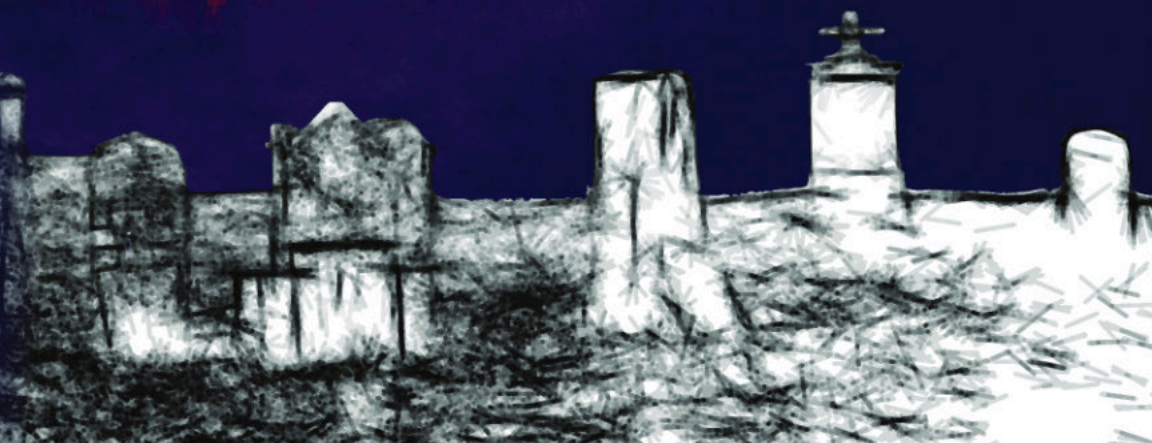


J. C. CAMPBELL



# A THIRD KIND

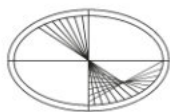




# A THIRD KIND



J. C. CAMPBELL



DIVERTIR  
PUBLISHING

*Salem, NH*

# *A Third Kind*

*J. C. Campbell*

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*Cover design by Kenneth Tupper*

*Published by Divertir Publishing LLC*

*PO Box 232*

*North Salem, NH 03073*

*<http://www.divertirpublishing.com/>*

ISBN-13: 978-1-938888-27-4

ISBN-10: 1-938888-27-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020947020

Printed in the United States of America

*Dedication*

*To my family, for all of the encouragement and support  
you've given me over the years.*



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## Chapter 1

SCREAMS ERUPTED FROM inside the trunk less than an hour outside of Jacksonville.

Kaleb sighed. He'd been waiting for the girl to come to. Her name was Allie, a twenty-year-old student from Jacksonville, and knowing that only made things harder. It was a stupid mistake to look at her ID—not the first of the night, mind you, but it had happened—and now more than ever he had no idea what to do with her.

He pulled over, grateful for the brooding clouds and heavy rain veiling the night. Stinging droplets and gusts of wind lashed him the moment the door opened. He hesitated, trying to think of what to say. Maybe, *Hi, sorry I abducted you. I haven't decided if I should kill you or not, but I'll keep you in the loop.* Could he even bring himself to do it? Killers, thugs, all-around criminals, sure, but some little wisp of a blonde girl with a bad habit?

He popped the trunk. "Please, stop scream—"

The kick caught him off guard, knocking him back a step. For a second he could only watch the sad little thing attempt to escape. Allie tried to heave herself out of the trunk, but her hand, wet with blood and rain, shot out from beneath her. She fell hard, her head catching an edge with a wet crack.

Kaleb leaned in to take a closer look. If not for the slight rise and fall of her chest he would have thought her dead. There was relief in that, but also anxiety settling into his chest and shoulders. What was better: having a role in another innocent's death, or having to deal with a witness? Tough call.

It could be worse, though—he could be in her shoes. Judging by the cast and tautness of her skin, she was a junkie. Maybe not that far gone yet, but on her way. What a waste, so young to be tainted by that poison. She didn't deserve any of this, but what was he supposed to do? She'd seen him.

As if that was her fault. How many times had he gone hunting? Hundreds? Thousands? And she was the first witness. Sure, others had seen him at times, caught glimpses, but never during a kill. If only he'd gotten there sixty seconds later...or if he would have just found someone else, someone worse...or...if. Or. If. It was useless to dwell on. It was what it was.

"It would be easy to kill you," Kaleb muttered. "Solve the problem. Twist your neck. Or suffocate you."

*Can you?* his conscience whispered. *Can you handle seeing another innocent face when you close your eyes?*

No. He couldn't. Two were more than enough to haunt his dreams.

He could almost hear his conscience hissing with laughter as if to chase off any misgivings that a bit of mercy might make him a little bit more human or a little less hell bound when he finally reached the end of his miserable existence.

A flicker of movement drew Kaleb's attention to the back of the trunk, striking home the truth of the matter. 'Killing' didn't adequately describe what he did. It was too cavalier. This girl was an accident he didn't know how to deal with. Then there was the drug peddler, a thug who made money on the side by pimping girls out whether they wanted to be or not. He was watching this all, eyes wide with abject terror. They were the only part of the man's body that still worked.

The technique had taken decades to perfect. Shattering the vertebrae in just the right way kept the body alive for a few hours—not long, just long enough to harvest. The pain had to be extraordinary, the reality beyond horrendous. Of all of Kaleb's victims, perhaps only a handful deserved such a brutal death. The rest were bad people, predators, but to die like this?

Ignoring the withered, whispering voice of his conscience, Kaleb slammed the trunk shut and turned away. It had to be done.

## Chapter 2

**A**LLIE WOKE UP fighting the urge to retch. Every beat of her heart sent a sickly throb through her head. A whimper slipped through her lips, and she pressed a hand to the back of her scalp. Her hair was clumped and sticky, matted with blood, and beneath was a tender lump split by a ragged gash.

She closed her eyes and focused on breathing, waiting for the pain to subside.

Thunder boomed, rattling windows and jarring Allie awake. She'd passed out—how long ago she couldn't even guess, but the throbbing had eased. She struggled to sit up and peered into darkness that was undoubtedly a blessing given her headache. It was also a curse, concealing all of the hidden terrors of her nightmares. Lightning flashed and the room sprang to life in flickering gray and black snapshots. She was lying on a couch in a cavernous concrete-walled room full of clutter.

This couldn't really be happening. She didn't want to be reduced to a story on the news—just another missing girl whose face would make headlines for a day or two, and then she'd be forgotten like she never existed. This wasn't the way her life was supposed to go!

Allie struggled to stand and collapsed back, cradling her head and trying to stop the spinning. Tears broke free, wetting her hands, and she waited for the dizziness to pass. "God, please help me," she prayed.

Minutes crept by and she looked around again. Her eyes were adjusting, but even so most of the room was impenetrable without the lightning. What she could see was junk—a lifetime's worth of boxes and furniture, layers of dust, and scattered bits of debris. The smell was more than just the moth-eaten couch. It was damp and dust and mold, and a distinct coppery tang that she wasn't quite ready to cope with.

Rain pelted a window above her head, and in a weak flash of lightning she saw the bars. They were thick and square; even if she could somehow reach them, there was no hope in hell she could break out. The desire to fall to her knees and weep was nearly overwhelming, but Allie fought it. Crying would do no good, no matter how badly she wanted to indulge, and she wasn't ready to give in just yet.

With one hand stretched out she wandered the room, searching, passing boxes that broke apart at her touch. A fit of coughing sent shock waves through her body, reigniting the pain in her head and making the floor roll beneath her. Midway through her fall she hit something large and solid, halting her without

grace. Her ribs ached where an edge had found them, and a cloud of dust enveloped her, taking away her breath. She clawed at the thing, trying desperately to stabilize herself and stop the spinning. Even as she fought to breathe her fingers found a grip. Wood. Hard edges mercifully worn smooth by time and wear. A dresser or cabinet.

Gradually the dust settled and the dizziness subsided. Amid the faint speckles dancing in her vision she saw a hint of light, so faint that only someone whose eyes had been denied sight for a time would notice it. She crept toward it, weaving through stacks of boxes and dark looming shapes. The path was slow and the room larger than she had thought, feeling more and more like a tomb. Her pulse raced and fluttered, fueling the headache, but she kept moving.

All at once the source became clear: a single, dim, dust-shrouded bulb dangled at the foot of a stairwell. Worn by the tread of countless steps, wooden slabs trailed up and into a murky recess.

Allie waited, straining to hear anything. The room was painfully silent, the only sounds the storm and the thundering of her pulse. She went up the first step and gagged, nausea overwhelming her. Another wave and she couldn't hold it back. A bit of bile splattered into her hand, and she flung it away before wiping her hands on her pants. Specks of light danced before her eyes and she sat hard, waiting for the spell to pass. It would be easy to blame it on a concussion, but the need was also there, the reason she was in this mess in the first place.

She wanted to quit. She tried. But the craving never left, never stopped nagging. All of her bad memories piled upon each other. Every stupid decision she'd ever made and every embarrassing and cruel moment of her life ground her down. Using was the only way she had to block it all out.

The nausea eased and she started up the stairs again, one hand held out in search of the door that had to be close. Cold metal greeted her hand and hope flourished. Praying a little prayer, she twisted the handle. It rattled but wouldn't turn. It shouldn't have been a surprise, really. God had never been there for her before.

Her legs gave out and she crumpled, drawing her knees up to her chest and succumbing to the need to cry. The nausea came back. Dry heaves sent her scrambling down the stairs, and she fell on all fours gagging. The next thing Allie saw was a pale, glowing white light surrounded by a void; a light at the end of a dark tunnel. She reached out, whether to push it away or embrace it she wasn't sure. She hesitated and chose to fight. She wasn't ready to die. Not yet.

Footsteps echoed overhead. A key rattled in a lock.

The dark tunnel widened, dissipating, and the light bulb swayed gently in a damp draft. Allie sat up too fast and nearly passed out, but she was already moving, crawling into the shadows. Terror rose like a living creature within her, biting and gnawing, trying to claw its way up her throat to freedom. Tears welled up, unwanted

as they were, clouding her vision. She squeezed between piles of junk and boxes, melting into the clutter.

Footsteps started down the stairs, every soft thump on the wooden steps a haunting knell. He reached the concrete floor and headed for the couch. Her abductor's voice cut through the basement—young, strong, and coldly neutral. "I guess you're still alive then. I'm glad for that. Now come out and we can try to sort this out."

Allie eyed the stairs. Did she dare? Was it even a choice? It was a chance, however slim.

"You can't hide forever," he said, louder. "You're going to have to talk to me eventually." He waited a moment, and sounded almost disappointed when he spoke again. "If I wanted you dead, why would I be keeping you like this?"

She could think of a few reasons. None of them made her want to step out and talk.

Scrapes and the sound of clutter being pushed aside came from the darkness. Allie slid out from behind the dresser and crept up the steps. She grabbed the handle, and again it rattled but wouldn't open. She choked back a frustrated scream and shoved against the door, trying to force it open. It didn't move. Not even a fraction. Allie held a hand over her mouth to silence her crying, turned back to creep back into the shadows, and screamed.

*He* stood at the foot of the stairs, face lost in shadows.

"Let me go," she sobbed. "Please, please let me go."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Then why did you take me?" she screamed back.

He was silent for a moment, and then spoke softly. "You saw too much. I didn't know what else to do."

"Let me go!"

"I'm sorry, I can't. I need to figure everything out first."

"I want to go," she sobbed. "*I have* to go."

"Maybe," he said. "In time. Now come back down. The couch isn't much, but it will have to do. I have to go out for a little while, but I won't be long."

When Allie didn't answer or move, he came up the stairs. She shrank away, trying to melt into the wall as he brushed past. He turned back, glinting black eyes boring into hers. "Is there anything I can pick up for you?"

She wanted to claw his eyes out and shove him down the stairs, but she'd seen what he'd done—how he'd been shot point blank and still manhandled the dealer like a rag doll. A knot lodged in her throat. He spoke again, maybe repeating the questions, maybe not. None of it was really registering, except the rasp of the key in the lock and the finality of the deadbolt clacking into place.

It had to be a nightmare. Allie clamped her eyes shut, trying not to listen

to his footsteps fade away. Her chest hurt. Even breathing was a chore. Her hands trembled and her skin was crawling. The headache was back with a vengeance, and it was a struggle not to retch again.

She stumbled back to the couch in a daze and more fell than sat. A cloud of dust swirled, setting off a new bout of coughing. Allie drew her legs up, rubbing them, trying to warm them. It might have been that her clothes were still a bit damp, or the chill in the air, but some part of her knew it was shock. She'd heard about it before, on TV, in books, and even in a textbook once. Exhausted, she tried to think and figure a way out. What was she supposed to do? The place was locked up tight.

Allie ran her hands over her feet, trying to work some warmth into her sore muscles. She winced as her fingers touched a patch of raw flesh just above her heel. It took only a few moments for lightning to flash, and she caught only a glimpse, but it was enough. Amid the bruises, a handprint purpled her skin, and a spot the size of a dime glistened wetly.

The events of the night caught up in a rush. The need had sent her out into a shitty, wet night. She remembered the misery of trying to turn back, get her shit together, and maybe even make amends. She owed it to herself and hated what she'd become, but it was so hard.

And then *he* came along. She watched from half a block away, hidden in the shadows, doing nothing as a man was murdered. She'd panicked, given herself away by running. If she'd been smart, clear-headed, she would have crouched low and stayed out of sight until it was all over. Instead she'd bolted.

As if reliving the memories of the night had taken something out of her, she curled up on the dirty couch, lulled by the sounds of the raging storm while crying silent tears, and sank into darkness.

§ § §

The grocery store shone like a beacon. People moved behind glass walls, shopping despite the unpleasant weather. How many times had Kaleb driven by this very store and never once gone in? It was too busy, too bright. Buying online or from magazines was easier.

"Woulda been better if she'd died," Kaleb muttered. He shook his head at the thought. Horrible. Two innocents were more than enough. A third, even by accident, was unacceptable. But if she got away... He couldn't be hunted. Not again.

The sounds and smells of the hundreds of people who had passed through the store recently assaulted Kaleb's senses the moment he stepped inside. Anxiety pressed in, and he leaned against a shopping cart, closed his eyes, and centered himself. No one knew who or what he was. The sensation of the world closing in gradually subsided, and he pushed on, eager to finish up and go back home.



Fruit caught his eye, much of it exotic, the only familiar items being apples and oranges. Saliva flooded his mouth at the oranges, a rare enough treat in his childhood and one of his favorites. He shook off the flash of nostalgia and grabbed random items. People milled about the store, barely giving him cursory glances, oblivious, stuffing carts full of garbage that surely couldn't be fit for human consumption.

Half an hour later he stood in line, not quite sure what he was about to pay for. Cans and boxes, bottles—both plastic and glass—full of ingredients he'd never heard of. Part of him wondered at the frivolity of humanity, and another part just wanted to be a part of it.

The bag of apples he'd stuffed into his cart caught his eye, and he could almost taste the sweetness, feel the crisp crunch of biting through the skin.

Forcefully diverting his attention away from the cart, he stared at the impossibly-slow woman in front of him. Elderly and wrapped in a heavy one-piece raincoat, she shouldn't have been out in such a storm. Time stood still while she rooted around her purse for payment. The teen running the register rolled his eyes.

The debit machine flashed. Code error.

Fed up with the light, noise, and odors, Kaleb resisted the urge to push past the elderly woman and dash into the night. He smiled at the absurdity of it. This was a simple taste of what he'd always craved, a tiny bit of normalcy in an otherwise nightmarish existence. An old woman was nearly proving to be his bane, the straw that broke his back. A joke considering the things he'd seen and done.

Minutes later he was finally on his way home. To Allie. His smile withered to a scowl. She was safe. She wasn't going anywhere. But what the hell was he supposed to do with her?



## Chapter 3

WHAT HAPPENED?" a dry voice rasped. Jason swallowed the lump in his throat. "Someone killed Antony. We don't know who." *Why the hell was it his problem?* It wasn't like he'd actually been there. But everyone else had bailed. Dealers, gangsters, and wannabe made men, all a bunch of fucking punks.

But staring into Amado's dead eyes, Jason felt a bit like a punk himself. There was something behind those eyes, lurking, waiting to break free. Whatever it was, Jason didn't want to be around when it finally did.

"Did you get anything useful? A plate number? A description?" Amado asked.

"They got a plate..."

Amado looked almost placated.

"But it was stolen." Jason sat back on the desk, legs trembling. He resisted the urge to wipe sweat from his forehead.

"That is very...unfortunate."

Jason raised his hands in surrender. "I wasn't there, and it's pure luck that Lee saw anything at all. He was making a pickup, got there just in time to see Antony shoot the guy point blank. Before Lee could even figure out what the hell was going on, the guy damn near tears Antony's head off. At first, I thought, like, maybe he was wearing a bullet proof vest or something, right? But Lee said the guy moved like one of you. And Antony, he's big, a real mean sonofabitch. No human could just walk up and twist his head around like a fucking corkscrew. If not for the girl showing up, Lee might be missing too. He played the only card he had and kept out of sight. Otherwise, you'd have two guys missing and no idea what was going on." Jason swallowed hard. It made sense, and they were usually reasonable.

Amado seemed to stare into him. "Why was he alone?"

*Shit.* One of the rules broken. It wasn't even his fault, and he had to explain it? His mouth suddenly dry, Jason forced the words out. "Lee was running some errands."

Amado didn't look pleased.

"But, uh..." Jason stammered, "there's always another angle on this."

The vampire settled an icy stare on Jason, waiting.

"Not the first time one of your guys has disappeared." He shrugged. "Who knows. Some morons start dabbling, testing the product, and before they know it the supply is gone and their pockets are empty. Some get caught up in other shit. But maybe this isn't the first time this freak has killed one of ours."

Tension eased out of the vamp, even if it went grudgingly. “Maybe. When was the last disappearance?”

Positive he’d barely dodged being on the menu, Jason clenched his fists to control the trembling in his hands and prayed his voice held. “About six months ago—some thumb breaker.”

“How did it happen?”

Jason shrugged. “No idea. He was out doing pickups and drop-offs, collected a few debts, and no one ever heard from him again. We put the word out that he ran with cash and product, but nothing turned up.”

The vamp turned his cold look on Jason again. “Maybe,” he said softly. “From now on, make sure the rules are followed. I will look into the trespasser myself. Where can I find our young...Lee was it?”

Lee was a good guy, nice to have at your back. Jason didn’t want to rat, but there wasn’t much of a choice. *Fuck*. “Peeler bar,” he sighed. “Twisters.”

Jason sagged with relief as the vamp turned and began to walk from the room, and froze, unable to breathe when Amado glanced back. The hunger in the stare, the beast shimmering right beneath the surface, took his breath away. They were businessmen, modern day mob, but they were still monsters.

Jason blinked and jumped up. Amado was gone. The room was empty. Jason buried his face in his hands and sat back hard. “Stupid.” He knew better than to stare into those eyes. His hands shot to his neck, checking for bite marks. He was clean, but he shuddered anyways. That stare had left him cold, as though it alone had been enough to drain him.

## Chapter 4

LIGHTNING FLASHED, PIERCING the darkness beyond a window covered in grime and dissected by rusted iron bars. For a second or two Allie thought she was home in bed, waking from a bad dream, and then she remembered.

An ominous rumble of thunder rattled windows, and moments later another bolt of lightning sent shadows leaping and dancing, scurrying across a gray and lifeless landscape of old furniture and boxes strewn with dusty cobwebs. The flash faded and a darkness so complete it was profound swallowed Allie whole. It was still night. The storm was still trying to wash the world away.

She sat up and rubbed at puffy eyes. It was all real. She was being kept prisoner by some psychopath. She scratched at her arms, trying to sate an itch that couldn't be sated, and chewed on her bottom lip.

Grateful that at least the headache had eased, Allie still felt like crap. She wasn't cold anymore. Instead, she was burning up, shivering, and slick enough with sweat that her clothes clung to her body. Every last inch of her being ached, and she felt as though insects were slithering beneath her skin.

She slid her legs over the side of the couch with a groan and checked herself over. Her ankle was swollen and hot to the touch. She traced her fingers over the bruise, feeling the raised outlines of his handprint, and pulled away when she found something wet and sticky. If she hadn't already thrown up, she would have now. She flicked her fingers frantically, trying to rid them of the skin that had sloughed off.

The room spun as she stood, and she limped toward the stairs.

Beneath the faint glow of the lone light bulb, she saw a purple and black bruise that covered her ankle as if *his* hand had been covered in ink. At the center of the bruise, the dime-sized scratch had grown to a glistening silver dollar swatch of infection that dribbled yellow and brown pus.

The clutter. Maybe there was something in there she could use...cloth to clean and bandage it. It was stupid and probably a waste of time, but anything that kept her distracted was worthwhile. She had to admit, even sick and wounded, she was more clear-headed than she'd felt in a long time. The panic had lessened. The fatalist glimmers were gone. Both were replaced by grim understanding. She was screwed, there was no arguing that, but she would rather die clawing his fucking eyes out than giving in to whatever he wanted.

She glanced up the darkened stairway and walked on by. She'd tried that. He wasn't stupid. He was calm, collected, and had no fear of her whatsoever. She wasn't his first.

The light faded with every step into the debris. She pulled box after box back to the light and tore them open, digging for anything that might help. She found nothing more than ancient books and newspapers, moth-eaten shirts, and dozens of shoes. Some of the clothes were newer, but most were yellowed by time. Shivers rippled through her and her heart raced, skipping a beat and then catching up with a thud that ached in her left arm. The clothes weren't his. They were all different sizes. Scores of them, but almost entirely men's. A preference, not that it helped her.

She sifted through the clutter, trying and failing to break apart the furniture and finding little worthwhile. One massive tome had some potential. It was leather bound and heavy, written in a flowing silver gild in old English. If she got a clear swing it might stun him.

The going was slow, the searching done by hand and the occasional lightning bolt that turned everything a ghostly shade of gray. Too often her gaze was drawn to the barred windows above, near enough to be infuriating. At best she could wait for the storm to break, pile up enough garbage to stand on, and scream for help.

She shuffled deeper into the basement, following a cluttered path, hands held out, searching. Part of her mind feared the possibility of a moment where her hands would find something, try to understand what it was, and realize it was him. How had it come to this? Why her? Because she made bad decisions, the worst of which was Taylor. She should have dumped him, or better yet, never bothered with him at all. Could he ever go out and not drink? Never. And then it was a hit of this and a snort of that. If she didn't join in she was a pariah.

Then the needles started. That was the limit at first. She drew a line, and Taylor crossed it while she lay passed out. The sting was enough to wake her up, but it was too late. He sank the plunger, and she was melting from the inside out. It was a type of bliss she'd never understood until she experienced it. The first was his fault. The second, third, fourth, fifth, and twentieth were all on her.

The here and now came back in a burst of pain. Her foot collided with something hard, and she instinctively reached for something to lean on. Her hands touched cold metal, and she bit her lip, waiting for the ache to fade while the chill from the metal sank into her flesh and bones.

Dread set in, tempting Allie's imagination, turning her stomach. A freezer, hidden in the back of this dungeon. The possibilities turned her hands clammy and her legs wobbly.

*Just do it!*

Afraid but needing to know, Allie tugged on the lid. Harsh white light blinded her, and she held one hand in front of her eyes, waiting for them to adjust. It took only a few seconds, and she let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. There was no body. The dealer wasn't stuffed into the freezer. There was nothing but boxes of pork chops, steaks, and burgers.

She began to lower the lid, and the dread came back. Hardly six feet away another freezer was nestled against the wall. An old fridge was beside it, and not far from those was a thick wooden table—old, worn, and covered in dark stains.

Unable to turn back and needing to know, she went to the next freezer. The same brilliant white light burned her eyes, and Allie stared, trying to comprehend. Unmarked, brown-paper packages filled the freezer to the brim, crisp and fresh without the rime coating the meat in the other freezer. Her hands trembled while she tore a package open. A bloody, round cut of steak complete with pale white skin and brown hairs pocking the pores glistened in the light.

The meat fell from Allie's hands, clattering on the stone floor. Reality wavered and grew heavy. Her hands shook uncontrollably, but she couldn't turn back. She grasped the refrigerator door and pulled it open. Plastic containers were stacked upon each other, jammed in beside dozens of glass bottles. All were crimson.

Allie threw up without warning, an explosive spray that burned her throat and mouth and splattered what had to be the remains of the dealer. She staggered away and collapsed against the table. The acrid smell of bleach assaulted her and she pulled away, nauseous, realizing what she was touching. She frantically wiped her hands on her shirt.

Allie fell to her knees, whispering a mantra over and over. "I have to get out." She half suspected he was watching her, laughing, and she waited for him to come.

He didn't. In time she stood again, steeling herself. She wasn't going to die here. Not like that. She wasn't going to wind up in that freezer. No way.

Still reeling, she caught a faint glimpse of color. Gloves. Thick, yellow, and as stained as the table they rested on. Behind them was a wooden block with a dozen black handles protruding from it. Allie reached for one and yanked it free. Light caught the edge of the blade, glinting lethally. She threw it away and reached for another, and then another. She refused to think of what the knives had done in their lifetime, but she couldn't stop thinking about what they were going to do yet.

With a cleaver in one hand and a carving knife in the other, Allie used her arm to wipe the dribble of vomit from her chin. She still had a chance. She just had to surprise him.

§ § §

Jordan ran to the basement door and glanced back impatiently at Kaleb, curiosity

glinting in her emerald eyes. She'd been making a pain of herself, trying to get into the basement since he'd put Allie down there.

Kaleb brushed Jordan aside with his foot, ignoring her meows and defiant swats. The moment the door opened, she leapt, darted down the stairs past the light, and her coal-black fur merged with the darkness in the blink of an eye. Kaleb sighed and followed.

The basement was silent. "Are you awake yet?" he called. "I brought you a glass of water and some aspirin." It was a small peace offering, but he had news for her as well. It might cheer her up a little to know that her family and friends were looking for her. They'd been on the news two nights in a row. The story was nationwide. Funny how one story would go big while others didn't even make the local paper. But she was a university student from a big middle-class family with lots of friends. Luckily for him there were almost no clues.

If she was awake, she gave no sign. Not surprising really. She'd seen him kill, and then he'd abducted her. Even so, sooner or later she was going to have to deal with him.

He turned a corner and rounded on the couch. Empty. Again, not a surprise. The basement was a junk heap. There were a million and one places to hide and almost no lighting. Most of the sockets had been empty for decades, and there was no way in hell he was bringing a lantern into this firetrap.

"No sense in hiding," he said. "There's nowhere for you to go."

He waited a moment, and hearing nothing, delved deeper into the room. Light caught his eyes, so bright it hurt. *Shit!* He pushed through the clutter with practiced speed. No wonder she was hiding.

"I shouldn't be surprised you found those. I'm sorry you had to see that, but it really doesn't change anything. We're stuck here until I figure this out."

Nothing. Not a peep.

There had been times in his life that were harder to live with than others. This was one of them. He lashed out, kicking a box that exploded like a dust bomb. "I can tear this room apart to find you," he shouted. "But I don't want to do that."

Sickened by himself, he turned back to the freezers, glad to see his supply untouched. He shut the lid and paused. She was close; he could smell the sour tang of sweat and hear her breath coming in fast, shallow gasps. It wasn't as if he didn't expect it. He knew he was a monster. What he did was evil. But it sucked to see it so clearly.

"I know this is rough, but I promise I don't want to hurt you," he said. "Hell, I even went shopping for you. I've got groceries upstairs. Tell me what you want and I'll see what I can do." He fell silent, hoping, and quickly grew disappointed.

The appliances hummed on and wind whistled overhead, finding its way through rotten seals and cracked glass. The noises of the house were familiar,



lonesome as they were, but the faint sounds of life were new. His life was solitary. He would often stare out of his bedroom window in the pre-dawn hours, enjoying the scent of the ocean in the air, watching and listening to a silent and still world, and feeling a horrible emptiness. People were out there, alive and sleeping. Yet even when they woke the emptiness would remain. Existence never felt as hollow as it did during those late hours. But Allie's breathing was worse. Here was someone who knew he existed, and still an insurmountable chasm remained between them.

Miserable, he turned to close the other freezer.

She moved nearby, her breath quickening, and Kaleb turned. He flinched, raising one arm in defense. Something glinted cold and metallic. Recognition clicked. *Did I leave those out on purpose? Did I want her to set me free?*

He was quick, but he hadn't given Allie enough credit; he'd taken her sweet and innocent appearance to heart. The cleaver bit into his skull. For a moment he was floating, the floor falling away only to rise up suddenly. His vision blurred and split. Allie towered over him, wide-eyed with adrenaline. She rooted through his pockets, pulled out the keys, and grunted in triumph.

His throat worked, trying to speak, but only pathetic gasps and gurgles came out. Allie bolted, leaving only the cleaver to occupy his thoughts. It bisected his vision, buried in his forehead, cutting down across the bridge of his nose. She'd gotten him good. A chill ran through his body. The pain began to fade.

It was time!

The relief was overwhelming, and tears rolled freely down Kaleb's cheeks. It was finally over. It would be pure bliss, if not for the terror of what was to come.

Keys rattled in the distance.

*Good for you*, he thought. *Got away clean.*

A piece of darkness detached and crept toward Kaleb. Bright green eyes glittered like gems in the harsh white light of the freezer, and Jordan mewled and sniffed at the blood soaking Kaleb's shirt and jeans.

The brief relief of finality dissipated as devastation set in, not for himself, but for Jordan. It had been damn near thirty years since he'd found her mangled on a road, damaged far beyond any normal creature's capacity to recover. Somehow, she had survived. She was smarter than she had any right to be, almost human in some aspects, and normal animals shunned her. What would happen to her now? Who would take care of her? She stared into Kaleb's eyes, and slid back into the shadows.

Unable to say goodbye, Kaleb closed his eyes and waited for the end to come. What awaited him? An eternity of flames and torture? Forgiveness? Maybe even his parents? Or would it simply end?

Keys rattled again and he grew impatient. Dying wasn't what he'd expected.

People always grew weak and sort of faded away, didn't they? That's what it was always like in movies and books. But he didn't feel like he was slipping away. He was just...numb. Darkness wasn't overtaking his vision. The freezer light burned against his closed eyes.

Allie pounded her fist against the door and screamed in frustration.

Kaleb opened his eyes and stared at the blade screwing up his vision. More than anything it was annoying now. He shifted, wanted to reach for it, yank it free, only his body refused to cooperate. The left side of his body was paralyzed, but his right hand twitched. It rose as he willed it, grasping upward. Sweat broke out on his forehead, and in a surge of effort his fingers clawed their way up his body.

The lock clacked open and Allie cried out in triumph.

Kaleb's fingers inched over his chest, touched the sweat slicking his face, and finally found the cleaver. The urge to retch arose as he yanked at the blade. Every pull, every last little motion, caused a sickly sucking sensation behind his eyes.

Taking a moment to gain a firmer grip, he worked the blade loose. His head jerked up and down, refusing to let the blade free, and dropped as the cleaver finally came loose with a wet squelch. A familiar, salty wetness dripped down his face, and he let the cleaver slide from his grasp.

Disappointment set in. It had felt like it was happening. Death. An end. Things that scared the hell out of him but could never seem to claim him. But if it wasn't...and if he was going to survive...then the girl had to be stopped. To be hunted again, reviled, banished. That couldn't happen.

Allie's footsteps pounded across the wooden floor overhead. She screamed. Jordan screeched. Glass shattered and a heavy thud rattled through the house.

A shiver ran through Kaleb like a winter breeze. Driven by desperation and self-preservation, he reached for the freezer, used it to pull himself up, and lurched toward the stairs on wobbly legs. One staggering footstep after another took him closer to *her*.

Allie screamed and shouted. More glass shattered, and Jordan let out a spine-chilling shriek. A door slammed shut. The front door.

She was out!

Kaleb broke into a run. If he was dead it wouldn't matter, but once again fate had only teased him. He couldn't lose everything he'd worked so hard and done so much evil for. Fear set in, and with it came anger. They worked like a drug, quickening his movement, strengthening his muscles.

He rounded the top of the stairs and shouldered the door out of his way, tossed aside the kitchen table, and tore down the hallway toward the front door. A piece of archway to the living room disintegrated into particles of plaster as he rammed by.

Allie's voice carried over the storm, desperate screams for help.

Kaleb's feet didn't even touch the steps as he leapt across the porch and onto the lawn. Soggy grass flew in clumps. Just a stone's throw away, Allie bolted up the neighbor's steps and pounded on the door. The little junkie was going to ruin it all!

Kaleb was on her in a flash. One hard pull and Allie was airborne, her mouth turned to a comical little O, her eyes wide with surprise. The little color in her face drained away. She landed hard on her back, grunting as the air was knocked out of her.

Kaleb lunged after her, clamped one hand over her mouth, and carried her across the lawn and up the porch steps. Allie kicked and thrashed, grasping for anything to hold on to. She managed to snag the railing and dug her fingers in until they turned white with exertion. One savage yank and the aged wood gave way. Kaleb unceremoniously dumped her across the threshold and swatted her new weapon aside when she turned and swung on him. He knelt and held a hand over her mouth, tempted to twist her head around.

A voice drew his attention, and he dragged Allie to the door, daring a glance outside to see what was going on. The porch light next door was on, and the elderly little lady that lived there peered out at the wretched night. She called out again, and after a few seconds returned to her home. The door thudded shut and the light turned off.

Kaleb eased his own door shut, and leaned against the wall nearly overcome with relief. Helen was a kind woman, always waved or said hello, and best of all she minded her own business. Thank god she hadn't seen anything.

Allie went limp in his arms, trying to use her dead weight to drop free. When it didn't work she flailed again, squirming and scratching, trying to bite him. Kaleb dragged her kicking and screaming through the house. She grabbed everything she could—a light stand, door jambs, and a chair from the kitchen. She fought like a rabid animal when they reached the stairs. All futile attempts. She wasn't strong enough. Only when they reached the couch did he let her go, trembling with anger. Why couldn't he just kill her? It wouldn't be the worst thing he'd done.

The answer was simple; it was because none of this was her fault. She was an innocent, albeit with a bad habit. Of course she was going to try to escape. She was terrified.

Kaleb let the tension slip away. "No more," he said. "I don't want to kill you, but I won't let myself get caught."

She stared back wide-eyed and uncomprehending. "What the *fuck* are you?"

*A monster.* But what exactly? Decades of research and he still wasn't sure. There was no slipper with a perfect fit.

He ran a hand through his hair, trying to compose himself, and let his fingers

linger on the crevasse in his forehead. It was easily the worst head wound he'd ever had. The girl had spirit.

He tried to smooth his shirt out and touched something hard and unyielding. A black handle protruded from between his ribs. He drew the blade out inch by inch, entranced by the thick, seeping blood. Based on the hysterical sobs and whimpers coming from Allie she didn't feel the same.

Nausea twisted his stomach. *What unholy thing could survive this?*

When he spoke again he was calm. "Whatever I am, you should realize by now that you can't kill me. You can barely even hurt me. And most importantly, you can't get away from me. You surprised me tonight. It won't happen again."

He waited, gazing down at her. When she didn't respond he turned away. "Get some rest. Tomorrow we're going to talk."

Allie curled up on the couch, silently sobbing.

§ § §

Bits of plaster cascaded from the walls when Kaleb yanked the basement door shut. It rested crookedly in the frame, set in place but not even close to repaired.

Jordan mewled from atop the kitchen counters wanting something, not that he cared at the moment. She wasn't starving, and he needed attention more than she did. Kaleb made a beeline for the bathroom and stared into the mirror, hardly able to believe the face staring back at him. It was nightmarish: bloody, pale, and waxy. His eyes had sunken into black holes, absorbing light rather than reflecting it. They were the eyes of oblivion, a personification of the void he'd always felt in his heart.

The gash on his forehead was horrific, speckled with tiny splinters of bone and bits of gray. Blood so dark it was almost black had dripped down his face and shirt. But the damage was already healing, the bone knitting. He stripped off his shirt before it could dry to his skin and threw it in the trash basket. A cut oozed between his ribs, a perfect surgical slice already pulling together.

People had chased him before, hunted him. He'd been stabbed, shot, and beaten, but never had he taken such a grievous blow to the head. Never had he appeared so ghoulish afterwards. Stab wounds and bruises were mere irritations. Bullets burned for an instant, a passing sting no more worrisome than the bite of an insect. But he'd always protected his head and heart, unsure if they were a weakness. Now he knew. He'd survived the head shot, or head-stab as it were, but the morsel of knowledge imparted in that one brutal stroke had cost him dearly. Decades of vitality wiped away.

The thought of losing so much hard-earned ground sent him into a panic. He bolted, tearing into the kitchen, yanking open the fridge door, and shoving

Allie's food aside. He snatched up a crimson bottle, chugged it, went back for a raw, bloody steak, and tore in. Chunks slid down his gullet as gracefully as any pelican, and he waited for the euphoria to set in.

It didn't crash over him as it always had but crawled through him crippled and weak. It felt like the drugs they'd made him take as a child, a creeping fog that numbed his mind and body and made everything go away. Hoping, praying that it worked, he walked in a daze back to the only mirror in the house. A nightmare stared back at him with hollow eyes, a jaundiced ghoul dressed in blue jeans and blood.

So much lost in one careless mistake.

He trudged to bed and collapsed. Down pillows had never been so soft and welcoming. It was all catching up. A man could only take so much.

There were things to be done. He would need money, lots of it, and a new place to live. Somewhere secluded that still had access to the highways. Maybe a cabin in the woods. Even with the sun far from rising, Kaleb felt a crushing need to sleep. His mind raced in an incomprehensible way, trying to plan, a thousand thoughts vying for attention and not one able to take root.

Sleep came like an avalanche, burying him beneath a wave of cold white noise that washed the world away. A flash of warmth spread through his chest as he fell asleep, gone as quickly as it arrived and forgotten just as easily.



## Chapter 5

THE DYING OF the day wakened Kaleb from his sleep. The sun's dim and waning light brought not the hope of a sunrise and a better day but the despair of yet another sunset and lonely night. His life was hollow.

As always, he regretted the thought. He had Jordan. She alone in this world needed him. She stirred at his side as if sensing his need and snuggled closer. So many years and she still couldn't bear to be alone. She was his shadow...unless she had something better to do.

Contemplating the night before him, Kaleb crawled out of bed, reached for the lights, and thought better of it. He trudged to the bathroom, wondering if he'd overreacted. Unlikely.

A dark figure stared at him from the bathroom mirror, something apart from himself. It was a creature of its own merit, an alter ego that could come and go of its own volition. He flicked up the light switch and watched the monster's eyes open wide in surprise. The spreading veins of corruption had lessened. The horrible gash in his forehead was little more than a pink scar. Even the black, limpid pools of his eyes had returned to a dull and dusty version of their hazel origins. He was gaunter than normal, pale enough to be anemic, and had suffered a setback that may take years to overcome, but those were all small prices to pay.

Jordan wove between his feet, meowing, her tail tickling the back of his knees. He picked her up and scratched her throat while she trilled and purred. If she wasn't kissing ass to get him moving on breakfast, he might have thought she was happy for him.

Two empty bottles and one shared package of meat later, Kaleb sat in quiet contemplation at the kitchen table. Self-loathing aside, he still had a problem in his basement that wasn't going to resolve itself. "Dunno what to do. That girl is a serious pain in my ass."

Jordan cocked her head and then went back to cleaning her paws.

"Lotta help you are," Kaleb muttered half accusingly.

If the girl didn't come to her senses...well, there weren't really a lot of options. She had no idea where she was, but if she got out, went to the police...with a good sketch artist, who knew what could happen? He mused over paying her off, but not with what she'd seen. He couldn't keep her captive forever though. "What the hell am I supposed to do?"

Jordan stared up, silent, though if she had an idea, she wasn't sharing it.

"I can't kill her. I just can't," Kaleb muttered.

The clock struck twelve. Hours had passed. Sitting on his ass was well and fine, but it was only avoiding the problem. Dreading the look that would surely be on Allie's face, Kaleb grabbed a bottle of water and a few apples as a peace offering.

§ § §

The sound of *him* walking around upstairs woke Allie from a restless slumber. At first, she wondered if it was thunder, but as she became aware of her surroundings she realized the storm was dying off. The shrieking of the wind had lessened to a quiet howl mixed with the soft patter of rain.

She curled up on the couch, shivering and bleary eyed, nausea twisting her stomach. The headache was back with a vengeance. Maybe it was withdrawal, or maybe it was still shock, but she didn't think so. She knew what both of those felt like.

The basement was arctic around her even though it was summer and the rain had been warm. The sweats had stopped overnight only to be replaced by chills that set her teeth chattering. She rubbed her arms, shivering, and looked to the clutter. There might be a blanket out there, an old coat, something. If only she had the energy to find out. She was tired, hungry, and exhausted by a night of little sleep punctuated by horrible dreams. Her waking hours were spent thinking of a plan. Nothing good had come to mind. Neither had there been a miracle—a passerby, a delivery man, or a neighbor. No one.

There was no way out. He was a monster. A real one. The bogeyman who used to hide under her bed, waiting to eat her all up. Now he was finally going to do it—and not all that long after she'd stopped believing he was real. She shivered again. This time it wasn't chills, but the thought of being diced up and placed into small brown packages.

She struggled to stand, managing to get halfway up before collapsing. Her legs were cold and numb and refused to do what she wanted. Unable to move, she curled up again, closed her eyes, and put her mind elsewhere. She went home.

A hand grabbed her arm, shook her, and she struggled to wake up again. The numbness had spread up her body, through her chest and arms, and even her eyelids felt weighed down. She managed to open them a crack, just enough to see him looming over her, his face once again obscured. How did he do it? Ever since that first glance his face had been hidden by shadows.

His lips moved, but the sound they made was faint, an inaudible murmuring. He leaned down into a bit of moonlight filtering between the bars above, and she finally got a good look at him. He didn't look like a monster. He was no deranged psychotic. Pale, maybe, a bit gaunt and tired, but...normal. Worry creased the corners of his eyes. He reached out again, gently caressed her arm, and spoke without sound.



In that light touch she felt an odd connection to him, felt sympathy for him, for the sorrow in his heart, for his pain, and through it all she understood him. What he had done was terrible, unforgivable, but he wasn't what she'd thought. She smiled, grateful for this one small mercy, and let the darkness take her.

§ § §

Kaleb shook her again. "Get up. It's time to talk." As usual she didn't listen. Was she just defiant? It didn't look like it. She was sickly, even for a junkie in withdrawals. He pulled at her shoulder, turning her towards him. There was almost nothing to her. *And I tossed her around. Probably gave her a concussion, maybe even a hemorrhage.* He shook her again in desperation, and his heart sank. Allie's eyes were milky, unseeing.

She smiled. And then she died.

For the briefest of moments, he'd felt her mind, an awful sadness at dying mixed with peaceful acceptance. And he wasn't sure, but had he also felt forgiveness? He took her hand and let it fall away; she was so cold. And the smell...

He wanted to believe it was the natural smell of death, bowels letting go, though he knew it wasn't. It was rot. Infection. One of her feet was pale, while the other was black with corruption. The basement floor rushed up to greet him and he sat down hard. It was his fault. Of course it was. But of an infection? Because of an accident?

"No." He shook his head. "No excuses. You killed her. May as well have broken her neck, too."

Grief and guilt gnawed at him. He sat with his back to Allie and the couch. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I really didn't want to hurt you." It was true, if not the whole truth. He felt as bad for himself as he did for her. He wasn't a good guy. He was a selfish, miserable, murdering prick. The grief was as much for the life he was trying to live as it was for the one he'd just taken. Killing bad guys was an easy out—a mask, twisting him to believe that maybe it even made him one of the not-so-bad guys. But now he'd killed another innocent. He wanted nothing more than to be a part of society, normal, but he was a parasite. And like all parasites, he killed the good and the bad. No matter how hard he tried he would never be normal.

His mind wandered to when he'd become a monster, that critical turning point in his life when he'd believed a lie. He'd been cursed ever since. The creature inside of him craved flesh.

Unable to look at her, he sat in silence and drew her university ID from his pocket. It was a good picture. She looked young, hopeful, and full of potential. Her life had barely begun before he'd ended it. Why couldn't he just kill himself?

*Because you're a coward who can't take what you give.*

Time passed as it always did, uncaring, and he was finally able to turn and look at her. He stayed that way for a long time, seeing beneath the grime and sickness. She was quite lovely—pretty in a girl-next-door sort of way—and as screwed up as it was, he'd taken some small measure of pleasure in being able to talk to her. It wasn't enjoyment of her fear or having power over her. It was contact, a connection, even a screwed up one.

She was different. Not that he was above killing addicts, but only people so far gone they may as well already be dead. Even then, they were a last resort. Guys like his last victim, the dealer, were preferential prey. It was more than the drugs, even though he'd been selling the hard stuff. No. That guy had been scum, the worst kind of guerrilla pimp with a rep for disappearing girls who tried to quit.

Maybe Allie would have lost herself in addiction eventually, thrown away her life, and become something he might take if he were desperate enough, but no one would ever know. The only certainty was that she'd cast a light not even a burgeoning addiction could dim, and he had smothered it.

A soft groan startled Kaleb out of his reverie. He spun around, hardly able to believe it, and his hopes crashed. Her pallor had worsened to a ghastly, waxy white. She groaned again, and he set his back to the couch once more, frayed. It was only gas escaping. Usually the bodies didn't linger long enough to do that.

The sickly-sweet stench of infection turned his stomach. It would stay until long after she was gone, infused into the dust. Still he waited, rooted by remorse and terrified of something he dared not say aloud lest, like a wish, it not come true.

He waited for a miracle.

Would it even work? The scenarios were so different. They had done it to him on purpose, changed who and what he was. He'd tainted her by accident. Could he even pass the curse on? He'd thought about it—how could he not? But to inflict that misery on another? He couldn't. Not on purpose.

All he knew was that he was different. Alone. A thing so terrible not even the monsters who created him would lay claim to him.

But if it did work...the thought sent flutters through his stomach. A fragile ember of hope ignited, sparked by the possibility of a future not as bleak as the past. Flutters turned to claws. It had taken so many years to return. Everything he'd done...all of the death...The ember faltered, doused by what would have to be done should his worst nightmare and greatest dream come true.

His stomach grumbled despite it all. Beyond the barred windows the sun was already beginning to brighten the morning sky.

Weighed down by a conscience that would crush a normal man, he trudged up the stairs and into the kitchen. He would eat. And then he would sleep. Every step was a misery. But as much as he hated himself, he couldn't fight the hunger.

## Chapter 6

THE SOFT SIGH of the wind was a perfect complement to the comforting patter of rain. A cool draft stirred the layers of dust covering the basement and rolled across Allie, leaving goose bumps in its wake.

She shivered and opened her eyes. It was cold—so much colder than it had been. Gloomy gray light filtered through the windows above, a welcome change from the hostile darkness of the previous days and nights. She sat up and tried to wipe the blurriness from her eyes. Had she passed out? She'd been sure she was dying. Then he had come, but the memories slipped away like smoke between her fingers.

Allie tried to stand and fell back. A sickening sensation of tearing skin curdled her stomach. She reached for her leg, sure she had scraped it raw, and found raw flesh strangely cool to the touch and absent of pain. A grimace turned to revulsion when she spied a mass of skin dangling from the side of the couch. Her entire lower leg had peeled like an overripe grape.

Pinpricks of light cut the gloom overhead, and she tried to stand again, wanting to feel the warmth of the sun on her face. She soaked it in, reveling in the heat, until a scent distracted her. Food. Her stomach grumbled, reminded that it had been empty for days. She found it more by smell than sight—apples, fresh and crisp, waiting on a plate near her feet. Skin, flesh, and even the core disappeared in a few greedy bites and she reached for another.

Minutes later the food was gone and the ache in her belly was worse. Spasms wracked her, sending a watery spray of pulp from her mouth and soaking her arms and chest. Not that she cared. Even the insubstantial wisps of memories were gone. She turned her head from side to side, thinning out the smells of dust, old paper, concrete—and mixed through them all was something intoxicating, something she had to have.

§ § §

Jordan sniffed at the door and growled low in her throat.

Kaleb trudged down the hall, calling ahead. “What’s up your butt?” He stepped around the corner and saw Jordan, ears flattened, peering into the thin band of darkness beneath the basement door. “Oh.” He gave her a guilty shrug. “I know. It’s my fault she’s dead,” he said, his almost imperceptible British accent thickening.

Jordan stared at him, intelligence shining behind her emerald eyes. Glass shattered in the basement, and she turned back to the door hissing.

Kaleb's heart would have thumped if it could. Was it really happening?

He rushed down the steps and paused. It was far too dark. "Not again," he muttered. His entire body felt afire with—what? Not fear, but maybe excitement? It had been so long since he'd felt anything like it.

The predator in him took over and he stalked to the couch, a thrill shaking him to his core when he got there. She was gone, aside from a revolting mass of skin. He hurried past.

It didn't take long to see the light. The freezers. Not like he should be surprised. Even so, he forgot the stealth and plowed through his hoard of trash, uncaring of the mess left behind, taking a quick glance at the table to see that his knives were all in place. As for the rest...a nightmare. Hard work pissed away. Bottles smashed, the blood wasted, plastic containers emptied, and shreds of brown paper and scraps of meat strewn across the floor. Part of him seethed while another tittered.

It was happening. Lost meat was a harsh price to pay, but she was worth it.

Kaleb turned to the maze he had created over the years. She was out there, confused and more dangerous than ever. "C'mon. We've already played this game."

Nothing.

"I get it. I've been there. If you come out, we can talk it over and get you some answers." *Pain in the ass. Why's she gotta be so difficult?* As if he didn't know. "This is stupid," he said. "You're not going to surprise me again, and even if you do, we both know you can't hurt me." What a load. She already had. And now she could bite through frozen meat.

How much time did she have? A couple of days? A week? Every moment was more precious than she could possibly know. He sighed in resignation. Saying so would only scare her more. Patience. That was the only way. Coax her out. Or just talk and let her listen.

Grudgingly, he turned back to the freezer with a scowl threatening to chase away the high of newfound hope. The meat. So much of it ruined. He'd have to go hunting again, and Allie...good lord, she would need ten times as much meat as he did.

It was impossible. Movies were one thing, but the way it was happening... all from a scratch? The implications were terrifying.

He waited, tense. Nothing. No scurrying. No breathing. The only sounds were rain tapping the windows and Jordan's faint growls. Giving the room one last scan before kneeling to sift through the mess, he searched for meat that hadn't been tainted, cursing under his breath the whole time. Garbage. All of it. Months' worth. More.

Arms overburdened with bottles and a few containers from the fridge that she'd missed, he made for the stairs. "I'm sorry," he whispered. He really was. He

still remembered what it had been like. The pure terror. The uncertainty. It didn't have to be like that for her.

He grimaced while passing the couch, unable to ignore the gleaming clump of flesh. Time pressed down, reminding him of his own transformation. In a day he'd begun to black out, the patches of missing time growing from one episode to the next. In a week his mind was gone. But this was different. He was no Isabella, and this wasn't part of a plan.

As if summoned by thinking of her, Allie lurched from the shadows, her eyes cold and milky-blue. Kaleb stepped back, trying and failing to stay out of her reach. Meat clattered on the floor. The bottles shattered. Kaleb grabbed her arms and strained to hold on while she twisted and squirmed with a stunning ferocity. "Stop!" he shouted. She bit at his arm, barely missing, and he forced her back, fighting for every step until her arm broke with a wet snap. He let go and waited for the screams, the crying, even a barrage of nasty words.

Instead, she lunged.

For once Kaleb was the prey. A thick strip of muscle tore free, and he screamed, not from pain but surprise. One hand locked on her throat, he shoved so hard her feet left the floor. She hit a wall with a wet crack and crumbled.

Blood gushed down his shoulder and arm, soaking his clothes and oozing between his fingers. She'd done it again. She was still trying. It wasn't possible. Her bones had cracked against the concrete, and there was a dark stain on the wall where her head had connected and split. She crawled toward Kaleb, swiping at his legs, forcing him back. He ran for the stairs, glad to see a black streak racing ahead of him, slammed the door shut, and hammered the deadbolts into place.

Anxiety throttled him mercilessly, making the rooms spin while he rushed to the bathroom. The mirror showed a different monster this time, a frantic creature stained with blood. Bone and cartilage glimmered inside of a gaping red hole where she'd bitten deep and taken a mouthful. Unsure of what else to do, he pressed a clean towel to the wound. Jordan yowled in the hall, a mournful sound.

Kaleb dropped to his knees and set his forehead against the marble sink. At least he hadn't changed this time.

But, Allie. The speed of degeneration... There was nothing left of the old her. He bounced his forehead off of the sink again and again. She would clean out the freezer, and there was nothing he could do about it.

*Kill her!* The thought popped into his mind as if someone had shouted it.

He couldn't. She deserved a chance, even if it took a hundred years. The opportunity was too important to pass up, the solitude too painful to endure. One bloody piece of clothing after another dropped to the floor. Cold showers. They held no appeal but would serve their purpose.

Blood mixed with water, swirls and whorls diluting and spinning down the

drain until the water ran almost clear and only a trickle of blood seeped from the bite. The meat around it was dark, both bruised and tainted. *And well deserved.* If it was toxic, fatal, so be it. It wasn't like he had a cure.

After wrapping up his wounds, he made for the fridge and wasn't the least surprised when Jordan came running. She purred, circling his legs until he sat on the couch, her plate beside his. He ate in silence, staring at the TV, not paying attention to anything until Jordan demanded more. It was too much to handle. Tonight. The past days. Everything since she'd come into his life. If keeping her had been dangerous before, now it was suicide.

Even worse, he was condemning her to as miserable an existence as his own, to being a murderer, a monster, an eater of men. He had no right.

Numbed by the highs, the lows, and having a strip torn off of him, literally, he went back to the fridge. He always healed faster on a full stomach. When he got back to the couch, he offered another piece to Jordan who was more than happy to take it. Without remembering having taken a first bite, he swallowed the last, and realized he wouldn't be sleeping any time soon. He scratched under Jordan's chin, oblivious to the claws kneading his legs, flipping channels with his mind anywhere but on the shows.

## Chapter 7

JASON REACHED FOR his phone, already irate. "What?"  
"He's back!"

Adam. Again. If it was another false alarm, Jason was going to feed him to the vamps. "You sure?"

"Unless there's more than one guy dragging junkies into back alleys. Over on Woodridge."

"Go find out. And don't hang up, I want to hear this."

"There's a bonus for this guy, yeah?"

"Huge," Jason said, "if it's him."

Jason listened impatiently as Adam and a few others rushed down the stairs and into the street. This was the third call this week alone. The entire state was on watch—the dealers, the junkies, and even the police, ever since the orders had come down a few months back. Everyone was on edge. Two guys had disappeared in Jacksonville alone, the bloodsuckers home turf, and word was at least three or four more were missing in Orlando and Tampa.

Footsteps pounded the pavement as Adam huffed on the other end of the line. A chorus of jeers and threats erupted, muffled and dim.

"What's going on you...*fucking*...*MORON!*" Jason yelled, face flushing. Gunshots rang out. Jeers turned to screams. The phone clattered and cut out.

"Goddammit," Jason cursed. He punched in Val's number. "C'mon, c'mon."

"Val here."

"It's Jason. He's back, over by the place on Woodridge. I think he killed Adam and his guys."

The phone went dead and Jason stared at it. Did Val really hang up on him? Or was it a disconnect? He tossed the phone away and dropped to the couch, not sure what to do. It had to be a hang up. Part of him wanted to run over and see what was going on. Another part said to stay home where it was safe. The guy was a freak, a soul sucker, a vamp. It was a hell of a risk.

*Or a once in a lifetime opportunity.*

He glanced at the clock. Only three minutes since the call.

Mind made up, Jason bolted for his bedroom and tore open the closet. A rain of junk flew over his shoulders as he dug for the box buried in the back. He flipped the lid up. Metal gleamed. The shotgun was sawed off, the red shells of silver shot and the blue shells wooden slugs.

*A Third Kind*

He snatched the chain around his neck, drew a silver cross out of his shirt, gave it a good luck kiss, and ran from the room.



## Chapter 8

**A**NOTHER BULLET BIT into Kaleb's chest. Another shirt ruined. The black hoodie was trashed too. He let his struggling would-be victim fall and charged the men that had chased him into the alley. Three seconds to snap the vertebrae, another three to load the body, a few more and he would have been behind the wheel. The trunk was open. The car was ready to go. And now this.

He rushed them, the sting of hot metal no more problematic than the drizzling rain. One hard swing crushed a skull and sent the corpse careening into another meat bag. They collided with a crunch and fell in a tangled heap.

The thunderous booms grew distant, and a blinding wave of electricity ripped through Kaleb's head. It buzzed in his ears, bled the world white, and sent him staggering, searching for someone or something to cling to. With the blindness came panic and a stitch in his chest, a pinpoint of ice. Heart attack? Was that even possible? It spread, down his arms, up his neck, soothing the dozens of holes pocking his flesh and the mangled gray mass in his skull. His vision came back, sharper, brighter, tinged red.

Whatever had happened, he wasn't the only one to notice.

Two of the men backed away, turned and ran. A third went pale, all of his bravado forgotten while he fumbled to swap out clips. A guttural snarl rumbled out of Kaleb's throat, and an animalistic urge took over. *Prey*. He gave chase, running faster than he'd known he could and catching up in mere seconds. One man he grabbed by the shoulder, yanked hard enough to tear the bone from the socket, and sent him rolling through dirty puddles. The other he tackled, forced the man's head back and bit into warm, delicious flesh before they even hit the ground. Hot meat slid down his throat in a wash of steamy blood, the victim's brief shriek a song to accompany the meal.

Warmth flowed through his veins in a euphoric rush. The victim was young, healthy, and delicious. Dizzy with blood lust, he let the body slip from his hands and sprinted towards the others, slowing only to aim a devastating kick. The scum saw it coming, screeched, and almost had time to beg before Kaleb's foot crushed its neck so badly the head almost sheared off. The body twitched, the head lolling at an angle it was never meant to. Blood jetted from torn skin, a severed artery spewing life. The twitches grew worse before stopping suddenly.

Kaleb turned to the last of his attackers. The man who'd managed the head shot was rooted in place by fear, his teeth chattering, hands trembling so badly

he'd dropped the fresh clip. Sirens wailed in the distance and Kaleb paused. A sense of dread, some leftover instinct from when man sought the shelter of caves, gripped his unbeating heart and squeezed. He'd felt twinges like it before, but nothing like this.

It was time to go.

But first, the beast inside roared, screaming to be unleashed, fighting the urge to flee. Kaleb rushed the gunman, swinging for all he was worth and reveling in the sound of ribs crackling and the sensation of hot meat encasing his fist. Knowledge from countless malevolent acts guided his fingers as they locked onto a thing so frantic it thrummed like the wings of a hummingbird. One twist and a wrench and the heart tore free with a wet slurp. They both watched, Kaleb enthralled, the gunman horrified, as it beat a few times, and the man dropped. It would be just to eat it like an apple, tasty too, but taking a man's heart was a cruel prospect, and Kaleb dropped it on the body.

He took in the carnage, wondering. How many would fit in the trunk?

Something shuffled in the shadows, and Kaleb spun, ready to kill. A man huddled against a brick wall, the original target, a nearly dead addict. Everything about him screamed death—his smell, his yellow eyes, and his emaciated body. He'd caught a lot of spatter from standing behind Kaleb when the bullets started flying, yet somehow he'd avoided being shot. A guardian angel? He was only the second person to survive a hunt.

What to do with him? Killing would serve no purpose other than covering tracks. "You can go," Kaleb said. "I've had enough for one night."

A voice thick with an almost Spanish accent came out of nowhere. "How generous. Unfortunately, we cannot extend the same courtesy."

Kaleb spun in search, taken off guard.

A similarly accented female laughed. "We should keep this one for a while. It will be fun."

He couldn't see them, but he could *feel* them. They weren't human. They reeked of old blood and death. Kaleb backed up against the car he'd stolen, ready to jump behind the wheel and drive.

The woman's voice dripped with derision when she spoke again. "How cute, I think he intends to run away. We must be scaring him, Renato."

"Move to the street and step into the light, rogue," the man said. "I would see you better."

What was he supposed to do? Listen? Not likely. Make a run for it? Give these things his back? No chance. That didn't leave many options.

"Let us keep him. Please?" the woman begged.

"Adora, be silent," he sighed.

A girlish *hmmph* was her only reply.

The one called Renato spoke again, his voice soft yet commanding, coming from everywhere. "We came here to kill you, rogue, but I have little desire to do so. Give me a reason to let you live. Surrender and perhaps you will receive mercy."

"I'll take my chances," Kaleb said, searching the shadows, desperation growing as the sirens drew closer. Where the hell were they? What the hell were they?

"Don't be a fool," the woman snapped. "If you fight us you will die."

"For your own sake," Renato said. "Kneel before Emigdio and plead your case."

Put his life in the hands of some random monsters? Right. "I have no idea who Emigdio is, and there's no way in hell I'm going anywhere with you. Just let me go. I've killed enough for one night."

Adora's laughter echoed through the night, spreading so it seemed to come from everywhere at once, but he was sure that for a split second it had been behind and above him.

"He has no idea whose ground he's trespassing on," she laughed.

"Take care, Adora. You give yourself away." Renato warned.

The laughter ended abruptly, and Kaleb had a sense of a shadow within the shadows moving away.

"I grow tired of this game. One last chance—will you surrender?" Renato asked.

"No!" Kaleb growled.

"I take no pleasure in this, but you have trespassed on the wrong territory and I do what I must. Michael, Adora...take him."

Kaleb backed up until he hit a brick wall. He'd always known he would meet other *things* at some point. He just hadn't expected it to be quite like this. These had the same feel as the soulless, dead-eyed creatures he had narrowly avoided in the past. Vampires, if he had to guess.

They appeared at the same time, casting off the shadows as though they were shrouds. Adora dropped to the roof of the stolen car, an amused smirk pulling at the corners of her mouth. Had she not been there to kill him, he might have fallen in love with her. Or at least lust. Tall and lithe, she was a stunning raven-haired beauty with a Mediterranean complexion. Her eyes were lost in the shadows, but he imagined they were the color of honey.

The second, a mass of corded muscle with fair skin and cropped golden hair, looked a modern-day Nordic god. All he needed was a giant war hammer. And courage. Despite being a foot taller and a couple hundred pounds heavier than Kaleb there was fear in his eyes.

The last could only be Renato. Even at less than half the size of the giant he demanded attention. The vampire's coat billowed with a gust of wind, and Kaleb realized it was a cape. An actual cape. He almost smiled, and would have if not for the scent. Renato reeked of time and strength. They all smelled of it, but Adora and Michael were softer, lighter.

Adora jumped off the car, landed as quiet as any cat, and revealed the points of her fangs in a playfully malicious smirk. Michael shadowed Renato's movements and took a step closer.

Kaleb used the wall as a launching point before they could box him in, hitting Adora hard and fast, latching on, spinning, using the momentum to toss her. She screamed, the threats and bluster forgotten, and hit Renato like a cannonball.

Kaleb moved faster than any human could have, and still it wasn't enough. He was smashed to the ground, rolling head over feet through water that stank of garbage and oil before sliding to a stop with his face in the gravel and too many stones to count embedded in his skin. Fat drops of warm rain replaced the drizzle, tiny bombs from heaven striking the back of his head to wash away the grime. He grabbed at his hood, forced by decades of skulking to hide his face, and hesitated, enthralled by boots large enough to crush his chest.

Michael.

Kaleb forgot the hood and pushed to his hands and knees. Renato and Adora rushed to Michael's side. Was this how it ended? Soaked in filth, slain at the hands of other monsters? After countless unfulfilled wishes for death, now that he wanted to live was he doomed?

He got up, brushing away mud and dirt, and noticed that his nails were longer, sharp yet cracked, and his skin was bruised and pallid. The vamps were even less impressed. One gasped. Another hissed. Kaleb looked up and saw their fear and confusion, Michael with one massive fist cocked and ready to swing. Shame burned Kaleb's face. He was monstrous even to the monsters.

"What are you?" Renato asked.

"Tired," Kaleb responded. "I've had enough. How about we call it even."

"You are not Vampyr."

"No," Kaleb said "I'm not."

"You must tell me," Renato blurted. "Countless years have passed since I felt surprise. I would know what you are before I kill you."

"Seriously?" Kaleb said dryly.

Michael was a white blur. His fist struck like a sledgehammer, sending Kaleb sprawling once again. Adora leapt into the fray, slipping an arm around Kaleb's neck before he'd even stopped rolling. She squeezed, determined to break his neck. Kaleb struggled to his knees, trying to pry her cold, steely arms loose. Renato closed in, grabbing Kaleb's coat, lifting him and Adora from the ground with one clenched fist.

Kaleb could feel his spine reaching the boundaries of its resistance. The chill behind his eyes dropped a few degrees, and Renato's pity turned to revulsion. Furious, at them, at himself, Kaleb let go of Adora's arms and lashed out at Renato. The vampire's nose burst in a spray of blood, and he fell back in stunned disbelief.

Kaleb threw himself backwards at Michael's unyielding frame, crushing Adora between them and breaking free of her iron grip. He whirled to face the giant.

Michael grimaced.

*Too much.* Not sure he could even punch high enough, Kaleb swiped at the vamp with his claws. The giant backpedaled, raising an arm in defense, and let out a ghastly wheeze. He felt for his throat and found a waterfall instead. Blood came in a torrent, splashing the puddles of rain, splattering with every choked gasp for breath.

Adora let loose an enraged scream and charged. She sliced and slashed, her fingernails as sharp and strong as any blades. The world tilted. Adora disappeared, and Kaleb found himself looking up at the overcast night sky. Wind hissed in his ears, ending abruptly with a bone-jarring thud against the pavement that reverberated in his bones. They were on him instantly, attacking in relentless unison, pummeling, kicking and clawing.

Kaleb struggled to stave off the blows and stand at the same time, managing to jump up, set his stance, and take a savage blow from Renato. His jaw fractured and at least one tooth popped loose, but he weathered it, surprising the vampire yet again.

The creature inside of Kaleb rose up, fury devouring fear, and his self-control withered. He grabbed at Renato.

The vampire caught his hands, fingers entwining, and a contest of domination began. It might have been an honest battle, as good a way to die as any, if not for Adora circling.

Renato's strength was incredible, his age staggering. What had once been a mere tingle behind Kaleb's eyes turned to an icy blaze. He couldn't say how, but he knew the vampire was at least a thousand years old.

A flicker within the blaze. Adora was at his back, ready to pounce. Kaleb pivoted and called on every ounce of muscle he had, crushing Renato's hands and forcing him to his knees. The vampire stared up, confused. Kaleb rammed a knee into his face, taking guilty pleasure in the sensations of bones and teeth breaking.

They had made him do this—left him no choice. Kaleb gripped Renato's arm and spun, flinging the vampire away. He'd hoped for a brick wall, a grated window. No such luck. A door buckled with a crunch and the spray of dust and splinters, and the vampire was gone.

He should have taken a moment to aim, but...Adora.

The vampiress lunged at Kaleb's back. He'd felt her move in some unknown part of his brain, and without even turning he reached out and caught her by the throat. She spit and snarled like a feral cat, clawing his hands and arms, gnashing her teeth in desperation to get free. When he turned to her she tried to scream, and he squeezed the noise away. With the ancient down the dread had eased and his body screamed for nourishment.

Unable to resist, he bit down, through her leather coat and into the soft, smooth flesh beneath. He lost himself in the gluttony of a fresh, if cold, meal. The blood was intoxicating. Every molecule of his being sang at the unexpected vibrancy of her stolen life force. It was different than human or animal, missing so many of the vital elements he needed but offering something he had never even known existed in return. He ripped chunks of flesh free and swallowed them whole.

The dreamlike high shattered. Adora slipped from his arms, her shrill screams drowning out the sirens. A chunk of lumber slick with blood and scraps of meat pierced the tattered remains of his shirt. He tried to reach for it and couldn't, paralyzed by a wretched ache unlike anything he'd ever known before.

A titanic force slammed into him with a horrendous clang that rattled his brain as efficiently as the bullet had. For the span of a human breath he was flying, and then he landed, skidding across the pavement, leaving a trail of blood and skin. The clang echoed through the night, melting into a ringing, and then a wail. The sirens. So close now.

Battered and broken, he barely managed to turn his head to watch Renato limp to Adora and gently drape her over his shoulder. The ancient tensed, looked at Kaleb as if considering, and rose into the air. His dark figure melted into the cloudy gray sky.

## Chapter 9

**R**ENATO RACED TOWARD the mansion, broken fingers aching with the effort of clinging to Adora. “Be still,” he soothed. She whimpered and gave one last feeble attempt to writhe free before passing out. Renato dug his fingernails in. He had to hold on, stay conscious. Just a few more minutes.

His vision blurred. By the time it began to clear the ground was rushing to meet him. Willpower alone kept Adora in his grasp. At her age she should have begun to heal already, but the wound was bleeding freely and her flesh decaying with every passing moment. He seethed with rage. Michael was lost, too young to survive such a grievous wound. They were his wards, and he alone had failed them.

Farmhouses and fields below wavered and dimmed. A skewed vision of the mansion came into sight, growing nearer far too slowly. But it was too late. Consciousness came and went.

### § § §

Cristo's heart skipped a few beats. Adora hit the ground with a sickening thump a few seconds ahead of Renato. Neither moved to get up.

Something must have gone horribly wrong for them to come back like this. And it wasn't like he didn't notice Michael's absence. Cristo leapt from the front steps of the vamp's old country mansion, hitting the grass at a sprint, shouting over his shoulder. “Get help!”

For once Adora was silent. A chunk of flesh was gone from her shoulder. The wound oozed yellow and brown, the smell enough to make Cristo gag. It didn't make sense. Vamps could take worse damage and still be standing.

A clamor of shouting and pounding feet from inside the mansion interrupted the peace of the countryside. Claudia and Luther appeared as silently as ghosts.

“See to Renato!” Claudia snapped.

Luther, a bald, wildly bearded brute born in the times when Romans ruled Germania, knelt over Renato and spoke with every bit of accent he must have had when he learned English hundreds of years ago. “He will survive.”

Claudia eyed Adora's pustulent shoulder.

“What's wrong with her? Her shoulder smells rotten. I thought you guys couldn't get sick like that.” Cristo said.

Claudia drew a one-handed axe from a strap around her waist and scanned

the fields surrounding the mansion. Nothing was out there. Only grass, waist-high, gold as wheat, stretching as far as the eye could see. "Take her to Cora."

Cristo moved as fast as he could with a dying vamp cradled in his arms, snapping orders at the other guards. "Stay on the door, and someone call Lucas."

"What the hell are we watching for?" Frank shouted at Cristo's back. Cristo ignored him.

"Faster!" Claudia snapped. She disappeared down the hallway.

Cristo muttered under his breath and broke into a light sweat. Adora was light, hardly noticeable, but Claudia was taking him right into the damned den. From there it was only a stone's throw to the dungeons—Gothic, nightmare-inducing pits of despair. Even up top you could get a whiff of the place sometimes, a stomach-churning nose full of damp, old blood, and whatever the hell it was they kept down there.

He turned a corner just in time to see Claudia vanishing behind a large and ornate gateway to hell. Cristo breathed deep, calming his pounding heart. They wouldn't do anything to him. They couldn't risk a war with Lucas.

The den was bigger than he'd expected and lavishly decorated. Expensive, full of art, murals, tapestries, a couple of paintings, but the lighting was shit—all old-school oil lamps and wall braziers. Fucking vamps.

Claudia stood before a gnarled black throne, talking to Emigdio. Cristo barely withheld a shudder. Emigdio was the worst of them, which was kind of funny. He was so small, scrawny even, but he packed a lot of menace in his slender frame.

Cristo waited for them to finish talking, wanting nothing more than to drop Adora and get the hell out. Most of his shirt was soaked through with her blood and dribbles of pus. They waved him over, and he barely withheld a bodily shudder.

He set Adora on the floor and stepped aside for Cora, the only bloodsucker that didn't make his skin crawl. The oldest of the bunch, she was the most human, or least monstrous depending on how you wanted to look at it. Maybe that was how she'd survived so long with such a lack of power. The elder vamp knelt at Adora's side. Cristo took a hesitant step back, and then another. As little as Cora unsettled him, the others reveled in the discomfort they caused, and it was one of them who turned their attention to Cristo.

The Lord of Florida was calm, uncaring almost. "Call for Vasco and Amado." Grateful for a reason to leave, Cristo nodded and ran.

§ § §

"What happened?" Emigdio asked.

Renato startled back from the threshold of unconsciousness, briefly entertaining the mad thought to lie. He could come up with an excuse, but he could



not and would not lie to Emigdio. "Michael is dead," he said flatly, voice muffled by a broken nose. "The fault is my own. I was reckless."

"Where is his body?"

Renato looked away in shame. "I left him," he whispered.

Samuel stiffened. His gray eyes fell on Renato. He was an enforcer, a true warrior. They were as different as vampyr could be, but his stare held no malice or no judgment. "The trespasser?"

Renato started to speak and stopped, his throat aching. Part of it was remorse, but some of it was broken bones and bruised flesh. "Slain," he finally said. Once upon a time he would have taken pride in that claim, but those years were long gone.

Samuel nodded almost imperceptibly, approvingly, and slipped from the room.

Emigdio went to Adora and dropped to one knee. Blood pooled on the carpet, tainted by the growing infection. Emigdio prodded the wound and wiped his fingers on the carpet, murmuring to no one in particular. "What has happened to our beautiful Adora?"

Cora waved and Rain appeared with a towel and basin of water. The girl hovered at the healer's back, watching and learning as any good apprentice should.

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like this." Cora said.

Emigdio raised his eyebrows. "Never?"

Cora shook her head and swept her gray hair back. She was ancient, even amongst the ageless. If she didn't know...

Cora dipped a towel into the basin and set to wiping the shoulder clean. "This won't heal on its own."

"It's in her blood," Rain said softly. Dark streaks reached across Adora's skin, an etching of lighting rippling through a cloud. Already the flesh had blackened around the bite. No matter how quickly Cora wiped, the pus grew back just as fast.

"She's dying," Cora said. She drew back her sleeve. Thousands of years had taught her the virtue of good aim. She bit into her veins. Two pristine crimson drops welled on the twin punctures, quickly turning into tiny rivulets that ran down her wrist and dripped onto Adora's shoulder. The blood hissed, popping and spitting as it struck the yellow slime. Small puffs of smoke rose in wisps. Adora moaned and squirmed.

Worry creased the crow's feet around Cora's eyes. She watched helplessly as the pinpricks closed up and the blood stopped flowing. Adora fell still on the floor, the gains the blood had made receding before the infection. "I don't know what this is. If I had time, maybe, but—" Cora bit down again, rending her veins wide. Blood came in a spurt, splashing Adora's wound.

Adora awoke with a scream, struggling to gain her feet, railing against Rain and Claudia as they held her down. The wound sizzled and quivered. Acrid smoke permeated the room. But the rot reversed. The dark streaks withdrew.

When the blood slowed to a trickle, Cora rent her arm again as the strain took its toll. The ancient turned gaunt, weak, dark bags growing beneath her sunken eyes. She wavered and collapsed.

Renato ignored his own pain and tried to get up to catch Cora, but Emigdio beat him to it and held her in his arms. Claudia and Rain stepped away from Adora. She'd passed out again. The apprentice healer was nearly overwhelmed by panic. Rain looked from one clan member to another in search of guidance. When none was given, she whispered to herself, nodded assent, and fled from the room intent on some task only she knew of.

Renato waited, every second excruciating. He couldn't lose Adora, too. His failure was already too bitter.

Cora stirred. "Is she healing?"

Emigdio shook his head. "The rot returns."

Cora opened her eyes, beseeching Emigdio. "I'm not strong enough."

Claudia and Luther shared a disconcerted look. If Cora was unable then neither of them would suffice. Cora had no true power, a rare enough affliction, but she was old, ancient, and her blood had the power of time even if she hadn't.

"How far away is Vasco?" Claudia asked.

"Still in New York," Emigdio answered. "And Amado is in Tampa."

Luther gazed at Adora, his harsh barbarian features softened by compassion. "Amado can be back in a few hours."

"Not soon enough," Emigdio said. "Then it falls to me."

Renato cringed. He shared a look with Cora, Claudia, and Luther. Something inside of him almost broke when they nodded in silent assent. Emigdio was the most powerful amongst them, but the gift of blood diminished some vampyr. It was one of the few reasons Emigdio had never made any children. Endangering his power was to risk their lives. But if they would not take care of each other... they would be no better than the clans they had fled from. It was why they had gathered to Emigdio and each other. It was more than simple protection. It was a family. A home.

Emigdio bit into his wrist and lowered it to Adora's shoulder. Luther pinned the vampyress with one large hand and used the other to wipe away the thickening layer of pus.

Adora awoke, whimpering as rich, powerful blood splattered the wound and sent streams of smoke into the air. Blood boiled within the crater, eating the infection. Emigdio ripped open his other wrist and lowered it to Adora's mouth. She resisted at first, but once the blood touched her lips she was lost in the blood lust.

In less than a minute he had done what Cora could not. The wound was still raw and open, but the infection and the dark streaks tainting her flesh were gone.

Rain stepped back into the room, halting as she saw Emigdio on his knees, wrists

torn and bloody. She rushed to Cora, giving her a bottle of blood, and not so much handed another to Renato as tossed it to him before bolting from the room again.

Emigdio pried his wrist free and walked doggedly back to his throne. Like any vampyr it had taken something out of him to bleed so much, and still his wrist had healed by the time he sagged into his chair. His hand mindlessly wandered to his neck and plucked at a chain, drawing it up from his shirt until a pendant popped out. It shone like obsidian, a twisted little being warped by insanity and screaming soundlessly for eternity.

The Lord of Florida looked to Renato. "Tell me everything," he said.



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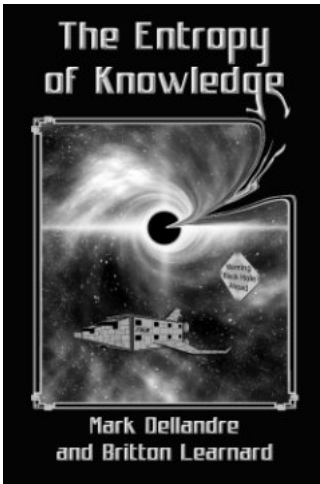
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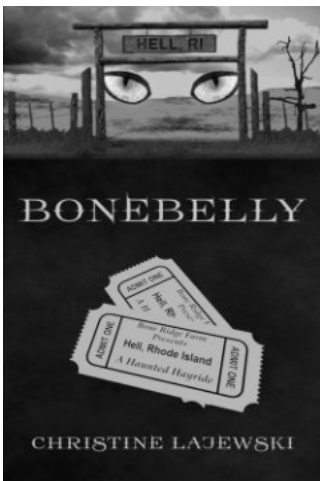


**The Entropy of Knowledge**

*Mark Dellandre and Britton Learnard*

We've all had moments when we felt like we were surrounded by idiots... Babylon Briggs feels that pain every day because his town, his planet, even his galaxy, is jam-packed with the most thick-headed simpletons imaginable. So when his home world is invaded by a group of equally clueless conquerors, it's up to Babylon to save the day. The only question is:

Is he smart enough?



**Bonebelly**

*Christine Lajewski*

A sinner transformed into a hideous creature, with an unfortunate craving for human flesh, condemned to a private hell in a wooded corner of Rhode Island; An outdoor haunted attraction—the creature's only respite from his suffering; Two young aspiring graphic novelists trying to record it all. Will the sinner find redemption by stopping the evil he chose to ignore so long ago...

*And something inside of Kaleb broke. The stress of the night, of his life, welled up, washing away his sanity. There had been too many lifetimes spent alone, of being a walking nightmare and trying to deny it for every single moment of his cursed existence. Tonight, the illusion had been dispelled, and the realizations left him hollow. Tonight, he had met monsters, real ones, and even they recoiled at the sight of him.*

A monster hides in plain sight, feeding off of humanity while yearning to return to it. He was to have been an immortal undead, to have power and strength like he'd never known in mortal life. The Vampyrs lied. They took his life, but when- he awoke he was not a Vampyr. He was something else, a creature so foul they abandoned him to die alone in a crypt deep underground. Kaleb survived by skulking in the shadows and preying on the dregs of society.

Until now. In one moment of carelessness, a young woman witnesses Kaleb's atrocities. Unable to kill her, Kaleb takes the girl hostage, and that's when his life begins to crumble around him. When the local ruling Vampyr clan realizes what is living in their midst, they come in force to destroy Kaleb and wipe every last trace of his existence from the face of the earth.

*About the Author:* J.C. Campbell was born and raised in Saskatchewan where he gained an appreciation for a good book during the long cold winters. What started with the likes of The Cookie Monster and the Cookie Tree, The Bobbsey Twins, and Superfudge quickly blossomed into full blown love of great novels such as The Cay, Lord of the Flies, The Talisman, The Princess Bride, and countless others.

What started as a self-challenge to actually sit down and write a novel has grown into a passion for telling stories, and there is truly little J.C. enjoys more than getting started on a new novel and going wherever the words will take him. J.C. is a Social Worker when he isn't writing, and enjoys fishing, reading, going to the movies, and traveling.



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