

Blood Shadows

By Tessa Dawn

A Blood Curse Novel

Book Four in the Blood Curse Series

For Harold & Goldie, my celestial stars...

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The Blood Curse

In 800 BC, Prince Jadon and Prince Jaegar Demir were banished from their Romanian homeland after being cursed by a ghostly apparition: *the reincarnated Blood of their numerous female victims*. The princes belonged to an ancient society that sacrificed its females to the point of extinction, and the punishment was severe.

They were forced to roam the earth in darkness as creatures of the night. They were condemned to feed on the blood of the innocent and stripped of their ability to produce female offspring. They were damned to father twin sons by human hosts who would die wretchedly upon giving birth; and the firstborn of the first set would forever be required as a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of their forefathers.

Staggered by the enormity of *The Curse*, Prince Jadon, whose own hands had never shed blood, begged his accuser for leniency and received *four small mercies*—four exceptions to the curse that would apply to his house and his descendants, alone.

Ψ Though still creatures of the night, they would be allowed to walk in the sun.

Ψ Though still required to live on blood, they would not be forced to take the lives of the innocent.

Ψ While still incapable of producing female offspring, they would be given *one opportunity and thirty days* to obtain a mate—a human *destiny* chosen by the gods—following a sign that appeared in the heavens.

Ψ While they were still required to sacrifice a firstborn son, their twins would be born as one child of darkness and one child of light, allowing them to sacrifice the former while keeping the latter to carry on their race.

And so... forever banished from their homeland in the Transylvanian mountains of Eastern Europe, the descendants of Jaegar and the descendants of Jadon became the Vampyr of legend: roaming the earth, ruling the elements, living on the blood of others... forever bound by an ancient curse. They were brothers of the same species, separated only by degrees of light and shadow.

Prologue

Nachari Silivasi gripped the iron stakes on either side of his hands and shouted his pain as the harsh lash bit into his skin again and again. And again.

He would not beg.

He would not give them the satisfaction.

His body shook against the hard granite beneath him, and his back arched in unnatural contortions as his spilled blood pooled beneath his naked belly. It felt warm against the otherwise cool stone.

It had been three long months.

Three terrible months since he had descended into the Valley of Death and Shadows—and entered hell—in order to save the Vampyr king of the house of Jadon from a dark possession.

It had been three agonizing months since he had seen his brothers.

The lash struck again, catching him off guard on a violent exhale, and he almost passed

out. His amulet, the one Shelby had given him, was cutting into his skin—it always did when they laid him facedown against the stone for his lashings—but he didn't dare take it off. Once, a minion of the dark lord had tried to wrench it from his neck, and it had burned the demon's hand like a hot branding iron.

As the lash struck lower this time, falling somewhere between his upper thighs and his buttocks, he heard himself whimper, and he cursed his momentary weakness. If only he could die. If only his brothers would renege on their promise to continue providing life support to his body until he returned. If only he could be free.

If Nachari could have laughed at the irony—which he couldn't—he would have: In their desire to keep him alive, to hold him to the earth, his brothers were keeping him in a vampiric version of purgatory instead. As long as his earthly body remained safe and healthy, awaiting his spirit's return to Dark Moon Vale, he could not fully die. Once dead, his corporeal body, which was holding his soul at bay, and his ethereal soul, which was projecting a corporeal form in order to sustain the endless torture, would merge. He would be one entity in one place, and the Dark Lord Ademordna could no longer enslave him.

Granted, he would be dead, never to return to his precious valley in the Rocky Mountains, never to see his Romanian homeland one last time, never to meet his *destiny*, but he would at least be at peace—for the dark lord who had taken him into the Valley of Death and Shadows could not hold him as one integrated being. His eternal soul would find its solace in the Valley of Spirit and Light where it belonged. With Shelby.

As the next stroke of the lash fell into the exact groove as the previous one, Nachari inadvertently bit his tongue: *Great Celestial gods*, how much more could he endure? Day after endless day. Knowing his body would regenerate again and again only to prepare him for more

torture.

Unable to withstand another moment of his torment, Nachari chose to take the only way out available to him...however temporary. Indeed, it was an escape he had taken one hundred times before. He threw back his head, his glorious mane of thick, raven hair spilling around his face and shoulders in wild waves of blood-crusting locks, and slammed his forehead against the stone.

The pain was indescribably profound.

Literally and figuratively stunning.

And then—mercifully—he collapsed against the stone, and the entire underworld went black.

Deanna Dubois knelt on her living room floor in deep concentration, rocking back and forth on her heels as she stared at the new set of drawings in front of her. She sighed in frustration and more than a little trepidation. The only reason she could call these drawings *new* was because she had drawn them last night—as opposed to the night before...

Or the night before that.

There was nothing new about her disturbing, ever-growing obsession.

She twirled a thick lock of ash-brown hair around her finger, noticing a particularly stark amber highlight, before turning back to the paintings.

Dear God, what was wrong with her?

She needed help.

And it was getting harder and harder to deny it.

She reached for the thin, lightweight computer beside her, drew it on top of her lap, and used the mouse to enlarge the webpage she had opened—and left open—almost two weeks ago: Psychiatric Clinics in New Orleans.

Just pick one, Deanna, she told herself. You need help!

She glanced once again at the pictures before her and tried to see them in a new light, maybe, with an eye for self-analysis—it was time for some serious introspection. Setting the laptop aside, she laid the drawings out in order, sort of like a progressively animated comic strip, and then sat back and studied them.

On the far left was the most beautiful man she had ever seen, a tall, incredibly well-built Adonis with deep green eyes and a face so utterly perfect she wasn't sure God could actually create such a being—let alone endow her with the ability to draw it. His hair was unnaturally thick and silky, and there was a strange air of confidence swirling around him even in the drawing—not quite arrogance, but definitely pride—a regal-like quality. He was simply breathtaking. Actually, more than that: He was arresting...almost disturbing in his appeal.

The next sequence of drawings was more benign, and she drew them the same every time: pine trees, rock outcroppings, skies filled with dark, mottled clouds, and endless miles of forest. Nothing especially interesting or disturbing there. They reminded her of pictures she had seen of Colorado.

She turned to the next drawing, the one immediately to the right of the last forest picture, and she shivered. In this frame, the ground had opened up beneath the handsome man, and he was falling into a dark, endless hole, being sucked into some evil netherworld. The hands that were reaching up to grab him were skeletal and demonic; and, of course, this is where the

metaphorical comic strip began to deteriorate and her own mental health came into question: In the subsequent set of photos—the largest sequence that she drew night after night—the ungodly beautiful man was depicted in all kinds of horrific scenarios and positions being tortured.

And by *tortured*, she meant hideously tormented in ways that no stable human being could possibly come up with—let alone draw in such brutal detail—unless that artistically disturbed woman was seriously going insane.

She rubbed her face with her palms as if she could scrub away the anxiety and stared apprehensively at the farthest picture to the right. Something in her gut turned over as her eyes connected with the images.

It was as if it were real.

As if it were happening right now.

As if, right this second, the man was lying facedown against a cold stone, bound by four heavy lengths of chain, with diamonds—of all things—embedded in the links. And God almighty, was he writhing in pain as his flesh was literally torn from his body by a spiked lash. Yet never—not even once in all of her drawings—did the guy beg his tormentors for mercy. For lack of a better term, he took it like a man.

A man forged from iron.

Whoever her phantom captive was, he clearly had the heart of a lion.

Deanna reached out and swept the drawings into a haphazard pile, purposefully disturbing the order in a desperate attempt to erase the madness that had become her nighttime—and more and more often, daytime—obsession.

“Who are you?” she whispered, pleading with heaven-knows-what for just a moment’s peace. “And why are you haunting me?”

One of the earlier-sequenced drawings seemed to rise to the top as if it were trying to answer her question by floating above all the other images...speaking in some cryptic, metaphysical way. “It’s just random, Deanna,” she reassured herself. “From the way you messed them up—you are not *that* crazy!” She emphasized the last five words while momentarily squeezing her eyes shut. And then she began tapping the back of her foot nervously against the floor in a frenetic, repetitive rhythm as she cringed. “What’s wrong with me...what’s wrong with me...*what’s wrong with me?*”

She continued to stare at the most prominent drawing.

“Fine,” she finally spat, reaching for the picture and lifting it up to study it more closely. “I’ll bite. Show me some great hidden meaning, then.” Shaking her head, she whispered, “Show me just how psychotic I am so they can lock me away forever.”

As she turned the drawing over and over, observing it at different angles, she began to notice a strange pattern in the sky: There was something hidden within the shadows of the dark clouds, the ones that loomed ominously over the forested valley, the place from which the man always fell into the black hole. And the hidden pattern wasn’t something Deanna had added to the picture; rather, it was a deliberate omission—white space that remained empty, uncovered by pencil marks.

An outline emerged in the absence of color.

Frowning, Deanna leapt up from the floor and went to get her magnifying glass in order to take a closer look. As she held the drawing beneath the lens, she bent way over to study the vacant space...and froze.

What in the world?

The spaces were letters.

And the letters spelled very distinct words.

Wondering if she wasn't about to open Pandora's box—and whether or not she might be better off leaving well enough alone—Deanna reached for her pencil and flipped over another drawing in order to transcribe the letters on the back, one at a time.

DARK-MOON-VALE-CLINIC.

She sat back and stared at the words, and then she picked up the magnifying glass and verified each one a second time, making sure she hadn't overlooked anything. Yep, that's what they said all right: Dark Moon Vale Clinic.

She set down the magnifying glass and shrugged. At least they hadn't spelled out Sybil or Three Faces of Eve. At least they hadn't spelled out *Redrum, Redrum, Redrum* over and over and over: "All work and no play makes Deanna a very dull girl," she whispered, shivering at the inappropriate reference to *The Shining*—a terrifying book written by Stephen King in the 1970s that was later made into a movie. That was later remade at a remote Colorado hotel...

Near the Rocky Mountain National Park...

Just outside the Roosevelt National *Forest*.

Deanna swallowed a lump in her throat, set the magnifying glass aside, and slowly reached for her laptop again. This time, she ignored the intimidating list of local psychoanalysts in favor of trying a different search: Colorado Clinics. When she didn't find the one from her drawings, she began to breathe easier. *Okay, this is good. The clinic isn't real.*

Even as she thought it, an uneasy feeling grew in her belly, and she continued to try various word combinations in the search engine, absently seeking to discern whether or not the *place* was real, even if the clinic wasn't.

And there it was.

Right beneath Mountain Hotels and Accommodations: *Dark Moon Vale Lodge*.

Damnit! she thought, her trepidation growing. It was time to research the place in depth.

Despite some frantic voice screaming deep within the recesses of her mind, *Stop! Don't go any further. This is one of those forks in the road—one of those ominous moments in life from which there is no turning back—don't do it!* she was helpless to stop herself.

Because something far deeper within her, something far more fundamental and compelling than fear, was spurring her on, inexplicably drawing her to the suffering man in her sketches. To the haunted eyes of that masculine figure.

And nothing in this world—or the next—was going to keep her from solving the mystery...if, in fact, it could be solved.

Even as Deanna clicked on the link and prepared to read further, she already knew she was headed for Colorado: She was going to Dark Moon Vale.

Somewhere...the victim in her drawings did exist. And she was going to find him even if it killed her.

If she had harbored even the slightest doubt before, it was now completely gone: Deanna Dubois was absolutely—*certifiably*—insane.

Chapter One

Dark Moon Vale

The sterile room in the private clinic was as orderly as it was disheartening. Kagen Silivasi dragged his chair closer to his brother's bedside and rested his elbows on his knees. He let out a gentle sigh and stared at Nachari's peaceful face, wishing Nachari would open his eyes. "How are you doing today, little brother?" he whispered, knowing there would be no response. "Everything seems to be in order...at least physically."

Kagen frowned. Nachari had been like a vegetable for three months now: His vital signs were good; his heartbeat was steady; and his complexion remained vibrant and flawless—albeit lacking the young vampire's customary lighthearted smile—and his eyelids rested gently closed over his typically vibrant green eyes. Wherever he was, whether in this world or the next, he appeared to be at rest.

At peace.

Kagen rubbed his jaw in contemplation, wondering for the millionth time what had gone wrong the day Nachari had traded his immortality to follow their sovereign king beyond the

realm of the living, to save Napoleon from the Dark Lord Ademordna, who had possessed the king in a plot to impregnate and destroy the king's *destiny*. Had Nachari followed the evil being into the Valley of Death and Shadows? Had he chosen the afterlife over his ceaseless existence on earth? Or had he been derailed in some other horrific fashion?

Only the gods knew.

And they weren't talking.

Kagen cleared his throat and tried to put some pep into his voice. "So, let's see: What's new today?" He spoke to the sleeping vampire the same way every morning, casually and with deliberate hope, praying his faith would one day get through. "Oh yeah, we worked out a new schedule for you." He absently took Nachari's hand. "It looks like Nathaniel will be hanging out from two to eight every evening; Marquis will sit with you from eight to three AM; and, of course, I'll get up with the chickens to be here every day from three until noon." He tried to chuckle but it sounded as insincere as it felt. "Nurse Katia will take the noon-to-two shift, just to give us a short break, but don't worry, Jocelyn, Ciopori, and Kristina will be dropping in on a regular basis during that time...more than likely to talk your ears off." He absently brushed an errant lock of hair from Nachari's forehead. "Braden would come more often, but we're trying to protect him from too much exposure to the situation—limit his time in the clinic and keep him busy."

He set his brother's hand back down, and then he shrugged away his guilt.

The two-hour window—120 minutes without Kagen, Marquis, or Nathaniel at Nachari's side—still felt like too much time: Nachari needed to know that his brothers were there every second, pulling for him, standing by him, willing him to live.

That they fully expected him to return to the family—both mentally and physically whole.

It was the women who had finally convinced the Silivasi brothers that they simply couldn't spend every waking hour at Nachari's side, that their fatigue also projected a tangible energy; and if they didn't take a break, make an effort to fortify their own souls, none of them would have anything left to give Nachari. Pretty wise, Kagen thought. Nevertheless, two hours out of twenty-four were all the Master Healer would concede. Luckily, the women were wise enough not to push it any further.

A smile warmed his expression, and he chuckled softly. "Speaking of the women, Marquis is treading on some very thin ice these days." He leaned in conspiratorially and lowered his voice. "Ciopori finally drew a line in the sand about Marquis's constant roughhousing with Nikolai—after all, the child is all of what? Just over four months old now?" His voice deepened. "So what did Marquis go and do? He gathered all of Niko's rattles, hollowed out the centers, and filled them with lead. *Lead*. Basically, he turned them into barbells, so every time the boy teethes and reaches for a rattle, he's forced to lift weights." Leaning back in the chair, he crossed one leg horizontally over the other and placed his arm on the back rest. "Nathaniel thinks Ciopori is going to kill him this time when she finds out. Frankly, I think she already knows but is waiting for the best time to use it as leverage." He leaned in as far forward as possible and added, "If you ever repeat this, I'll deny saying it, but Marquis no longer runs things over there...even if he thinks he does. I swear to you on my honor, our newest sister has that male wrapped around her little royal finger." He smiled without restraint. "It's priceless. It truly is."

All at once, the steady line on the monitor dipped for a moment and a shrill beep sounded, drawing Kagen to immediate attention. His breath caught as he checked the screen,

processed all of the numbers quickly in his head, and prepared to jump at a moment's notice if necessary. After thirty seconds or so passed without incident, he relaxed his shoulders and chalked it up to the normal fluctuations of technology. And then he sternly chastised himself for overdramatizing the moment. *By the gods, he had never been this antsy before with a patient.*

Of course, Nachari wasn't just any patient...

Still, Kagen couldn't help but wonder whether or not he was even capable of providing his youngest brother with ongoing, competent care anymore. Clearly, he could not remain objective, rational, or detached. Perhaps he could no longer see things from a true healer's perspective.

Perhaps he should have another healer step in for him.

The second the thought crossed his mind, he dismissed it.

Good, bad, or indifferent, there was no way in hell Kagen Silivasi would ever relinquish Nachari's care to another. The mere thought made him cringe. Nachari would either wake up, come back to the land of the living with gusto, or he would slip away quietly—or not so quietly. Either way, it would be with Kagen at his side.

Kagen rose from his chair.

He crossed the room and opened one of two windows that looked over the whitewater river below. A crisp breeze swept through the night, bringing with it the fresh smell of pine and juniper, clean mountain air. As the invigorating scent filled his nostrils, he inhaled deeply. He thought he had worked through most of his guilt. At least he had tried to put it in its proper place—which wasn't in the Dark Moon Vale Clinic, interfering with his one-on-one time with his patient. Even if the patient was his beloved brother.

Looking at it rationally, he knew he had done all he could for Nachari. From the moment events had first begun to unfold, Kagen had acted with infinite care and meticulous precision: He had overseen the draining of his little brother's blood with expert timing; and he had treated the wizard's dying body with the utmost respect, going out of his way to preserve the dignity of the sacrifice Nachari was making.

Correction: the *temporary* sacrifice Nachari had made.

It had never been intended to be permanent.

Kagen stared out the window at a towering group of Ponderosa pines as he recalled that fateful, horrific day: Salvatore Nistor had conjured a parasitic demon from hell in an attempt to destroy Napoleon Mondragon, actually brought the monster to earth from the underworld. Since none of the Dark Ones were capable of getting anywhere near Napoleon on their own, they had relied upon every trick in the book—literally, in the Book of Black Magic—to bring the formidable king down, to exact revenge for the day Napoleon had single-handedly slain eighty-eight of their warriors in the underground colony as punishment for Salvatore's capture of Princess Ciopori. Meanwhile, Nachari had agreed to try and save the king—to allow the warriors in the house of Jadon to drain his body of blood and force him to flatline in order to free his immortal soul from his body. It was the only way Nachari could enter the Spirit World and do battle with the demon on behalf of their king.

And Kagen had brought Nachari back to life immediately, just as he had promised.

He had started Nachari's heart and pumped oxygen to his brain, all the while keeping him viable so that his traveling soul could return to his body the moment their king was out of danger—just as soon as Napoleon was safe, back in his own healthy body, and no longer possessed by the Dark Lord.

But nothing had gone as they planned.

Nachari had never returned.

Something had gone horribly...horribly wrong.

Kagen shook his head to dismiss the memory. It stung to think of the way the Dark Ones had snuck a possession worm into their king, tried to use Napoleon to destroy his newfound mate—and then himself—and cost the Silivasis their beloved brother in the process.

Kagen was infinitely proud of Nachari.

And endlessly ashamed of his inability to do something more to bring the Master Wizard back.

He rolled his head on his shoulders to release some tension and looked back at Nachari, noting how peaceful he appeared on the bed. If three months had not already passed, he would have sworn his little brother was just sleeping soundly. That any minute now, he was going to jump up, flash that broad, endearing smile of his, and saunter across the room with that rare, almost arrogant swagger that Nachari wore like a second skin—the one that had women swooning, gasping, and begging for even the slightest glance in their direction, just hoping to get a look at *those eyes*.

Truth be told, Kagen thought, underneath it all, Nachari was one of the kindest, most sincere males he had ever known.

Kagen walked leisurely back to the bedside and tilted his head to the side, studying every nuance of his brother's face.

Remembering.

Decades of teasing. Centuries of endless jokes played on the family by both Nachari and Nachari's late twin, Shelby. Endless antics—some planned, some accidental—but all evoking

silly smirks, childish chortles, and raucous laughter in their wake. So much animation in those arresting features.

Kagen shook his head.

There was so much more life left to live for the young, 500-year-old vampire. So much more of the world to see. So many more experiences to enjoy.

Like Kagen, Nachari had yet to meet his *destiny*. Unlike Kagen's, Nachari's woman would undoubtedly become the most envied woman on the planet. Not that women didn't swoon and pant over the only brown-eyed, russet-haired Silivasi brother in the bunch as well, but Nachari was...well...Nachari. And Kagen never wanted to see that change.

He shrugged, tapping the sleeping male lightly on the shoulder. "You know what, brother. I almost forgot to tell you about Storm." He held both hands in front of him and toggled them up and down as if measuring two invisible weights. "Now, keep in mind, of course, that parents tend to exaggerate; however, this little guy is actually starting to babble already and make some words. If I'm lying, you can sue me."

Although all vampire children developed far more rapidly than their human counterparts, at only four and one-half months old, Nathaniel and Jocelyn's industrious child was already showing an unusual level of intelligence.

"The other day," Kagen continued, explaining the outlandish claim, "Jocelyn was strapping Storm into his car seat in order to bring him to the clinic for a visit; and apparently, the little guy was so accustomed to coming here to see you that he looked up and said, 'Unka Chari?'" Kagen felt his eyes grow moist. "*Unka Chari*, can you get over that? The boy knew that he was going to see his uncle Nachari." He looked away as the last words caught in his throat; and then he cleared it, took a deep breath, and slowly blew it out. *Damn it all to hell—why did*

this have to be so hard? For the love of all that was holy, what did the gods want in exchange for bringing Nachari back? There was no price the Healer wouldn't willingly pay, regardless of any cost to himself.

Suddenly, from somewhere far away, deep in the recesses of his mind—someplace where unspoken doubts lurked in the shadows, threatening, always threatening, to come into the light—Kagen felt the subtle stirring of fear. Waiting. Prowling. Ever ready to pounce. And it spoke in a terrifying voice: *“Your brother is gone, and there is nothing you can do to bring him back! He will never walk this earth again!”*

For all intents and purposes, Nachari was dead, and that which remained now was only a picturesque shell of a life that had once been vital. Just like his twin Shelby, Nachari was forever lost to the grave.

Everything inside of Kagen resisted the voice.

He steeled his determination and stuffed the thoughts back down, forcing the wretched voice back into the shadows where it belonged, because the alternative, to listen and to *hear*, was unthinkable.

Unfathomable.

Inconceivable.

Not. Going. To. Happen.

Shaking it off with steely determination, Kagen jumped to his feet, drew his cell phone from his pocket, and quickly dialed the number of a human female who lived in Dark Moon Vale, the daughter of a loyal family who had served the vampires with honor for years. As the phone rang several times, he tapped his foot impatiently against the floor.

A woman in her mid-twenties answered. “Dr. Silivasi; is this you?”

Caller ID, Kagen thought, and then he rolled his eyes. He hated the title *doctor*—humans had doctors; the sons of Jadon had healers. They spent 400 years at the Romanian University studying infinite theologies and practices in order to become *healers*—anatomy, biology, and pharmacology did not even tap the surface of where they went in their quest to understand the countless nuances of regeneration and wellness—so advanced was their craft. Kagen Silivasi understood the flow of kinetic energy at a quantum-physics level. He could manipulate the subtle interplay of mind, body, and spirit, measure the subtle influences of nature on a vampire’s body rhythms. He understood life to be an interconnected system of living energy as well as fundamental elements; and he knew how to influence each one at the most basic, atomic level. And that was on top of mastering the general medicine practiced by humans.

Whoa, Silivasi! he thought, stopping the irrational mental tirade. *Defensive much? Get a grip.* Feeling like an overly temperamental idiot, he forced a smile in order to put some warmth into his voice. “Just call me Kagen, or even Mr. Silivasi, Shelly. Okay?”

The woman sounded nervous and far too apologetic. “Oh, gosh...yes, of course, I’m sorry, Doctor Sil—I mean, Mr. Silivasi. Do you...” She paused as if searching for the exact, right word. “Do you need my...services...this afternoon, Master? I’m...I’m always here, at your service.”

Kagen switched the phone to his other hand. *Master?* He decided to let it go. “I’m afraid I do, Shelly. It has been a little over a week since we last—”

“Yes, yes, of course!” She rushed the words, cutting him off in midsentence. “Oh, I’m so sorry—I didn’t mean to interrupt you.” She groaned, sounding totally exasperated. “Forgive me.”

Kagen fought back a chuckle. As far as he knew, no vampire in the house of Jadon had ever punished or harmed a loyal human servant for not genuflecting sufficiently, yet Shelly

Winters had always responded to him the same way: like she was afraid he might just put her six feet under—perhaps come steal her in the night, whisk her off to a dark Romania castle, and drain her body of blood—if she didn't pay sufficient homage every time she heard his voice. For the love of Auriga, he had no idea why she still behaved that way after so many years of serving the Vampyr, of living within their generosity and beneath their protection. Surely, she had to know them better by now. Her family had to be one of the few who had been with the house of Jadon for more than five generations.

“Mmm, I see,” he purred, deliberately inserting a low, rumbling growl into his already raspy voice. It was awful to toy with her like this, but she had sort of invited it. “I will overlook the indefensible...this time.” His voice was deep, hypnotic, and practically dripping with menace. Dracula on steroids.

Shelly didn't respond.

And he could have sworn he heard her heart pounding through the phone, rising to a frenetic rhythm, even as she swallowed reflexively several times in a row. Without actually seeing her, he imagined her delicate hand protectively covering her throat as she shivered.

“Shelly?” he said, his voice now calm, steady, and reassuring.

“Y...Y...Yes, Mr. Silivasi?”

He chuckled softly. “I'm *teasing* you, sweetheart. You don't have anything to apologize for. I'm just trying to loosen you up.”

She sighed audibly. “Oh...yeah.” And then she tried to laugh along with him—tried but failed. “You got me. You're very funny, Mr. Sil—”

“*Relax*,” Kagen drawled. This time, he placed a hint of compulsion in his voice, not enough to override her perceptions, just enough to take her heart rate down a notch. “Breathe, darling.”

She breathed heavily into the phone. “Okay...I’ll try.”

Kagen chastised himself for toying with the poor female: Not everyone understood his unique sense of humor, and Shelly Winters had a good soul.

She was a sweet, innocent young lady with a true heart for service. She practically radiated love for her fellow man—although, when Kagen considered the behavior of most human men toward their women, only the gods knew why—but Shelly was one of those rare types who always saw the best in everyone because she looked for it. There wasn’t a fake or pretentious bone in her body, and that was why Kagen had chosen her to nourish Nachari while he was...inanimate. Shelly’s soul was a perfect match to Nachari’s goodness. And the human female had come to the Dark Moon Vale Clinic on a weekly basis, as requested, ever since the day Nachari had been admitted. While Kagen couldn’t speak for Nachari’s eternal soul, he could absolutely certify that his brother’s physical body was in top condition, and Shelly Winters was a big part of the reason why. “You are ready, then? To feed him today?” he asked.

He was referring to the practice of drinking plenty of fluids to flush her system of impurities, adding vitamins and minerals to richen her blood, and generally avoiding all processed foods in order to raise her overall vibration. While vampires could consume any human blood, ward off diseases, and still find nourishment, this was Nachari they were talking about. And as long as different elements projected different frequencies, nothing but the best would go into his brother.

“Absolutely,” she assured him. “I’m always very diligent. Ready at a moment’s notice.” Although she spoke with confidence—perhaps courtesy was the better word—her hesitance could still be heard.

And Kagen couldn’t really blame her.

Under normal circumstance, the vampires in the house of Jadon did not call upon their human allies to provide blood; they hunted like all other predators, choosing their prey in the moment, inoculating them against the pain, and wiping their memories. But Nachari couldn’t hunt right now. As it stood, the fresh human blood had to be taken from a vein and fed to the male through a tube. It was awkward at best, intimidating at the least.

But it shouldn’t have been scary.

“I really do appreciate this, Shelly,” Kagen said sincerely. “I know that the situation is...difficult.”

Shelly sighed. “No, not at all.” She obviously lied for his benefit. “I am more than happy to do it.” At least the last part was true.

“So you can come now?” he asked, changing his manner to a business-like tone.

“Oh, yes, of course,” she said. “I can leave in ten minutes...be there in twenty if you’d like, Dr. Sil—Kagen.”

He smiled then. Progress had been made after all. “Very well; I will see you when you get here.”

“Absolutely,” she said. “Is there...um...oh, never mind. I’ll see you soon, then.”

“What were you going to say?” Kagen asked, curious.

She hesitated. “Nothing, really...just...”

“Just?”

“Just...is there anything else you need? I mean, *anything* at all?”

There was a strange, unfamiliar note in her voice, a peculiar emphasis on the word *anything*, and suddenly, Kagen wasn't at all sure what she was asking...or offering.

Shelly Winters?

Surely not.

“I don't think I know what you mean, Shelly,” he said, getting straight to the point.

She sounded mortified. “Oh...oh...um... I don't...I didn't...can I get you anything...from the grocery store or anything?”

The corner of Kagen's mouth turned up in a wry smile. *Well, I'll be damned.* “No, sweetie, thank you.” He almost added, *Vampires rarely eat human food—and certainly not a Healer*; but then Shelly already knew this, so he decided to leave well enough alone. “Your generosity toward Nachari is more than enough. I am eternally in your debt, Miss Winters.” Perhaps a little more formality between them was in order, after all—although it was a little hard to pull back all the *sweethearts* and *darlings* at this point—what could he say? Kagen had grown up in a different era, and his innocent dallying with the opposite gender was as natural as breathing and walking. “Just drink a glass or two of orange juice before you come, and be prepared to stay for at least an hour afterward.”

Although he was very careful with the amount of blood he took in any one feeding, Kagen never took unnecessary chances with human charges. An hour was more than enough time for Shelly to recover from the process, but he would rather be safe than sorry. Especially now, after the loss of Joelle Parker: after Valentine Nistor had schemed to take the daughter of one of their most loyal human families, violate her, and use her body to father his dark twin sons under the guise of pretending to be Marquis Silivasi. The evil one had known the young woman

was naive and in love with Marquis, and he had used it to his own hideous advantage, causing her inevitable death in less than forty-eight hours after the deception. The loss had sent shock waves through the house of Jadon and the interconnected human community alike—the privileged few who were exposed to the truth about the vampire species...as well as the dangers that came along with that knowledge—and now, the vampires had to be ever more diligent. The humans needed to know, under no uncertain terms, that their vampire benefactors did not take them for granted or consider their health and safety lightly.

Not ever.

“Okay,” Shelly whispered, sounding mildly deflated. “For what it’s worth, I also...I’m always here for you as well, to talk...if you want.”

Kagen grew deathly silent.

When after thirty seconds or so he still didn’t respond, she pushed forward. “I don’t know if that’s really appropriate or anything. I just know that it must be truly awful, what you’re going through, and I’m...I just want you to know I’m always here if you need an objective ear.” She swallowed hard, betraying her nervousness. “Even if I’m human, I do care, and I’m just very sorry about—”

“Thank you,” Kagen said curtly, cutting her off mid-sentence. “We will see you when you get here, Miss Winters.” With that, he hung up the phone and slipped it back into his front pants’ pocket. He knew that Shelly meant well—of course, she did. But she was treading on very thin ice. And he would not be crooned to like a child...by a human.

He glanced at the bed—at the peaceful yet lifeless-looking male lying on top of the crisp white sheets—and slipped a careful, protective mask over his emotions. *I’m sorry if that came*

across as rude, he thought, but it just isn't a subject I'm going to discuss with you, Shelly. You...or anyone else.

He walked to the cabinet, opened the pine door, and began retrieving the apparatus he would need to facilitate the blood transfer in business-like fashion. It wasn't that he was cold or unfeeling. In fact, it was quite the contrary. It was just that, as a human, there was simply no way someone like Shelly Winters could possibly understand...

All of the sleepless days.

All of the second-guessing.

Had he done right by Nachari? Was he prolonging his brother's life or withholding his peace? Could he have changed the course of events by doing something differently, and if so, what? Was there a medical answer to why Nachari remained in a comatose state? And if so, why wasn't Kagen wise enough to figure it out? Should he step aside and let someone more objective assume the wizard's care? Could he ever...possibly...live with the loss of another sibling, knowing that he had given his consent for the action that led to his death?

No, Shelly Winters did not understand.

That vampires were intrinsically connected to the earth, and their emotions brought about immediate changes in the same. That, for the sake of her kind, the rivers needed to continue to flow...without flooding. That the sky needed to remain tranquil...without thundering. That the earth needed to remain solid...without trembling and splitting open beneath their feet.

And it would if Kagen were to ever give voice to his feelings.

It most certainly would.

Kagen glanced down at his hand and the dual rivulets of blood flowing across his skin, realizing that he had unwittingly bitten into it with his fangs. He slowly licked the blood away and closed the twin wounds with his venom before forcing his fangs to retract.

He drew in a deep breath.

Steady. Calm. Focused.

Turning to the male on the bed, he smoothed back Nachari's hair and laid the back of his hand lightly against his cheek. "Shelly Winters is coming to feed you soon, my brother. To help you keep up your strength." He watched for the response he knew wasn't coming, and then he nodded. "You *will* return to us, Nachari, and when you do, I expect you to be in perfect health. Do you hear me?" His voice was as calm and dispassionate as a still pond.

Yet his soul was on fire.

As always, his words were a prayer, beseeching all the gods and goddesses in the heavens...and beyond.

By all that is holy, bring this blessed one back to me.

Please!

Chapter Two

One week later

After a long, exhausting drive from Denver International Airport, Deanna Dubois arrived in Dark Moon Vale around 4:00 PM, exactly one week after the revelation she'd had about the mysterious man in her drawings. She immediately checked in at the main lodge, retrieved a map of the local area, as well as a set of keys to a small remote cabin she had rented for the week, and headed for her final destination: 116 Forest Hill, Cabin B.

Now, slowing her rented four-wheel drive to a creep, she pulled over to the side of the road and turned the map upside down on the steering wheel in order to visualize the route from an exact point of view. For some reason, the GPS was completely lost; it simply didn't work on this side of the mountain. Thank goodness she'd had the foresight to take the map when it was offered to her.

She placed her finger on a familiar geographical marker and stared out the window.

There.

Right behind that grouping of trees was a steep embankment that should lead down to the Snake Creek River. If she was reading the map correctly, the cabins would be located just on the other side of the creek, after crossing an old stone bridge.

Deanna pulled back onto the roadway and drove slowly over the uneven, rocky ground, relieved when she finally saw the approaching bridge in front of her. She rolled down the window in order to take in the melodious sound of the rushing water as she crept across the stony bridge and breathed in the fresh mountain air. It was truly heavenly. There was nothing like it in New Orleans. She glanced at the map once more to regain her bearings at a fork in the road, and then she wove to the right and drove about 500 yards farther before suddenly coming to a screeching halt.

Her foot slammed against the brake pedal.

She dropped the map and gripped the wheel with two iron fists as she stared dumbfounded out the rearview mirror at an eerily familiar clearing. Her heart thudded in her chest; goose bumps appeared on her arms; and a light wave of nausea swept over her body. Struggling for air, she released the wheel and pressed a taut hand against her stomach.

"My God," she whispered.

Reaching to release the vehicle's locks, she opened her door, shrugged into a lightweight jacket, and bounded out of the SUV, practically sprinting toward the clearing. In the distance, she could just make out the Snake Creek River and a small cluster of guest cabins on the other side, but that no longer held her attention: She was too entranced by the endless miles of forest. The frighteningly familiar setting. The particular coloring, angles, and juxtaposition of the various elements: pine trees, rock outcroppings, skies that were blue today but had once been filled with dark, mottled clouds.

In her drawings.

This was the place.

The haunted clearing where the beautiful man had been sucked under the earth by something—what?—so evil.

She slowed her pace and approached the scene with caution, if not reverence, stunned by the exact likeness to her drawings. As she drew closer and closer to the very spot that had haunted her for months now, something inside of her turned almost electric—it practically hummed with pulsing energy—and she wasn't sure if she could handle all the metaphysical sensations.

Still, she kept on.

Drawn as if by an unseen force to a particular spot on the ground.

Deanna drew in a sharp breath as her eyes swept over the barren earth. It had been cleared away, no longer natural, leaving evidence that something...or someone...had, in fact, been right there. And there was a dark, ominous stain in the center.

She squatted down to touch the dirt. What was this? She immediately backed up with a jolt and stood upright.

It was blood.

Earth that had been soaked—no, practically bathed—in blood.

For reasons beyond her comprehension, she felt like crying.

Screaming.

Falling to her knees and weeping.

What the hell?

There was such an overwhelming sense of grief enveloping her that she staggered where she stood. Unable to bring it under control, she knelt in the dirt and placed the flat of her palms over the bloodstained earth. “What are you?” she whispered, distraught. “*Who* are you?”

She lifted her hands and brushed the bloodstained dirt through her fingers. “And why do I feel like I’m going to die because of you...like I wish I could?”

She wrapped both of her arms tightly around her middle and started to rock back and forth, inexplicable tears streaming down her face. When finally she had shed her last teardrop, she wiped her eyes with the back of a dirty hand and stood. “Come back to me.” She mumbled the words nonsensically. “Please...oh, please...come back to me.”

Fearing for her sanity, she turned to run to her car but was stopped short by the presence of a skinny, brooding redhead sitting on the hood of her SUV. The woman had parked a pink Corvette behind Deanna’s Ford Explorer and was watching her with piercing, angry eyes like those of a tiger. Everything about the otherwise small woman screamed danger.

Just one more thing that made no sense.

Deanna appraised the stranger from head to toe as she raised her chin, held out her keys, and approached with caution. She hadn’t grown up in a perfect suburban world, and she knew how to handle herself if necessary. Under ordinary circumstances, she would never fear another female of such small stature, but these weren’t ordinary circumstances. And somehow, although she didn’t know how she knew, the woman sitting so brazenly on the hood of her truck was no ordinary person.

“Hello,” Deanna called pleasantly, figuring it might be best to get on the woman’s good side up front.

The girl popped a piece of gum, pushed away from the hood, and took a large, measured stride toward Deanna, kicking off a beautiful pair of spiked black heels as she stepped forward.

Oh shit, this isn't good.

The redhead narrowed her eyes. “Two questions: Who the hell are you? And what the hell were you doing underneath that tree?” She took out her gum and tossed it on the ground. “Speak now, skank, or forever hold your peace.”

Kristina Riley-Silivasi watched with suspicion as the human woman rocked back and forth, crying like a ninny, directly over the spot where Nachari had died. The chick felt the earth, touched her adopted brother's blood, and held it close to her heart.

What. The. Heck.

The only ones who knew about what went down in this meadow were the sons of Jadon and, of course, the sons of Jaegar. No one else. And since Kristina knew damn well that this girl wasn't a *destiny* to one of the Jadon vamps—or a convert, since there weren't any converts other than her—she quickly did the math and figured the Dark Ones had sent the woman...

But why?

As the girl approached her car with more confidence than Kristina appreciated, Kristina gave her a once-over. Granted, the chick was very pretty—exotic-looking actually. Strange. Some kind of indecipherable racial mix that definitely worked for her, that was for sure. And she had a lot of confidence with her five-foot-nine or -ten, clearly toned body.

But...oh well.

Kristina was Vampyr now, ever since Marquis had converted her under the unwitting protection of the dark lord Ocard—which was a whole other story—and only because Marquis had mistakenly believed Kristina was his *destiny* at the time. It really wasn't his fault, though; Salvatore Nistor has used a black magic spell to switch Kristina and Ciopori in a ploy to kill Marquis. Luckily, the plan had failed, but not before Marquis had claimed Kristina, converted her, and almost made her...*his*...in every way.

She shook her head, dismissing the thought.

Back to the matter at hand...

The flipped-out female sent by the Dark Ones to do something...to Nachari? Anger swelled in Kristina's breast, and she jumped down from the hood of the car, kicked off her shoes, and strolled right toward her. "Two questions," she said, feeling her anger rise to even greater proportions. "Who the hell are you? And what the hell were you doing underneath that tree?" *Where Nachari died?* She took out her gum and tossed it on the ground, willing her eyes not to turn feral and her fangs to stay put. "Speak now, skank, or forever hold your peace."

The beautiful lady stopped dead in her tracks and took a step back. "Excuse me?" she said, with way too much metal.

"You heard me," Kristina snapped. "I don't believe I stuttered."

The woman smiled then. Actually smiled. "I don't believe I gave you permission to sit on my truck." She strolled confidently forward and hit the *unlock* button on her key fob. "Pardon me," she said, waiting for Kristina to step aside.

Kristina reached out and grabbed the chick by the arm, squeezing just hard enough to let her know she could crush her bones at will if she chose. Placing an implied threat into her voice—something she had just learned recently in Jocelyn and Nathaniel's self-defense class—

she shoved her way into the woman's mind. "Tell me what the hell you were up to and who sent you. *Now.*"

The woman yanked her arm free and took a step back, but there was definitely a wash of fear in her eyes. "I...I'm a guest staying at the cabins." She turned around and pointed in the direction of the log cottages.

Kristina scowled. "Show me your room key."

The woman frowned, but she did as she was told. Well, actually, as she was compelled. "Here," she said angrily, pulling one of the unmistakable lodge key-cards out of her pocket. "Satisfied?"

Kristina frowned. *What the hell?* "You're a guest?"

"Yes," the woman huffed, "that's what I said." She squared her shoulders. "I'm Deanna Dubois. I'm here from New Orleans...for the week, but I have to say, if this is how the people around here treat visitors, then don't expect any repeat business from me."

Kristina looked off into the distance toward the clearing. "What were you doing over there—all playing around in the dirt and crying and shit? What the heck was that?"

The lady looked embarrassed now. Unsettled. "I...I honestly don't know. I just felt something really powerful...and terribly sad...and it drew me to that spot. Sorry if it was private property or something. I didn't mean to trespass. I just...I don't know what came over me. That's the truth."

Being as new as she was to the species, Kristina wasn't especially good at vampire tricks, but this was just too important—she had to try. "Look right in my eyes, Deanna."

The woman blinked, and she even frowned; but she did as she was told.

"Now tell me straight up: Are you telling the truth?"

The lady nodded.

“You’re actually a guest here, and you just felt something powerful that drew you to that spot? And made you cry like that?”

Deanna nodded her head again, this time more slowly. “Yes.” When she reached up to rub her temples as if she were getting a headache, Kristina figured she’d better back off a little. No point in giving the chick a lobotomy. “Did the Dark Ones send you?”

“Who?” Deanna asked, genuinely confused.

Kristina shook her head. “Nothing...forget it.” She looked deep into Deanna’s eyes. “Really, *forget it.*” She took a step back and waited. When Deanna shook her head back and forth, like she was all of a sudden unaware of where she was or what they were talking about, Kristina swallowed with relief. “It was nice meeting you, Deanna. I hope you enjoy your stay in Dark Moon Vale.” *Amazing*, she thought as she slowly backed away. The chick had to be one of those real psychics or something; too bad she didn’t read fortunes.

Deanna blinked several more times and nodded. “Yeah, thanks. Nice meeting you, too...” She paused. “I’m sorry; I don’t remember your name.”

Kristina held out her hand. “Kristina,” she said, smiling wide enough to flash her pearly whites. “And that’s okay. My memory sucks too most of the time.”

Deanna nodded then. “*Kristina*. Great, I’ll remember next time.” She offered an insecure, confused smile.

“Cool. Take it easy, and enjoy your stay, okay?”

Kristina didn’t turn around to watch the woman climb into her SUV. She’d had enough of the Twilight Zone for one day and didn’t care to see any more of the chick’s confused

expression. Besides, she figured if she had done everything right, the lady would forget most of the conversation, take a couple of aspirin for her headache, and be on her merry psychic way.

If not, then she could only hope that Marquis and Nathaniel never got wind of it. They both took the whole business-industry-in-Dark-Moon-Vale thing pretty seriously, and it wasn't like Kristina was anyone's favorite person around there anyway. Well, maybe Braden's—at least since Nachari had been gone and the two of them had ended up saddled with each other—but even the adorable boy couldn't save her if news of this fiasco got back to one of her new brothers. Or worse, Napoleon.

She cringed as she climbed into her Corvette and put the key in the ignition: Better to keep the whole incident to herself for now. After all, who really needed to know about a strange, clairvoyant lady from New Orleans who ran around in the trees, sensing psychic energy?

No one.

That's who.