

**Dark and Bitter Pearls**

Slidell, Louisiana  
Jack Cheramie's house  
March 30

Lucien De Noir sat beside the unconscious girl curled on the bed, its box springs creaking beneath him. Mid-afternoon sunlight filtered through the golden, gauzy curtains covering the window, bathing the room in a tranquil glow. An illusion—no, worse, a lie—given the day's dark, violent, and unimaginable events.

*My son has been shot and stolen and the mortal woman he loves, the woman who keeps his slipping sanity balanced, is missing.*

Lucien's deltoid muscles flexed, restless, but he suppressed the urge to unfurl his wings and take to the sky in search of Dante and Heather; he feared that they had been spirited off in two very different directions. And he had no idea where to look, which path to follow, or even who was responsible.

Not yet, anyway.

Lucien focused his attention on Heather Wallace's drugged sister. A light sheen of sweat glistened on Annie's forehead. Tears wet the ends of her lashes. And her blood-speckled face looked light-years away from peaceful.

Guessing why wasn't difficult.

The blood freckling her face and throat was Dante's. Lucien knew by the scent alone—copper, a hint of adrenaline, a the moonlight-silver tang—and had known from the moment he'd scooped her unconscious body up from the sidewalk in front of the club.

She must've been standing beside Dante when he'd been shot. Or damned close, anyway. A

muscle flexed in Lucien's jaw. Shot repeatedly and without mercy. Dante's blood had saturated the Oriental carpet in front of the bedroom he shared with Heather.

So much blood when Dante should've healed. Too much blood. And the odd scent clinging to the shell casings Lucien had picked up from the hallway carpet had left him wondering. A troubling scent. Familiar.

Lucien studied Annie's pale face, pushed sweat-damp tendrils of her punk-style blue/purple/black hair back from her face. She shivered inside her fuzzy purple bathrobe as though it was woven from ice, instead of plush terry cloth.

With a soft chirp, Heather's orange tabby jumped up onto the bed and sniffed Annie for several moments before curling up beside her. Eerie blinked golden eyes at Lucien, then began licking the undersides of his paws, his tongue scraping delicately across the scorched pads.

Like the cat, Lucien also smelled the drugs on Annie's skin, in her sweat—a cold, chemical taint. He had no idea what drugs flowed through her veins, or how long she'd remain unconscious, but he had no intention of waiting for her to wake up. Not when answers rested like pearls in her mind. Not when he could play thief.

Too much time had passed already. Hours lost to the police and their investigation of the shoot-out outside the club and the fire inside; a loss he'd finally cut short with a blue-sparked finger to the lead detective's forehead and a whispered suggestion: *You've already spoken to Dante. He saw nothing. Heard nothing. Knows nothing about the incident here or the fire that claimed his home four nights ago. You will write that down in your notebook.*

Blinking, the detective promptly put her pen to paper.

Lucien sighed. A temporary solution at best; the suggestion would eventually fade. But a problem for another time. Closing his eyes, he drew in a long, deep breath—in through his nose,

out through his mouth—then another, as he worked on centering himself before delving into Annie’s unshielded mind.

“How she doing?” a Cajun-spiced voice asked from the doorway. “Looks like she ain’t moved an inch since I carried her in from the van.”

Lucien’s calming breath morphed into a low, frustrated exhalation. He opened his eyes. Glanced over his shoulder.

Dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt announcing LAFAYETTE MARQUIS, the interruption—better known as Black Bayou Jack Cheramie, Dante’s band mate in Inferno—leaned one muscled, tribal-inked shoulder against the doorjamb, arms crossed over his chest, a bloodstained washcloth balled-up in one hand. The drummer’s mane of cherry-red braids framed his face, his expression a tight-jawed mix of worried and angry.

“She hasn’t,” Lucien confirmed. He nodded at the washcloth in Jack’s hand. “How are Von and Silver doing? Has the bleeding stopped? Are they healing?”

“*Oui*, it’s stopped and they’re healing, for true, them. But given that they’re nightkind and all, it took longer than I expected. Thibodaux agrees with me,” Jack added, with a tilt of his head toward the kitchen where the fugitive SB agent sat at the table cleaning his Colt .45. “Said his partner always heals up *beaucoup* fast. But he also admitted that she ain’t never taken a bullet to the head before neither.”

Lucien thought of the odd scent on the shell casings he’d found in the blood-spattered hall, wondering again just what they had contained. “I don’t think normal rounds were used.”

“Dunno, *padnat*. They sure as hell look like normal rounds to me. Course there ain’t no telling what kind of load they-all contained.” Jack uncrossed his arms and held out his hand, revealing two skull-dented and compressed bullets cupped in his callused palm. “They just kinda

worked their way outta the wounds. Ain't never seen nightkind heal from bullets before. Weirdest goddamned sight."

"Let me have the bullets."

Jack stepped over to the bed and dumped them into Lucien's waiting palm. A faint tree-sap, amber-like odor wafted from the small bits of mangled brass. Whatever the substance had been, it seemed to be capable of slowing, perhaps even halting, a vampire's natural ability to heal. Even a True Blood's.

Remembering what he'd felt when he'd reached for Dante's mind back at the club—a psionic flatline that had sheeted Lucien's soul in black ice until he'd finally detected a low, ebbing life force absent of any healing spark—he once again felt the urgent desire to unsheathe his wings and vault into the sky.

He needed to find Dante before it was too late. Before destiny twisted in on itself and became fate.

"Tee-Tee? Heather?" Jack asked. "You think they were in the back of that van those assholes were trying to put Annie into?"

*Tee-Tee.* Jack and the other mortal members of Inferno had tagged their nightkind frontman with the affectionate nickname because, at five-nine, Dante was shorter than the rest of the band. *Petit.* Little one. *Tee-Tee.* And with Dante also the youngest, at nearly twenty-four, the name pulled double duty.

Young in years, perhaps, but not in hard and brutal experience. Dante was the last surviving member of a secret, decades-long project co-run by the FBI and the Shadow Branch—a government black ops division that answered to no one and didn't officially exist. Project Bad Seed had been devoted to the development and study of sociopaths. But in truth the goal had

been to *create*, then control them.

And being the only nonhuman subject in the project, Dante had garnered special attention. Had been shoved with cool deliberation beyond boundaries no human subject would've survived. Just to see if he could.

Dante had been placed in the worst foster homes available, shuffled around constantly; everything and everyone he'd ever cared about or loved had been systematically stripped from him. Human monsters had fragmented and buried his memories, implanted deadly programming.

The muscle ticked in Lucien's jaw again. He'd flown away from New Orleans on a sultry July night unaware that he wouldn't return for eighteen years, unaware that Genevieve, his dark-haired *belle femme*, was pregnant, unaware that she would soon fall into cold and curious hands, or that their son—born vampire and Fallen—would be birthed into an experiment of unthinkable design.

Dante had escaped, his heart and mind scarred and damaged, haunted by things he couldn't even remember. Yet he led his household and Inferno with skill and focus, with quiet strength, fierce devotion, and stubborn will.

*And I have failed at every turn to keep him safe.*

"Lucien?" Jack's concerned voice scattered Lucien's dark thoughts, returning him to the bedroom and the unconscious girl he sat beside. "You okay, you?"

Lucien frowned. "Fine. Why do you ask?"

"No reason, really—other than the fact that you're getting blood all over the floor," Jack replied, tapping a finger against the back of his own hand, and pointedly arching one dark blond eyebrow.

Lucien's frown deepened when he looked down and saw drops of blood speckling the oak

planks. He became aware of a distant, prickling pain. Exhaling in exasperation, he unclenched his hands, pulling his thick black talons free of his blood-slicked palms.

“Well. Perhaps *fine* isn’t completely accurate,” Lucien amended.

“King of the understatement. Here, you. Catch.”

Glancing up, Lucien snagged the bloodstained washcloth Jack tossed at him, then busied himself wiping his palms and talons semiclean. The punctures were already healing, the pain nearly gone. His unbound waist-length hair brushed against his back and sides with the movement, soft as silk against his bare skin. He’d left his shirt behind on the club’s roof when he’d taken to the sky—not caring in the slightest that it had still been daylight or that he might be seen.

Tossing the washcloth back to Jack, Lucien curved his lips into what he hoped was a reassuring smile, but when Jack’s dubious expression remained stubbornly in place, he decided to shift the drummer’s attention elsewhere. “You were asking if I thought Heather and Dante might’ve been inside the van, correct?”

Jack nodded.

“Heather might’ve been, yes,” Lucien said, “but Dante . . . ?” He shook his head. “I saw a few things at the club that leads me to believe that whoever took him wrapped him up to protect him from the sun, then carried him out through the courtyard.”

“Shit. You thinking two different vehicles heading off in two different directions?”

“That I am.”

“Shit,” Jack repeated. He skimmed a hand along the buzz-cut dark blond hair beneath his mane of braids, his hazel eyes fixed on his scuffed brown Durangos. “I shoulda been there,” he said, voice bleak.

“And done what? Die?” Lucien’s flat voice brought Jack’s gaze up and lit a fire behind it. “If you *had* been at the club, you’d be dead now, a bullet buried deep in your brain—your mortal, unhealing brain.”

“Me, I don’t think you’re giving me enough credit here,” Jack replied, his Cajun accent thickening. “It mighta gone down a whole ’nother way, for true.”

Lucien arched one dubious eyebrow. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re a drummer, one who learned to shoot growing up in the bayou, and not some trained-to-kill Navy SEAL who can turn even pocket lint into a lethal weapon. You’re not a bodyguard, not a soldier, not even a rent-a-cop. Just a drummer with a gun.” At Jack’s less than enthusiastic grunt of agreement, he added, “And if you’d been inside the club, a *dead* drummer with a gun.”

“No need to be an asshole, you,” Jack growled. “But point taken. So what’s next? Do we wait until sunset to see if Dante contacts you or Von”—he tapped a finger against his temple to indicate how he expected the contact to be made—“and see if he knows where he is? Or who took him?”

“I’d prefer not to wait that long,” Lucien rumbled. He shifted his attention back to Annie. “With the help of Heather’s sister, we might not have to. Perhaps she heard something—a destination, a name—that could put us on the right path.”

“But Annie ain’t awake yet.”

“She doesn’t need to be. Like most mortals, her mind is unshielded and open. All I need do is to go inside.” As Jack’s brows drew down in a worried V, Lucien added soothingly, “She won’t feel a thing.” Which was true, but even if it hadn’t been, he still wouldn’t have hesitated, not with Dante’s life on the line.

No risk, no sacrifice would ever be too great.

Not just because Dante was his son—even though that was more than reason enough—but because Dante was also a *creawdwr*. The only one in existence and the first to walk the world since Yahweh's death more than two thousand years ago, not to mention his being the first mixed-blood Maker ever. Capable of creating—Making—places, beings, life itself. And equally capable of Unmaking it all, as well.

Untrained, unbound, except for his bond to Heather, Dante strode the same edge of madness that each *creawdwr* before him had walked—a precipice crumbling beneath his boots—fighting the damage done to him by Bad Seed, fighting for his sanity, for the right to claim his life as his own, to piece together his shattered past.

If Dante fell into darkness and chaos, all worlds—mortal, vampire, and Fallen—would fall with him. And if Dante died . . .

Lucien shoved the thought aside, refusing it.

Centering himself with another deep breath, he rested his fingertips against Annie's temple, then closed his eyes. He slipped inside her mind. Absently, he shielded himself from the raw emotions swirling through her subconscious, a whirlpool of self-loathing, grief, guilt, and fury. He eased past her nonsensical narcotic dreams and delved into her memories. Looked through her eyes.

Images flashed and twirled, a mirror-bright disco ball of out-of-sequence fragments and splinters, a glittering puzzle-play of light, shadow, and betrayal.

*Fragment: Desperate relief pours through Annie. Dante is somehow awake. He leans drunkenly against the threshold to his and Heather's room, naked except for the bondage collar strapped around his throat, his pale hands clutching either side of the doorjamb for balance. It seems as though he's already slipping back into Sleep, but beneath his milk-white skin, his*



*muscles are taut, corded, rippling . . .*

Splinter: *“It’s not Dante I want. I’ve come for you, pumpkin.”*

Fragment: *Two members of the black-uniformed posse carry Heather out from behind the bar on a stretcher. Flex-cuffs bind her wrists and tendrils of red hair trail across her face. Out cold. Tranked . . .*

Splinter: *“Shoot the others. Burn it down.”*

Splinter: *“He won’t be getting up again, not with those bullets inside of him.”*

Fragment: *He presses the muzzle of his gun against Dante’s blood-slicked chest, above his heart, and squeezes off two more rounds. Then he places the gun against Dante’s temple.*

Once Lucien had prized each dark and bitter pearl of knowledge about that morning’s events from Annie’s mind—including a secret that made him glance at her robe-covered belly—he withdrew. A cold and furious anger thrummed through his veins. An acrid taste burned at the back of his throat. Words he’d once said to Dante came back to mock him.

*The truth is never what you hope it will be.*

Raking a hand through his hair, Lucien looked up and alarm flickered across Jack’s face at whatever he saw in his eyes.

“What?” Jack asked, straightening out of his slouch, his voice knotted with dread.

“It was Heather and Annie’s father—FBI agent James Wallace—and he didn’t take Dante. He shot him”—Lucien’s voice roughened as he visualized the trench-coated man standing over his son’s motionless and bloodied form, gun in hand, an image acid etched into his mind—“then left him to burn with the others.”

2

### **Interrupted Sleep**

Jack stared at Lucien, his expression speed-shifting from stunned disbelief to bewilderment.

“If not the FBI, then who the hell took him?”

Lucien had to force out each bitter word. “I don’t know.”

But one thing he was damned certain of—given what he’d witnessed in Annie’s memories—the substance in those bullets had been designed to kill a True Blood. Dante in particular.

James Wallace had apparently done his research very, very well.

Having been a part of Dante's life only for the last five years, there was still so much Lucien didn't know about his own son. He could count on one hand—with a finger or two to spare—the born vampires he'd met during the nearly two dozen centuries since his escape to the mortal world from Gehenna.

Rare, brimming with power and magic and a riveting, nightbred beauty, they were solitary beings—an elemental, but dying, bloodline—who had eventually become little more than wistful myth for the global community of turned-nightkind.

But, myth or not, that hadn't stopped James Wallace from discovering the truth and learning exactly how to harm Dante.

*He won't be getting up again, not with those bullets inside of him.*

Lucien intended to make James Wallace regret those words profoundly before he killed him. Rising to his feet, he headed for the doorway, the floor creaking beneath his shoes.

“Well, shit. So now what?” Jack asked, sucking himself up against the threshold in order to allow room for Lucien to step through. “Wait until twilight? See if Tee-Tee makes contact?”

“Dante's injured and I don't know how badly. He might not be capable of making contact.”

But Heather . . . that was another story. If the temporary blood link between her and Von still held, the nomad should be able to find out where she'd been taken. *If* it still held. But given that most blood links lasted anywhere from twenty-four to seventy-two hours, and the one between Heather and Von wasn't quite forty hours old yet, the odds were slightly in their favor that it did.

Lucien strode down the hall. “I need to awaken Von.”

“But . . . how?” Jack protested. “It's still daylight.”

Lucien paused in the guest bedroom's darkened doorway, then glanced back at Jack. "I have a method for pulling nightkind up from Sleep. However, the results can vary, so it might be best if you waited with Thibodaux. This could get violent."

Jack looked unimpressed. "My mama says the same thing at every Cheramie family reunion."

"I'm serious."

"So's my mama." Jack blew out a breath, then nodded. "Okay. You do what you gotta do. I'll keep Thibodaux company, me. I'll just tell him to ignore anything he hears coming from the guest room—hissing, screaming, wing-flapping, girlish pleas for mercy." A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. "Y'know. The usual."

"The only girlish pleas for mercy will be your own if you don't get moving," Lucien growled, pointing one taloned finger toward the kitchen. He appreciated Jack's attempt to ease the tension with a bit of dark humor, and it helped—for a moment.

"Another thing my mama says. Often."

"I can't imagine why," Lucien replied, voice dry.

Chuckling, Jack turned and headed down the hall. Just as he reached the dust-mote-flecked spill of sunlight emanating from the kitchen, he called, "We're gonna find them, for true. Tee-Tee and Heather both." His words and confident tone were as bracing as a tumbler of top-shelf scotch—for them both, Lucien suspected.

"Yes, we are," Lucien agreed.

There was nothing he wouldn't do to ensure that outcome. Nothing.

*I would lay the world to waste for my son.*

Foreboding trailed an icy finger down Lucien's spine, whispered arctic words in his ear:

*What if you don't find him? And your son lays waste to the world in the meantime instead? Or tries to? What then?*

*I will find him, Lucien thought numbly. No other outcome is possible.*

Stepping into the room, he regarded Silver and Von, Sleeping side by side on the bed, a cheerful quilt covering them to the waist. Both pale faces were smooth and peaceful; another disquieting illusion, one revealed by the pillows with their dark stains, by the blood-matted hair pushed away from Sleep-cool foreheads.

Von McGuinn Slept on the side of the bed closest to the door, the ends of his nut-brown hair trailing over his bare shoulders. Even in the curtained gloom, Lucien could see the nomad clan tattoos blue-inked in graceful Celtic designs—dragons, antlered hunters, and ravens to name a few—swirling along Von's shoulders, down his arms, and across his pectoral muscles and abdomen and, beneath the quilt, even lower; each had been earned when he'd still been mortal.

But the crescent moon tattoo beneath Von's right eye, glimmering like star-silvered water, was unlike all the others. No mortal could wear it. It was the badge of his office—*llygad*. Keeper of history. Counselor. Warrior bard, one of many within the impartial, truth-seeking ranks of the *llygaid*. The guardians of nightkind history.

Lucien had no doubt that Von would know what James Wallace had loaded into the bullets, and how to counteract it.

Rolling his shoulders back to ease tension from taut muscles, he crossed to the bed, then knelt beside it, the floor creaking beneath his black-trousered knees. Underneath the odors of clotted blood and nostril-tingling antiseptic, he caught a faint, reassuring trace of Von's scent of frost and gun oil.

"I can't wait for twilight, *llygad*," Lucien apologized. A bead of ruby blood welled up on the

inside of his wrist as he pierced the skin with a talon. “We need to speak *now*.”

Lucien licked the blood from his wrist, then lowered his head over Von’s pale face. Kissing the nomad’s mustache-framed lips, he parted them with his blood-smeared tongue. Breathed energy and the pomegranate-and-copper taste of his own blood into Von, drew him up from Sleep.

And filled his waking mind with Annie’s dark and bitter pearls.

When the nomad sucked in a sharp breath, Lucien ended the kiss and lifted his head to look into vivid green eyes wide with shock.

“Holy hell.” Von’s voice was a hoarse whisper. He struggled to rise, but, weakened by blood loss and the disorienting effects of interrupted Sleep, he fell back against the mattress, sweat beading his forehead. “We gotta find them.”

“We will,” Lucien promised. “Once we locate Heather through your link with her, her bond with Dante will lead us straight to him.”

“Shit. My link. Their bond. Yeah.”

“But right now I need you to regain your strength and clear your head.” Lucien extended his arm to Von, offered his already healed wrist. “Feed, then we’ll get to work.”

Without another word, Von grabbed the proffered arm, tore hungrily into the taut flesh with his fangs and drank deep.

**3**

**One Stubborn Motherfucker**

March 30–31

Snatching jeans from the small pile of clothing Jack had left for him on top of the bureau, Von yanked them on over his gray pin-striped boxers, zipping them up with a furious jerk of his wrist. His pulse pounded in his temples as he counted the many ways in which they'd been fucked over in just a few short hours.

Heather drugged and nabbed by her own goddamned father.

Dante shot and left to burn, before some mysterious asshole slipped into the building, bundled him up, then carted him out into the blazing noontime sun. And disappeared.

Silver and himself shot. Annie, tranked. The club torched.

Oh, and don't forget the other little revelation Lucien had plucked from Annie's mind: Heather's little sister was pregnant. As for how far along she was, the identity of the baby-daddy,

and whether or not she even planned to keep the squatter in her womb, that information was still tucked safe inside Annie's head, hers to keep.

Von wondered if Heather even knew about her sister's pregnancy. A worry for another time, like *after* he'd found Heather, hauled her lovely ass out of the fire, then followed her psionic GPS of a bond straight to Dante.

Von had made his first attempt to contact Heather right after he'd fueled up on Lucien's blood—the Fallen/angelic stuff was like nitrous oxide to nightkind. A blast of furious energy had exploded through Von's every cell, lighting his mind up like a Las Vegas casino marquee, and thrumming like electricity through his veins. Despite that intoxicating rush, his attempt had been only partially successful. And, thus, a complete disappointment.

*"Keep trying," Lucien commands in a voice of edged steel.*

*"No shit," Von growls. "I know you're worried sick, man, me too. But you're driving me nuts staring holes through me. Why don't you go raid Jack's liquor cabinet and give me some space?"*

*Lucien stares a few more holes through him with narrowed eyes before swiveling and stalking silently from the room.*

Attempts two through ten had ended with the same frustrating results. And Von had decided to give it a rest, give the drugs in Heather's system a little bit of time to wear off. But he had also learned a few very important things.

One: his link with Heather was definitely still intact.

Two: Heather was drugged and unconscious, her mind wrapped up in a cotton ball of static and currently beyond his reach.

Three: he'd better keep his fingers crossed and wish with everything he had that whatever



she'd been doped with would wear off *before* their blood link unraveled.

Grabbing the neatly folded olive-green T-shirt from the bureau, Von tugged it on, then went over to the bed to check on Silver before leaving to join the others. Dried blood darkened the right side of his midnight purple hair—thanks to goddamned James Wallace. Bastard would pay. And not just for Silver.

*I've come for you, pumpkin.*

*He won't be getting up again, not with those bullets inside of him.*

Hands clenched into white-knuckled fists, Von left the bedroom. When he stalked into the darkened kitchen with its blanket draped windows, AWOL Shadow Branch agent Emmett Thibodaux—long, lean, and looking like a young, ginger-haired Clint Eastwood—took one look at Von's chest, then quirked up an amused eyebrow.

“Sorry I missed that,” Thibodaux drawled, folding his arms along the back of the chair he straddled. His assessing blue-iris gaze grew thoughtful. “*Real* damned sorry.”

Frowning, Von looked down at the borrowed T-shirt, then groaned. It read GATOR FEST WET BOXERS CONTEST CHAMPION, each letter shaped out of tiny green and brown gators. He aimed a glare at an innocent-looking Jack. “Cajun smart-ass,” he muttered. “Or maybe Cajun clairvoyant, given the title and all.”

The drummer grinned. “More like Cajun delusional, given the title and all.”

“I second that,” Lucien put in. He leaned against the counter in front of the sink, expression neutral, pretending to be relaxed, despite the tension cording nearly every muscle on his six-eight frame.

“Sad how the truth can be too much for some people,” Von offered with a long-suffering shake of his head.

Thibodaux made a sound that was halfway between a snort and a cough, then got up and went to the refrigerator for a beer. Von watched him closely as he returned to his chair, a frosty bottle of Dixie in hand. He caught a whiff of the man's scent—fresh ice and anise, sharp and cool—which mingled uneasily with the faint odor of smoke and acrid chemicals clinging to his clothes.

*Fire extinguisher, I'm betting. Lucien said Thibodaux helped him put out the blaze at the club.*

So throw confetti and pin a medal on the fucker. Didn't mean he could be trusted.

"We know James Wallace took Heather," Von said quietly, sauntering over to the table to stand opposite Thibodaux. He folded his arms over his gator-afflicted chest. "But who the hell grabbed Dante? I find it damned curious that all this shit went down right after you and your partner showed up bearing gifts for Dante."

Yeah, a Pandora's flash drive of a gift, one that should probably be left unopened—Dante's past from the moment he'd been born into Bad Seed.

Thibodaux set the condensation-dewed beer bottle down carefully on the Formica table, then met Von's gaze, his own wary. "Bad timing. Me and Merri had nothing to do with any of this."

"He's telling the truth," Lucien said "I had the same concerns, so the first thing I did when I arrived here was scan his mind. Thoroughly. He's clean, *llygad*—no deception, no hidden agenda. That's not to say that the SB wasn't behind Dante's abduction—just that Thibodaux and his partner had nothing to do with it."

Thibodaux's expression tightened, chiseling his features into razor-sharp angles, hard planes, and narrowed blue eyes. "The bastards wiped my memory of everything I'd learned about Baptiste and Bad Seed for a reason. Could be they're planning to use him again, trigger his

programming and have him waste another FBI agent like they did in Seattle.”

“And want to keep him invisible,” Von growled. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

“*If* they took him,” Lucien pointed out in a deep rumble.

“If,” Thibodaux agreed. Lifting the beer bottle, he tipped it against his lips, took a long swallow.

“We’ll sort out the who and why after we find him,” Von said. He abandoned the table to join Lucien in front of the sink. “You got the bullets?”

Lucien answered him by unfolding his arms from his bare chest, extending one hand, and uncurling the taloned fingers. Cradled in his cupped palm were two bits of skull-mangled brass.

Picking up the bullets, Von took a quick sniff, even though he didn’t need to. He’d caught and recognized the woody, amberish scent the moment Lucien had opened his hand. His stomach sank—hell, it cannonballed—into uncharted depths.

*No True Blood can survive that . . .*

Von closed his eyes, then tried to reach Dante through their link. His heart constricted painfully when he felt the low and erratic pulse of Dante’s poisoned life force. At least he was still alive, but his continued survival was definitely in question.

*<Little brother.>*

But Von’s sending hit a barrier surrounding Dante’s mind—a barrier composed of poison, pain, and drug static—then bounced away, unheard. His breath hissed out in renewed frustration between his teeth. He opened his eyes.

“What did Wallace use?” Lucien demanded, dark brows slanted into a deep V. “What did he put in those bullets?”

“Something very few know about,” Von replied. His hand knuckled shut around the bullets,

squeezing them into his palm. “Resin from a dragon’s blood tree.”

“Tree resin?” Thibodaux questioned incredulously. “That’s all it takes to put down a fucking powerful born vamp? *Sap?*”

“Sap,” Von confirmed. “The resin from a dragon’s blood tree is medicinal for mortals, but fatal to True Bloods. Nature’s way of balancing shit out by giving born immortals an Achilles’ heel, I guess.” He scowled. “Goddamned nature.”

Jack’s breath caught. “Fatal?”

“Yeah, and with as many times as that bastard shot Dante, he should’ve been dead by now. The only reason he’s still alive is because of you.” Von nodded at Lucien, saw comprehension and relief flash in his eyes. “Because of his Fallen bloodline. But I don’t know if or how long it’s gonna keep him that way. This is uncharted territory.”

“What does he need?” Lucien asked.

“That’s the problem—I don’t know what he needs. No one does.” Raking a hand through his hair in frustration, Von fingered apart blood-matted locks, welcoming the distracting pull of pain at his scalp. “Any other True Blood would already be dead.”

Gold light flared in Lucien’s eyes, gleaming like stars in the gloom. “Good thing, then, that he’s not any other True Blood.”

“Doesn’t hurt that he’s also one tough, stubborn-ass sonuvabitch,” Von said. “That’s another good thing. Damned good.” He returned to the table, pulled out a chair, and sat down. He tossed the crumpled bits of brass onto the table. “We’re gonna find him and his equally stubborn-ass woman, bring them both home.”

“Yes, we will,” Lucien rumbled. “And the sooner, the better. I trust you’re ready to resume your attempts to contact Heather?”

Von shook his head. “No, I’m ready to *succeed* in contacting Heather, not *attempt* to succeed. But first . . .” Reaching across the table, he grabbed up Thibodaux’s bottle of Dixie and, giving the man a quick *thanks-for-your-generous-donation* wink, poured the remainder of the cold, hopsy brew down his throat.

“Please, by all means, take mine,” Thibodaux drawled, amusement glinting in his eyes. “It’s a helluva long way to the fridge and back, after all. Would probably take at least four whole seconds. Maybe even five. Who’s got that kind of time or energy?”

Von thumped the empty down onto the table, then belched. “Exactly. Y’know, I think I’m starting to like you.”

Thibodaux lifted one ginger eyebrow. “As a person or as lunch?”

Von shrugged. “Don’t wanna spoil the mystery. Thanks for the beer, man.”

Shrugging, the former SB agent started reassembling his just-cleaned gun, his long-fingered hands moving with a deft and practiced ease. “Eh. You’re welcome.”

Von closed his eyes, then reached out to Heather again.

*<C’mon, doll. Talk to me.>*

All he heard/felt was drug-thick static. But that didn’t stop him. He could be one stubborn motherfucker too, especially when it came to family—and whether Heather knew it or not, she was definitely that.

So was Dante. Maybe they hadn’t been born brothers, but they were brothers under the skin, their fates tied together. Von had known that inexplicable truth the moment he’d first seen Dante standing onstage with his band in a smoky N’awlins dive. And Von had made himself a promise that night.

*Wherever his path takes him, he ain’t gonna be walking it alone. I’ll be right beside him.*

*Each step of the way. I'll always have his back.*

Really? Sure about that?

Right now Dante was very much alone, his back unguarded.

Jaw clenched so tight his teeth ached, Von leaned forward in his chair, elbows to knees, and rested his head in his hands. Drawing in a deep breath, he reached for Heather again.

*<C'mon, doll. I need you. And I mean that in a totally platonic way.>*

Only static.

Von kept at it.

When he felt Silver awaken through their link, felt his confusion at his unexpected whereabouts, he realized that the sun had slipped beneath the horizon. He shifted his focus from Heather to Dante, hoping against hope that his friend had awakened as well.

*<Little brother . . .>*

But once again, his sending bounced back from the barricade of resin, drugs, and pain that still surrounded Dante's mind, leaving him unable to determine if Dante was conscious or not. But gut instinct whispered, *He's out cold, poison racing through his veins, pulsing through his heart*; a whisper that left him cold.

Knowing he needed to get back to Heather before time ran out, Von reluctantly withdrew from his link with Dante, but not before arrowing a message at the barricade: *<We're coming for you, little brother. Just hold the hell on.>*

Drawing in another deep breath, Von caught a whiff of cinnamon and dried blood and knew that Silver had walked into the kitchen even before he heard his voice, low and tense, asking Lucien what the hell had happened. Heard Silver's breath catch rough in his throat as the fallen angel answered him mind to mind.

“Jesus Christ,” Silver whispered.

“It’s my fault.” Annie’s small and desolate voice disrupted Von’s concentration. “I never should’ve fucking called Dad. I just wanted to rub his face in it . . . I wish I’d killed the bastard when I stabbed him in the throat with that goddamned dart.”

*So do I*, Von thought, tuning everyone out and focusing every bit of attention on the fading link and the red-haired woman at the other end. As the hours unwound, he realized that Sleep might claim him before he could make contact with Heather. If that happened, the link would be well and truly gone by the time he woke up again.

He couldn’t let that happen. He redoubled his efforts, feeling the cold prickle of sweat along his scalp. He didn’t know how much time had passed when he caught a fragrant whiff of cloves and spice and rich tobacco. He felt a cool-fingered touch on his arm. Opening his eyes, Von looked up into long-lashed velvet brown eyes—a detective’s penetrating gaze.

Thibodaux’s nightkind partner, Merri Goodnight.

She wore black slacks and a white blouse beneath a black suede jacket and stood a slim but curvy five-foot-nothing. Apparently someone—Thibodaux and Jack, most likely—had left the house at some point to pick her up at the French Quarter hotel where the two former SB agents were staying.

“*Llygad*.” Merri Goodnight’s face, espresso-dark and ageless and framed by sleek black hair, was respectful as she eyed him curiously, her gaze sliding over the tattoos on his arms. “Never met a nomad *llygad* before.”

“Now you have,” Von growled, not even bothering to keep the irritation from his voice. “So be sure to note the occasion in your diary with a smiley face and a kiss. I’m a little busy here, darlin’. What the hell do you want?”

Looking completely unfazed by his surliness, she replied, “To help you *keep* busy. It’ll be dawn in a few hours, but I have a way to keep you from Sleeping.” She offered him a small purple pill. “A stay-awake,” she informed him. “Created for vamp agents in law enforcement divisions.”

“How well does it work?” Von asked, studying the pill pinched between her thumb and forefinger.

“Perfectly. You’ll be awake all day. But there’s consequences.”

“Ain’t there always?” Von plucked the pill from her grasp, tossed it into his mouth, and washed it down with a warm swallow of a beer someone had kindly left idling on the table.

Merri folded her arms over her chest, then slung her weight onto one rounded hip. She arched an eyebrow. “Don’t you even want to know what those consequences are?”

Von shrugged. “Not really. I’ll take my chances. You’ve used them, right? And you’re still upright and breathing. That’s good enough for me, darlin’.”

“I hope you remember that when you’re twitching on the floor.”

“If I don’t, I trust you to remind me,” Von drawled. Merri’s quick smile told him that he’d pegged the situation right—she would rub his face in those repudiated consequences for all she was worth.

“Not to be rude, but . . .” Von closed his eyes again and directed his attention inward. A moment later he heard the soft whisper of suede, the deliberate tap of boot heels against oak as Merri turned and walked away.

“By the way, Emmett isn’t the only one who’s sorry to have missed that wet boxers contest, Mr. Champion,” she purred, her voice all silk and amusement, as she walked out of the kitchen.

“Holy hell,” Von muttered.



Jack was going to eat the goddamned shirt, one tiny gator at a time.

With Merri's scent still spicing the air, Von returned his focus to Heather. <*C'mon, doll.*>

Minutes multiplied into hours. And, for the first time since he'd been turned, Von was awake to witness the sunrise he'd willingly sacrificed forty years ago. Or could've, if he'd opened his eyes, hauled his ass out of the chair, and twitched the curtain aside for a peek.

But he didn't.

Dawn came and went unlamented, then noon slipped past. The strength of his link to Heather was beginning to thin and weaken, when the static suddenly dissipated like smoke in the rain.

And Heather reached back.

**Poisoned Apples**

Baton Rouge  
Doucet-Bainbridge Sanitarium  
March 31

They dumped her black-haired angel on the concrete floor, as if he was a piece of curbside junk, a banged-up gift for the donation truck. Dumped him right underneath the big metal hook hanging like a sharp and scary question mark from the ceiling of chalk-white squares.

*Meat hook*, the little voice in Violet's tummy had told her when the smiling orderlies in their white ice-cream-man uniforms had ushered her—black paper wings taped (after a bunch of pretty-pretty-pleases) to the back of her Winnie-the-Pooh sweater—into the empty room with its soft padded walls.

“Go ahead and color, sweetie. We'll be back in just a little bit.”

Violet had stared at the hook, her fingers clenched around the box of crayons in her hand, her gaze fluttering like a hummingbird along the glittering curve of metal.

*What's it for?* she'd asked uneasily, her tummy suddenly full of fluttering moths.

But her little voice had become silent.

Violet was busy coloring the pictures she'd drawn on the soft padded wall when the orderlies had come back, minus smiles and nice words this time as they dumped Dante onto the cold floor.

He hit the concrete with a soft thud, his long black hair fanning across his snow-white face, hiding his closed eyes and the faint blue smudges beneath them. He almost looked like he was sleeping. But Violet knew better. The metallic smell of pennies folded into the air as blood

trickled from his nose. From his ears. Smearred his lips. Again.

Violet sucked in a breath. “I think he needs to go back to the doctor. He’s still hurt. His owies are still bleeding.” She couldn’t believe she needed to point that out. They were grown-ups. Couldn’t they see the blood glistening on his white skin?

*Yes, the little voice in her tummy said. They could and they do.*

*Then why don’t they help him?*

*They aren’t supposed to. But someone else can.*

“Me,” Violet whispered. “That’s why I’m wearing wings.”

One of the orderlies kicked Dante from his side and onto his tummy, revealing the pale, pale hands twisted behind him at the small of his back. Metal gleamed around his wrists.

Bad-guy handcuffs. For her angel.

Violet felt the crayon she was holding—Fire Engine Red—snap in two against her palm. She let the crayon fall to the floor, the paper wrapper holding the broken halves together.

Bad-guy handcuffs for the angel who’d reeled her in like a lost kite from among the blazing stars when she’d floated away from her body.

*Mommy turns on the TV in the motel in Oregon—the motel with the picture of a winking beaver chewing on a twig, outlined in glowing color—and is searching for the Cartoon Network when Violet hears firecrackers pop-pop-popping outside in the parking lot. Hears the sound of breaking glass. Then her mommy’s scream, jagged and raw.*

*“My baby!”*

*Violet tries to tell Mommy that she’s okay, but she can’t. She just drifts up and away, leaving her body, with its wide, staring eyes and the new dark and bleeding hole above them; leaving behind her wailing mother, and wishing she could stay.*

*Then Dante catches her.*

“Don’t kick him!” Violet raced across the room, her paper wings rustling at her back. Crouching beside Dante, she glared up at the orderlies. “Stop being so mean! Mr. Purcell and the doctors promised that they’d make him happy, promised that they’d take care—”

“Hush, sweetie, don’t you worry none,” one orderly, a man with curly brown hair and a name tag reading *Joe*, said. “He’s tough. He can take it, trust me.”

“It’s still mean,” Violet insisted. “And he isn’t even awake.”

“Not yet, but he will be soon,” the other orderly—blond ponytail and a name tag that read *Tyler*—said. His eyes darted toward the thick, heavy door like he wished he stood on the other side. “Almost sunset.”

Violet nodded. “He’s a nighttime angel.”

She’d never actually seen his wings, but she knew deep down that they were there because she’d caught a glimpse of them—like black shadows outlined in Fire Engine Red at his back and arching above his head—when he’d lassoed her down from the sky and tucked her back into the body he’d held in his arms.

She’d known that it was her body, even though it was different now, her black hair, golden skin, and jade green eyes (a color her mommy always said she loved) angel-magicked into red hair, freckles, and blue eyes.

“Wake up, princess,” Dante had whispered.

Blood had streaked the skin beneath his nose that night too.

And his hands had glowed with pretty blue fire.

Joe and Tyler exchanged a look, one bristling with secrets—grown-up secrets—then Tyler swallowed hard and looked away. “Do it already and let’s get out of here.”

Kneeling on the concrete floor, Joe jabbed a needle full of red stuff into Dante's shoulder. He pushed the plungie thing until the needle was empty, then jumped to his feet. Sweat beaded his upper lip.

"Was that medicine?" Violet asked hopefully, her gaze still on her angel.

"Sure. Why not?" Joe's voice sounded like a shrug.

"Will it make him better?" She touched one of Dante's hands. His skin felt like ice beneath her fingers, nothing like the heat she remembered, his arms embracing her tight. Ice, when he should be fire. When he suddenly shivered as though he was lying in a snowbank without a coat or mittens instead of on a concrete floor, before going still again, she wasn't surprised. Unhappy, but not surprised. "He's cold. He needs a blanket."

"A stake through the heart more like," Joe muttered under his breath. "Shit. I didn't sign up for this—locking little girls into rooms with starving bloodsuckers. It isn't right."

Violet looked up, frowning, trying to puzzle out the meaning of Joe's words and the reason why he sounded so nervous. The orderly's gaze was on Dante. She remembered the flash of fangs she'd seen when her angel had smiled at her just the day before when she'd finally been allowed to see him. But only for a little bit since he was so sick.

*Hungry*, Dante'd whispered.

*I didn't know angels had pointy teeth.*

*Ain't no angel, chère. I'm nightkind*, he'd replied. Then, rubbing his forehead, face pained, he'd added, *I think*.

His low voice had made Violet think of sweet tea and *couche-couche* and the grizzled man in the baseball cap at the alligator tour place from the trip she and her mommy had gone on last year. *Cajun*, Mommy had said.

*Do you bite?* she'd asked Dante out of curiosity, touching a sharp fang tip.

*Yup. All the time.* A smile had slanted across his lips. *That I do know.*

*Will you bite me?*

His smile had vanished and his voice had turned fierce. *Never, princess. Jamais. I'd never bite you. That I know too.*

She'd believed him. But Violet had a feeling he might bite the orderlies.

The gleaming hook captured her gaze again and the moths in her tummy turned to pebbles.

“Is that for him? In case he bites?” She forced herself to look away, to look at the orderlies instead, but their blank faces didn't make her feel any better. “But what if he promises not to bite? What if he promises to be good?”

Joe shook his head. “It's not right, leaving her in here with him.”

“Shut the hell up,” Tyler growled. He tossed a look at the camera poking out from a corner in the ceiling. “You trying to get us fired? Or worse?”

“Let me add another choice to those options, gentlemen,” someone drawled. Violet looked over her shoulder to see Mr. Purcell standing in the threshold—the man who had brought her here while her mommy got better at the underground hospital.

*So she can rest and get well and so you can spend time with your . . . angel . . . while she does. Pretty soon, you'll all go home.*

His words had been smooth and slick and full of poisoned-apple smiles.

Just like now. A shiver creepy-crawled down Violet's spine.

*He's a bad man,* her little voice warned.

*Bad enough to hurt angels?*

*Bad enough to kill angels.*

“Tell me what you think,” Mr. Purcell continued, “I leave *you* in the room to keep our little Violet company. You could even color while you wait for her angel”—his lips puckered as though the word *angel* tasted as sour as a pickle—“to awaken. I’m sure Violet would be happy to share her crayons. How does that option grab you?”

Shaking his head, Tyler hurried from the room and past Mr. Purcell without a backward glance. Mr. Purcell smiled.

“You don’t need to be scared of Dante,” Violet insisted, looking at Joe. “He’s not mean. And I’ll share my crayons if you want to stay and see.”

Mr. Purcell chuckled. “Helluva offer. *Do* you want to stay and see, Joe?”

A muscle bunched in Joe’s jaw, then he glanced away, his face looking like he had a tummyache. “Sorry, kid,” he whispered, his shoulders slumping. “Keep as far away from him as you can. Keep yourself out of reach and—”

“Joe,” Mr. Purcell said. Just the one word, and almost a whisper. A whisper once more full of poisoned apples and thick thorns. Then, just as quietly, “Give her the key.”

The orderly’s face turned white. The smell of sweat wafted into the air. He pulled a key from his pants pocket and handed it to Violet. Swallowing hard, he left the room without another word.

Violet studied the key the orderly had given her, little and light, it looked like a toy key. She looked at the bad-guy handcuffs gleaming around Dante’s wrists. “Is it for those?” she asked. “I knew you’d figure it out,” Mr. Purcell said. He reached for the big, thick door’s metal latch and started to pull it shut. “He’ll be awake soon, so you won’t be lonely for long.”

“Okay,” Violet said, “but he needs a doctor.” She brushed Dante’s hair back from his pale cheek. Blood glistened beneath his nose, on his lips. “He’s still hurt. See?”

“He’ll be fine,” Mr. Purcell said, his gaze flicking to the hook above. “Trust me. The only thing that’ll happen will be history repeating itself.”

The door swung shut with a heavy *thunk* before Violet could insist on the doctor again. Red lights lit up on the little panel beside the door. LOCKED.

Her angel shivered on the cold concrete floor for a moment, then lay still again. She had a feeling the orderlies wouldn’t be coming back with a blanket. Feeling the weight of the hook hanging above her, above her sleeping angel, Violet unlocked the handcuffs with the little silver key. Pulled them free from around his wrists and placed them on the floor. The skin of his wrists looked rubbed raw, bruised.

She thought about the lies—*just little white ones, sweetie*—Mr. Purcell had instructed her to tell Dante to make him happy. *Answer to the name Chloe. Call him Dante-angel and let him believe he gifted you with that Winnie-the-Pooh sweater. Poisoned apples.*

*Why? Why are they hurting him? Why are they asking me to hurt him too? They promised to take care of him. Don’t they know he saved me from Heaven?*

*Maybe that’s what scares them,* her little voice suggested.

“Then they’re being stupid,” Violet muttered, but not disagreeing, not really.

She grabbed Dante’s shoulder and, grunting, pulled him over onto his back. He smelled of Halloween underneath all the blood and he was wearing clothes like the ones she’d first seen him in—leather rock-star pants, a black T-shirt, but without the sleeves with all the little holes this time, and boots with lots of buckles. And, just like before, a collar was strapped around his throat, a black collar with a steel hoop.

He looked like he belonged in the *Underworld* movies her mommy had Netflixed and Violet had watched in secret, hidden behind the couch, when she was supposed to be in bed. And those



movies had been full of scary stuff, dark stuff, dangerous stuff.

The hook in the ceiling told Violet that Mr. Purcell's promises, every word from his mouth, were only juicy, red poisoned lies. Told her that scary, dark, and dangerous stuff was on its way, scampering on fast little spider legs. And her angel needed to be awake so he could face it. So he wouldn't have to take another kick in the ribs that he couldn't even roll away from.

Paper wings rustling behind her, Violet patted Dante's cold cheek and, calling his name, urged him up from his dreams. Relief spread through her tummy like hot cocoa when Dante drew in a deep breath.

Her nighttime angel was waking up.