she grabbed it, and swallowed a big dose of reality.

"I'm sorry," she muttered and sat up. "I can't ... We can't."

She heard him inhale and she knew he was filled with want and desire just as she was. But supposedly it was even worse on a guy. It had always been hard on Lee before ... before she let things go all the way.

The thought of Lee had her breath catching again.

Tears filled her eyes and all she could think was how she'd gone down this road already. She'd given herself to Lee and look where that'd led her.

"Go take a cold shower." She gave him her back and pulled the sheet over herself.

He took several deep breaths of air, and after a few long seconds he said, "I didn't mean ... I was just going to kiss you. Shit," he said, his voice filled with self-loathing. "I never meant to take advantage of the fact that-"

"You didn't." She closed her eyes. "Didn't take advantage. I went there with you. But ... we shouldn't have ... gone there."

"To soon?" he asked.

"Too everything," she answered. Too good. Too real. Too much like it meant something really special. Too much to have to deal with losing later on. "If you're not going to shower, I am. We need to get back to Shadow Falls."

She hated the anger in her tone and hoped he understood it wasn't because of him. It was because of her. She simply couldn't let herself go down this road again.

* * *

In the shower she heard a phone ring and listened as Steve told Burnett they would be back in a couple of hours. He took a shower after her, and thirty minutes later, they got into a hotel elevator, one she had no memory of coming up in.

Had he carried her? She hated not knowing something. Hated knowing she'd been that vulnerable.

Once they arrived in the crowded lobby, he led her into the hotel's restaurant.

A complaint rested on her lips, but she remembered she'd eaten today and he hadn't. So she shut up and followed the hostess when Steve told her they needed a table for two.

He ordered a steak and baked potato and some sweet tea. She ordered French onion soup, about the one thing she could actually enjoy, and a Diet Coke.

When the waitress left with their order, Steve looked at her, still wearing an apology in his eyes. Yup, he felt guilty for things getting out of hand. But she didn't put all the blame on him. She could have stopped it. Should have stopped it.

"How's the shoulder?" he asked.

She reached up and touched where she'd been stabbed. "Completely healed," she said. Then she remembered something they'd talked about earlier. "Did you learn medicine from your mom?"

He nodded. "Sometimes she'd volunteer at different free clinics. I used to go with her

on weekends. I'm a fast learner on some things."

She suspected he was a fast learner in all things. She hadn't seen it at first, but intelligence lingered in those big brown eyes. "And you don't want to be a doctor?"

"I didn't say I don't want to be a doctor."

"But you said ... I mean I got the feeling when you talked about your parents that you didn't want to do what they wanted you to do."

"She wants me to go into medicine for humans because that's where the money is. I want to train to treat supernaturals. That's where my skills will be the most useful."

She nodded. "I see." The waitress dropped off their drinks. Della twirled a straw around her glass and watched the bubbles rise to the top. "My parents wanted me to be a doctor, too."

"And you don't want that?" he asked.

"Hell, no. I want to go into criminal justice."

"A lawyer?"

"No. I don't want to defend the law. I want to enforce it. Before I was turned, I was thinking FBI or CIA. Now I'm thinking FRU. Which is why I didn't want Burnett to know I'd screwed up."

He shook his head. "You didn't screw up."

"I got stabbed. That's pretty screwed up." She jabbed her straw into her drink.

"We were up against a whole gang of rogue vampires. The fact that we got out of

there alive is a freaking miracle."

She gave the straw another race around her glass. "But you're the one who saved us. The one who came up with a plan, and then again with the werewolves."

"Yeah, but you were a little busy trying not to let that rogue were/vampire kill you in the ring. And when the weres showed up you were already stabbed and bleeding like crazy, but you still stood up."

"I didn't do shit when they came," she muttered, ashamed of herself.

"You stood up and faced them and let them know you weren't ready to be their dinner."

He looked down at his own glass for a second. "Honestly, I was totally impressed with you. The whole time, I'm freaking out inside. Hell, my knees were shaking and you were like this epitome of calm. I kept looking at you and thinking if you could do this, I could, too."

She let go of a deep breath. "I wasn't calm. I was freaking out, too."

He smiled. "Well, that's why you're so good at this, Della. You didn't seem scared. Not once. You can do this. I personally don't like the thought of you putting yourself in danger, but don't ever think you screwed up. You kicked ass in that ring."

His compliment felt like a big hug. And as she constantly told Kylie and Miranda, she wasn't much of a hugger.

Looking down at her drink again, the realization hit. She used to be a hugger, but now when anyone wrapped their warm arms around her it reminded her of how cold she was.

Suddenly, she realized when Steve had kissed her and touched her she'd forgotten she was cold. For the first time since she'd been turned, she'd felt normal again-felt ... human. Damn that felt good.

"Thanks." She looked up briefly and hoped he understood how much she meant it, because she didn't want to have to express it any more than just offering the word.

The waitress dropped off their food. Della spooned the French onion soup into her mouth, bypassing the cheese. But as the warm, tasty broth danced on her tongue, she couldn't help but think how good Steve's blood tasted. How good his kisses were. How it felt to be touched and not think about being cold.

When she'd showered, she'd noticed a hickey between her shoulder and left breast. She was glad he'd left his mark on her. But she was equally glad it wasn't permanent. It would fade in a few days. And that's the way it should be. Because once they were back at Shadow Falls this was over.

Done.

She simply couldn't put her heart on the chopping block again. Lee, along with her parents, had taught her how hard it was to love someone. How easy it was for them to disappoint you.

She didn't love Steve, not yet, but these last thirty-six hours had taught her how easy it would be to let herself go there. When someone was genuinely nice your heart welcomed them inside. Add the whole good-looking thing and him being such an awesome kisser to the scenario, and her heart had a welcome mat ready to toss down, a marching band, and banners with flashy letters reading, COME ON IN.

And that was unacceptable. She couldn't fall in love with Steve. Nope. No way. As soon as they returned to Shadow Falls, she was back to being the old Della. Solo. She had Miranda, and she had Kylie. As soon as Kylie returned.

Della didn't need a guy making her feel special, making her feel beautiful, making her feel ... human.

Steve picked up his knife and cut a piece of steak. "Oh, when I spoke with Burnett earlier this morning he mentioned that he went to see Kylie."

Della's heart swelled. "He knows where she is? Is she coming back?"

"He must know because he said he'd seen her, but he didn't say anything about her coming back. He just said to tell you that she was okay and that she asked about you."

That was Kylie, always worried about others before she worried about herself. The girl was an idiot. Well, not an idiot. She was just one of those really caring people. Sort of like the damn shape-shifter Della was having lunch with.

Della dipped her spoon into the onion soup. "Well, if he knows where she is, then I can just go and bring her back."

"Kidnap her?" he asked.

"If I have to, yeah. She belongs at Shadow Falls with Miranda and me."

Steve chuckled. "You're not serious," he said.

"The hell I'm not," Della snapped. "Kylie's coming home and that's all there is to it."

* * *

Home. Della felt it as she landed outside the fence at Shadow Falls about thirty minutes later. Funny, how the place had started to feel that way. Of course, maybe that was to be expected when she no longer belonged with her parents.

Steve landed and transformed. "We should go to the front."

"No." She pulled out her phone. "I'm calling Burnett and telling him I'm here, then I'm jumping the fence. I just want to go to my cabin and relax ... I don't want to be interrogated right now."

She wanted to have time to regroup in her head.

Burnett answered on the second ring. "Where are you?"

"We're here. Right outside the fence on the east side of the property."

"Good. We're having dinner now. Why don't you come over? There's a surprise."

"I'm tired. Not in the mood for surprises. I just want to take a shower and relax. Can we talk tomorrow?"

"Are you okay?" His tone grew dark, concerned.

"I'm fine," she growled.

When she hung up, Steve started walking over to her. She watched the way he moved, like a lion, lithe and with purpose. He stopped right in front of her and brushed a strand of hair back behind her ear. "You know, I kind of don't want to go back. I liked it just being you and me."

She'd liked it, too. Too much.

She caught his hand and lowered it from her face.

Swallowing a lump of regret, she forced herself to say it. Part of her had hoped she wouldn't have to spell it out for him. But that was the coward's way out. And Della

Tsang wasn't a coward. Plus, Steve deserved to know up front that it wasn't him. It was her.

"Look, I ... I enjoyed this. Everything. I really did, but ... it's over now."

He shook his head. "Why? It doesn't have to be."

"Yeah it does." Her heart suddenly grew heavy. Too heavy for her chest. "I don't ... I'm not ... I'm not ready for this." She waved a hand between them.

That look of apology filled his eyes again. "I told you I didn't mean for that to happen. I'm not going to pressure you to take it there. It'll happen when it's supposed to happen. I'll be patient."

She shook her head. "I don't mean just that."

Concern tightened his brows. "Then what do you mean?"

"I mean us ... period. Us being an item, us being an 'us.' I'm not up for that."

He shook his head. "Why? I thought we got along great."

"Why isn't important. It's just the way it is. I'm not going there. I'm completely happy the way things are, happy with me ... not being a couple." It was such a huge mistruth she could hear her swollen heart doing all sorts of erratic thumps, each one hitting against her sternum and calling her a lying bitch.

"No," he said, "I can't accept that."

"You're going to have to accept it. Because that's just the way it is, Steve. We went on a mission and we did great. We did what we were sent to do and thanks to both of us the world might be a little safer. But what happened between us needs to end. I'm not

right for you."

He studied her. "Who are you right for?" he asked, sounding jealous.

"I'm not right for anyone," she said and her heart didn't race or mark that as a lie. She had loved already. Loved and lost. "It's over, Steve. Just accept it."

She started running and right before she leapt over the fence she heard him.

"We'll see about that." His words rang in her ears. A promise or a threat, she didn't know. But the idea of it being a promise chased away the biggest part of the pain she carried in her heart.

As she walked inside her cabin, she breathed in the scents of home-the smell of Miranda's fruity shampoo, and her scented candles. Della could even pick up the scent of Kylie's favorite lotion.

Standing in the living room, Della let herself feel the tiniest bit of pride that she'd completed the mission. The feeling reconfirmed that she wanted to pursue a career in catching bad guys.

Walking into her bedroom, she opened her bottom drawer and pulled out the pictures. Images of her and her family, and others of her and Lee. All captured moments with emotion. Memories that now hurt to think about.

She started to rip them all up, but then on second thought, she dropped the pictures of her family back into the drawer. Some things she couldn't give up on. But others ...

She tore the snapshots of her and Lee into little pieces and let the tiny specks of paper rain down into the garbage. Then she went to her bed and flopped down on her back and stared at the ceiling.

We'll see about that. Steve's words echoed in her head like the lyrics of a song-a good song, one that crawled into your head and replayed itself over and over.

She closed her eyes. Life might have thrown her some punches this last year, but Della Tsang didn't go down easy. She was just going to punch back.