

Chapter One

Jay woke in terror. Agony and terrible need wrapped around his stomach like a vise. A piercing ache throbbed through his upper jaw, sharp points brushing his lower lip. He stumbled to his feet, breathing in painful gasps.

Sounds magnified with terrible clarity: the high-pitched whine of electronics, roaring car engines, voices, footsteps, shuffling, rustling, all of it far too loud. The stench of decay and animal musk mingled with the reek of fuel, exhaust, old food, and stale beer. They swirled and tangled, a barrage of odors that assaulted his senses. Ice etched his veins and consumed his mind, forcing him to action. He had to move.

Jay's thoughts spun, the sensory overload disorienting him further. His steps were uncertain. He squinted against the painful points of light from nearby street lamps. There was something he shouldn't be doing. It was wrong. It was impossible to focus. Despair wavered through him, behind the overwhelming compulsion. *Make it stop. Oh, God, please, make it stop.*

The sound of a foot dragged across pavement captured his attention. A scent of alcohol and sweat, stale urine and vomit; wretched odors, but, *oh, yes*, something else. Something that drew him. He had to move, to get closer, to... Jay blinked his burning, watering eyes against the glare. A man sat against the rough brick wall in the debris of the filthy alley, his clothes ragged and stained, *homeless*. A vague word; an identification. *A person. Oh, no. Oh, yes...* he had to...

Jay staggered toward the old man, an uncontrollable growl of frustration and need rising unbidden from his throat.

Tires screeched, too close, too sudden. Startled, Jay spun around to face the threat, hissing and snarling instinctively. A black passenger van rocked to a halt beside him. The side door slid open, too loud; a rumble of protesting metal assaulted his ears, but inside... heat... he needed it. Jay lunged for the open door. Hands reached for him; he was lifted, then other hands were on him, shoving him down against rough carpeting. The smells of plastic and upholstery stung his nostrils, and close human warmth tormented him. Metal screeched; a loud bang produced sudden darkness, relieving his aching eyes.

Jay struggled against the steely arms pinning him, fighting their grip in an uncontrollable panic. Voices he couldn't understand assaulted his ears. A whine of agony emerged from his throat. He had to get free!

Heat penetrated from a warm, soothing touch on his shoulder. He needed to turn to it, to grasp it, to take it into himself, to erase the pain, the cold ache... then he had it. Jay's arms wrapped around the source of heat, the softness. More voices drifted by, words beyond his grasp, his mouth touched... he had to press his mouth to her throat, to taste her skin; sweet, so warm, throbbing. His teeth sank in reflexively, deeply.

Warm liquid, a bright, exquisite, salt-iron tang, hit the back of his tongue. He needed to get closer, somehow; he didn't know how, but it happened. Jay found himself inside her, rushing in desperation, searching for her. He had to fill her with himself, had to find all of her. Her thoughts stretched beneath him, embraced his consciousness, reached back to embrace him. He felt the peace, welcome, sympathy and desire. She wanted him to be with her. He felt it, felt all of her, and they were so together; no space existed between them. He swallowed without volition.

Ambrosia spilled down his throat, erasing pain. A powerful surge of pleasure ran through him. Jay felt it echoing through her, consuming them both. The steel bands constricting his stomach eased, as he swallowed again and again. It seemed that each time, some hidden belt of pain or tension was released,

in a flood of overwhelming, irresistible relief.

Jay felt her, too, sharing with him; electrical waves of pleasure that coursed through them both, radiating from his touch, from her throat. Her thoughts, too, were reassuring, gentle, passionate. *Yes, take it, all you need, no more pain.* Was it her thought, or his? He wasn't sure. It was their thought now. She was bright and vibrant, a motherly, practical person with a core of strength. He knew she was-- could feel that she was.

Broken images passed through Jay's mind, sliding away before he could grasp them. Smells of cooking and the sound of laughter one moment, gunfire in the darkness of a city street the next. Riding a horse fast along a trail. Whipping winds and storm sirens over a beach. Tumbling memories of places he'd never been, people he'd never met, experiences he'd never had. Her thoughts touched his shattered life with a whisper of sorrow, but the pleasure rose so high it eclipsed everything. It banished all other emotion, leaving no room to analyze what they shared.

So good, God, it's so good.

A gentle slope down, and he stopped drinking. He felt no need to continue, but just to relax now, to let go, to slip away. Jay's tongue touched her throat with a final caress, then he was alone, and could think again.

Clarity. He was in a van. It was still, but lurched into motion as he looked around. Clean upholstery in midnight blue surrounded him, and a stifling new car smell permeated the air. The woman before him; her name was Chara... Charlene. Her short, curly red hair sat atop a round face, smile lines framed her hazel eyes. Her body was compact and sturdy with ample breasts, dressed in dark jeans and a black knit shirt... and he knew her. Somehow he knew her name. Jay knew she was feeling sympathy, caring, and concern. His own confusion reflected back to him, muted, like an echo. Jay stared at her in wonder. He was on his knees, his arms still around her. He let them fall as she moved back up onto the wide bench seat.

He took a breath. There were others in the van, too. The driver: a male with short, light brown hair. In the passenger seat, a shock of dyed purple hair. Beside Chara sat a young black woman with long wavy hair, her face tense. A middle-aged athletic-looking man sat on the other end of the bench seat, his eyes closed. A young man with dyed black hair and murky gray eyes was reaching over the seat from the back to clutch the man's arm. The black-haired man let go, sitting back. Jay moved away to sit on the floor of the van, studying them, trying to remember and wrap his mind around what he had just experienced. He was feeling concern that, somehow, wasn't his.

Memories flooded back to him on a wave of terror. Chara's eyes widened at the powerful surge of emotions, which he felt echoing through her. A flare of alarm erupted from the others, imposing itself on his senses. Jay gasped, shaking his head violently.

"No! No! I'm not... I can't! I won't be that! I won't be like that!" Jay couldn't control the hysteria that gripped him. The word pounded in his mind like an evil jackhammer. *Vampire. You're a vampire; you're just like him now, you drank her blood. You did it; you drank her blood, and you liked it, and now you're like him.*

He wanted to flee, glancing wildly toward the door. Chara slid from the seat, putting her arms around him as if to restrain him. Jay sensed that she could never stop him, but it felt good, and it was soothing. He stopped, and let her hold him. Where could he go?

"Easy," Chara murmured. "Easy, calm down, you're safe. Easy... no one can hurt you now, and you didn't hurt anyone. Look... I'm fine. I'm not hurt at all. It didn't hurt. Just calm down."

Jay whimpered, wanting to protest, but let her soothe him. His eyes filled with tears. He was lost; his soul felt hollow and numb, and he began sobbing uncontrollably. There was nothing more to the world than terrible despair, the horror of what he had done. Relief and residual pleasure hummed inside him in terrible contrast to his emotions. Chara held him, her hand smoothed his back. Sympathy. she was all sympathy, comfort and calm. When his sobs faded, exhaustion claimed him, and he fell asleep in her arms.

Chapter Two

Cheerful children in straw hats danced along the wall, with fishing poles and bait buckets in hand. Puppies bounded playfully behind them in a procession of nostalgic earth tones. Jay eyed the wallpaper reproachfully, the absurdity of it a bit more than he felt ready to handle.

He lay on a comfortable double bed with a patchwork-patterned comforter in brown, tan and beige. A homey, old-fashioned wooden nightstand beside the bed supported an iron goose-necked lamp. A small table in the far corner with a brown cloth cover held a vase containing an arrangement of dried flowers, while a tall, antique dresser with brass pulls stood against the wall across from the foot of the bed. Faded earth-tone rag rugs softened the hardwood floor.

He rolled over and saw, through a brown ruffle-dressed window, bright, terribly bright points of light in the dark purple sky. Jay stared in confusion until the realization hit him; they were stars. It was night. They were so bright; he could see everything so clearly! Jay jerked a glance back at the lamp. It was off.

He took a careful deep breath, and sat up. He could hear voices from somewhere in the house. The door was closed. With a surge of trepidation, Jay catapulted off the bed, grabbing the knob. It turned easily, and he released it without pulling the door open. He sighed, feeling shaky, leaning against the wall, his eyes tracking back to the window.

Great thinking, Jay, he chided himself. *Big old window there, no bars, and you're worried they locked the door on you. And hey, look, it's nighttime, and you just woke up. Of course you did. You're a vampire. What more did you think they were going to do to you now, anyhow?* He paced back to the bed, sitting down heavily, burying his face in his hands.

A woman's voice, one he didn't recognize, murmured from somewhere downstairs, "Sounds like our guest is awake."

"I'd better go get him, then." The more familiar gentle Southern drawl was Chara. "He might never come out."

"Or he'll take off out the window," suggested a male.

"You going to handle the introductions?" A second male asked.

"I expect so," Chara answered. "I'll see how he is. If he's ready for it. He might be less nervous knowing who we all are, at least."

Moments later, footsteps sounded on a staircase, approaching his room. With wonder, he realized he could hear the person's breathing, and even their heartbeat. The doorknob turned, and Chara walked in, flipping the light switch.

"GAH!" Jay buried his face in his hands, blinded.

"Sorry," she chuckled, and he felt apology from her, somehow. "Didn't think about that. How are you feeling? Once your retinas recover, that is." He heard Chara move into the room, and squinted at her, rubbing his eyes. She bustled over to the window, straightening the curtains absently. She wore a pair of faded jeans and a simple light blue pullover blouse.

"I... I'm not really sure, actually." Jay blinked rapidly as his eyes adjusted. "How should I be feeling? How..." He choked on the words, voice lowering to a near-whisper, "...are vampires supposed to feel?"

Chara turned back to him with a frown, tilting her head to one side, eying him with sympathy.

Jay felt sympathy. *Am I sensing her feelings?* He analyzed the sensation. He could tell that they weren't his own emotions; she seemed, somehow, to be surrounded by a 'texture,' an energy, that was uniquely Chara, some indescribable property that identified her as clearly as her face or her voice, and carried her emotions to him. The tone in his voice, he realized with a touch of self-pity and anger, had been a whine. He was still too frightened to care much. Jay's thoughts flinched away every time he

tried to think about the future and what might be coming next for him. He met her gaze with a hint of challenge.

Chara studied him for a moment. "Come on, then," she said, with a decisive nod. "I'm guessing that vampires," Chara smiled gently, "would feel a lot better after a shower and some clean clothes. Let's get you some things. I expect someone has something that'll fit you. What size are you?" She grabbed his hand, pulling Jay to his feet, and with the irresistibility of a locomotive, dragged him out of the room, down the hall.

The large bathroom had a private dressing room foyer with an enormous luxury shower stall tiled in light gray ceramic in the far left corner. A square Jacuzzi bathtub dominated the right corner, and broad, frosted windows occupied two walls. Potted plants marched up the tiled stair and around the tub, with several more on stands, lining the windows. On the left wall, twin sinks on a wide dark gray granite counter were reflected in a tall, broad mirror, which extended its length. The floor was warm beneath his feet, covered in smooth, patterned gray travertine tile.

"I'll be back with some clothes, right quick," Chara assured him. Jay's gaze was captured by the mirror, and she left him standing before it, as he tried to figure out why he could see himself.

Jay stared morosely into his reflection, listening to her movements in the other room. Light blond hair, dirty and tangled, fell to his shoulders. Haunted clear blue eyes stared back from fine-boned features. He didn't look any different. *No pointed ears, no glowing eyes, no...* He swallowed heavily, baring his teeth. *No fangs.* He blinked in confusion. *How...?*

Leaning forward over the counter, Jay peered more closely. *Okay, they do look different.* His canines were so sharp, and thinner. They didn't look the same as they had before, but they weren't any longer than his other teeth.

Jay leaned back again in puzzlement, running his tongue gingerly over the points, surprised by the pinprick keenness. His probing tongue found a break in the smoothness behind a canine... the back of the tooth was ridged somehow, a bit past the point. No, he realized, there was a deep groove there. The ridges weren't raised, they were just where he felt the edges of the groove beginning. He clenched his jaw, eyes squeezed shut as he realized what use those grooves would have...

He heard Chara return, as he stood before the mirror, eyes closed. She walked over to him, placing her hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong, hon?" Chara's voice was low and calming.

Jay opened his eyes, glancing at her, then staring at the floor. "Eh, I was just..." He blushed. "I don't understand. I thought I remembered..." he gestured at his mouth.

Chara studied him for a moment, then realization rolled through her to him. "Ah. Trying to check out your fangs?" She smiled and winked. Jay flushed harder, in confusion. *How can she be so casual?*

Her gentle humor and kindness were soothing. Jay sensed no cruelty at all in her words. Wanting to sink through the floor, he couldn't bring himself to answer.

"They retract, hon," Chara said. "You can extend them if you try. Just takes some practice, as I understand it. Don't scare yourself, though." Jay couldn't bring himself to look up at her.

"Well, in any case, I think I've found some clothes that will fit you for now. Why don't you get cleaned up? Take your time. You'll feel better, I guarantee it." She smiled at him again, slipping briskly out of the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

Jay glanced at the mirror unhappily, stared into space for a moment, then decided that the shower looked pretty good. *Yeah, I feel like the bottom of a trash dumpster.* He stripped out of his clothes, trying not to look at the broad, brown patches and spatters staining his shirt and jeans. He wadded them up into a tight ball, leaving them on the sink counter, unsure of where else to put them.

The broad, rainfall style copper shower head was a luxury he hadn't experienced before, and the soap and shampoo were vanilla-scented. He used a lot, trying to get clean. Jay wondered if he was trying to wash away everything that had happened, and not just a few layers of grime, but it felt better. He didn't figure Chara would really mind if he washed his hair five times.

The light gray towels that hung beside the shower were thick and soft. He found black jeans and a

T-shirt on a chair in the dressing foyer. They smelled a bit strange to him, but Jay put them on. A minute or so after he had finished dressing, a knock came at the door. He opened it to admit Chara. She studied him for a moment.

“Come on, hon,” she moved into the room, taking Jay's arm and sitting him down in a padded beige vanity chair, retrieving a black plastic bristle brush and comb from a nearby maple wood cabinet. Chara set about taming his hair with deliberation.

“Uh,” Jay flinched. “I can do that.”

Chara deftly avoided his grab for the brush. “Nope, I've got it. You just sit tight. Consider this my hobby and humor me for now.”

“Vampire-grooming is your hobby?” Jay asked sardonically.

She gave a hearty laugh, and Jay caught a wave of approval. “I spent a year working as a hairdresser during college.” She expertly wielded the comb to release a stubborn tangle. “Gotta have cash for pizza and beer.” Chara paused. “You know, I don't even know your name? I think you picked up mine, but I don't know what to call you.” She smiled.

“Jay. Jayson Wallace.” He opened his mouth as if to say more, then closed it again. *Why did you tell her your last name? Because you trust her. But why? How do you even know her name?*

“All right, Jay.” Chara put a few finishing touches on his hair, which was already half dry, and studied him critically. “You'll do.”

Jay caught a hint of mild attraction from her and blinked in surprise, blushing again.

“You haven't asked many questions, hon,” Chara pointed out softly. “No one here means you any harm. If you want, why don't you come downstairs now and meet the other folks. I know you've heard them talking, and they all know you're here. You don't have anything to fear from us.”

Jay stilled, eyes focused on the cloudy patterns in the square tiles on the floor.

Chara sighed. “I'm not going to make you do it, hon. If you don't feel you're ready to face a room full of people, I can respect that.” She hesitated. “I don't know how much you really understand about all of this. It must be quite frightening for you. I'm willing to talk to you about anything you want. Just ask, and I'll do my best to explain it all to you.”

Jay stirred, the motion jerky and agitated. His eyes widened in distress. “I just...” he closed his eyes. “I do want to know,” he continued. “I know what I saw and I can't... can't live with that.” He sighed. “This isn't... it's not what I was... expecting.” He hesitated. “I'm not sure I can deal with this.”

Chara put a hand on his shoulder again. “Come on, there's a sitting room across the hall. I'll tell you what I can, and we'll see what we might want to do after that.” She walked to the door, turning back to watch him until he stood self-consciously, and followed her.

An overstuffed taupe sofa dominated the large sitting room. Beige high-pile carpet contrasted with pleasant sky-blue-and-white rag painted walls. White lace curtains framed the large bench window, which contained a taupe corduroy cushion in the same shade as the couch. A stereo system in a metal rack stood against the wall, with potted ferns softening the severity of the electronics. Chara perched on the window seat, allowing Jay to find his comfort zone on the couch.

She studied him for a moment. “Well,” she said. “I guess I'll start with the 'important stuff'. Maybe you should start with what you know, and I can fill you in on the rest.”

Jay stared at the small fine leaves of a fern. “I know I'm a vampire now.” *A killer. A monster...* “I don't know much else,” he finished in a whisper.

Chara sighed. “Then you probably want to know exactly what's happened to you, how it was done, and what it's going to mean for you. Don't let me run over you if there's something you really need to know.” She clasped her hands in front of her, as though gathering her thoughts between them.

“It's true. You're a vampire now. The person who did this to you is a criminal. He doesn't do the things he does because he's a vampire; he does them because he's a sick, twisted son of a bitch who likes to hurt people. You're not like him, and you never will be. You don't have to be a killer, and you're not evil.”

Jay was trembling now, a welter of fear, disbelief, painful hope, and confusion boiling up in him. Chara moved to sit beside him, and he clutched at her as she put her arm around him. He buried his face in her shoulder, silent, still shaking in reaction. She held him until the tremors eased, and he began to relax again.

Jay laughed humorlessly, a breathy sound. "And I'm sitting here, surprised that he lied to me." He buried his face in his hands.

"Ah." Chara hugged him, continuing, "We're not monsters, Jay."

He listened, unable to bring himself to ask more than a few questions, while she explained the rest to him, then retreated to the bathroom to wash the tears from his face. Chara wanted him to meet the others. *I guess I owe them a lot, and it would be rude not to at least say thank you.* He didn't want company, didn't want the stress of meeting new people, but he also didn't want to appear ungrateful.

Especially not to Chara. Chara: a donor. Not a normal person, but one who carried the same virus responsible for making him what he was. A person who would eventually become a vampire herself. *A person who let me drink her blood; who thinks there's nothing wrong with that.* Jay shuddered, trying to meet his own eyes in the mirror again.

The things she had revealed to him were hard to grasp. He could never have his old life back. *In eight days I'll have to do it again, to... feed, again.* Jay closed his eyes, as though he could shut out the thought by switching off his senses. It didn't help. He took a deep breath to steel himself, hesitantly opening the door again.

"Are you ready to meet the others?" Chara asked, radiating sympathy.

"I guess so," Jay managed, stepping into the hallway.

"Ah, I should tell you who we are, too. It wasn't an accident we happened to be there when we were. We were tracking the vampire that we're pretty sure did this to you. We're, well, vampire cops, I guess you'd say." She laughed. "Sounds like a TV show. We're a Law Enforcement Circle." She quirked her lips. "We named ourselves The Mavericks. Our job, sanctioned by the Council of Justice, is to track down and catch vampire criminals. Human law enforcement wouldn't stand a chance, and we don't want them trying. We're not ready for the world to know about us here, just yet. We police our own. We're all volunteers." Chara paused again. "They're a competent group of people, down there. I feel good working with them, and they're my friends. Don't expect typical cops, though. Everyone's got their own reasons for doing this."

Jay stared at her, his jaw tightening as sudden determination and anger rose in him. "So, how do you join?"

"Beg your pardon?" Chara asked with some confusion.

"How do you join a Law Enforcement Circle, or whatever?" Jay's voice was strained.

"We're volunteers, hon. But..."

"I want to join, then," he stated implacably.

She blinked at him. "Jay..."

"I want to get him." His voice was rising with tension and beginning to break. "I want to get the son of a bitch that did this to me. I want to see him fucking *dead*." Jay was shaking, tears blurring his vision.

Chara folded him into a hug, her emotional field full of renewed sympathy and sadness. He trembled, remaining tense, but did not pull away.

"All right, hon. Look here, you're pretty damned young, but there *is* something you can do. Something that'll help us and maybe get you what you want. You have every right to that. It's going to be damned hard for you. It's not going to be nearly as easy as blowing the bastard's head off. But, you just might be able to get it fixed so *we* can. Legally. Right now, we're supposed to take him alive. I don't like that, but it's our law. We know this asshole ain't doing this out of ignorance, but we can't prove it." Chara clutched him tighter. "You can, if you have the courage."

"Whatever it takes," Jay insisted. "I'll do it. I'll do it." *But how?*

Chara pulled away, patting him on the back. “Well, hon. I'll hold you to that. You're going to need to wait about a week, though. Your body's still stabilizing, and for what you'll have to do, you need to be in top shape. Are you ready to come downstairs now?”

Jay closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and releasing it in a long sigh. He was very still. Finally, he nodded. “Yeah. Okay, I'll meet them. I guess I owe them a 'thanks,' anyhow.”

“Naw, hon, you don't need to thank anyone. It's our job, and we're damned glad we were there to do it.” Chara ushered Jay toward the stairs, following as he made his way slowly down.

The rest of the Mavericks were trying to appear engaged in various activities. Chara headed toward the kitchen, leaving Jay to stand awkwardly at the base of the stairs.

The room was huge, with a fireplace set in the wall across from where he stood. It was surrounded by comfortable sofas, which framed a heavy coffee table. Additional chairs were arranged in corners, and a television set in the far right corner stood before another couch, with two overstuffed chairs augmenting the seating. Two small tables, each with two chairs, were arranged to the left. The front door was on the wall to the far right, and to the left, the room led into the kitchen. A hallway led deeper into the house from the left of the staircase, and another continued on between the living room and kitchen.

A young, pretty black woman in a red blouse, with long, wavy hair loose around her shoulders, looked around at the others, rolled her eyes, and approached him, holding out her hand. “Lara Smith. Good to see you looking well.” Jay looked down at her uncertainly, recognizing her voice from the conversation he had overheard earlier.

“Um, Jay... Jayson,” he replied ducking his head, returning the handshake automatically. He remembered her from the van. Lara seemed strange to him, somehow. The feel of her hand, or something less definable, was not so comfortable as Chara's.

Lara kept hold of his hand. “Let me introduce you to the others.”

Jay also recognized the middle-aged man with silvering temples. The older man had been next to Lara, closest to the door of the van. He was now seated at the small table nearest the stairway, in front of a chessboard, and wore a practical dark tweed suit. The man looked up, nodding politely as Lara approached. *He even looks like a cop.*

“Russell Norton, there. He means to beat me at chess one of these days.” Lara smiled at Russ, reaching over to move a chess piece. “Checkmate.”

Russ's jaw dropped. He began intently studying the board.

A tall, heavily built, long-faced, and imposing middle-aged man, and a mature, attractive, green-eyed blonde woman who had not been in the van, were introduced as 'Morton Almherst' and 'Millicent Greenburg.' The two appeared to be cross-referencing newspaper clippings, and were dressed in pullover shirts and jeans. They were seated at the other small table, in a couple of padded chairs.

A man with large, liquid brown eyes, and wheat colored hair and mustache, was seated in an easy chair, reading another newspaper. He was introduced as 'Nicholas Tell.' *He was driving the van*, Jay thought. Wearing a button-down gray shirt and black slacks, Nicholas also looked a lot like a typical cop. He appeared to be around thirty years old.

The purple-haired man and his companion with the black dye job occupied the couch in front of the TV, and were introduced as 'Dave Williams' and 'Tate Mitchell,' respectively. They seemed to be only a few years older than Jay. Neither looked up for more than a few seconds from their video game, in which they appeared to be engaged with whole-body motions and muttered swearing. Dave wore black jeans and a plain black t-shirt, and Tate was wearing black leather pants and a torn black band t-shirt with a faded decal. *They just look like a couple of ravers or something; they don't look like cops at all.*

Jay had the uncomfortable impression everyone was paying a lot more attention to him than they appeared to be. Lara led him over to sit on the couch across from the empty fireplace. She paused, considering him. “You'll do fine, son,” she said, returning to her seat near Russ to watch the older man try to work out what had gone wrong (for him) in the chess match.

Chara reappeared, shoving a glass of water into Jay's hand. She sat down on the couch, to his right. He eyed the glass with some uncertainty, deciding she wouldn't have given it to him if it would do him any harm. He took a sip. *She said that food would make me sick, but I guess water's okay.*

Mort held up an article clipping for Millie, murmuring, "I think this was one of Malachi's, but these over here probably weren't." He gestured toward another pile of clippings.

The name raised every hair on Jay's body. His stomach roiled. He clutched at the cushion on the couch, squeezing his eyes shut, fighting back the memories. Concern ran through Chara's emotional field. He opened his eyes to find her, Lara, Russ, and Dave all staring at him. A rising beeping from the television accompanied an exclamation of triumph from Tate, who took advantage of Dave's distraction.

The purple-haired man swung back and shoved his friend over, barking "DAMNIT!" Tate laughed like a loon. Ignoring the man, Dave rose and paced over to Jay. "You okay, kid?"

Jay glanced up into the faded blue eyes to find surprising sympathy there. He felt Dave's genuine concern. His hands tightened into fists. "Yeah, I'm okay. I think I'm just... kind of tired. I'd like to get a bit more rest if you don't mind," he said diffidently, feeling tense. His emotions were boiling up under a landslide of remembered horrors. He set the glass down carefully on the side table.

Dave blinked, mild alarm threading through him. "Sure, kid, go get some rest, and don't worry about us, we don't mind." He clapped Jay on the shoulder, pacing back to his game.

Jay found Chara watching him, and felt her increasing worry. She pulled him to his feet, leading him back up the stairs to the small room he had awakened in earlier. "Get some rest, hon. Tomorrow's another day, and maybe we can see about getting you some clothes and things then," she said, closing the door behind her.

Flopping down on the freshly made bed, Jay noted absently that the bedclothes had been changed. He stared out the window at the too-bright stars. Memories rushed at him from the darkness in his mind, threatening to swallow him alive. He pulled the pillows over his head, curled into a tight ball, and sobbed.

Chapter Three

Jay startled awake the next night as something cold and wet brushed his nose. The confusion of sleep cleared, revealing piercing greenish eyes set in a broad, hairy face topped by two raised, pointed ears. A long, fur-covered muzzle was just inches from his nose. The muzzle parted.

“Ooorrrlllddoooaallgrrrrr,” the hairy monster growled.

“AAAAAYYYYAAAGGGHHHH!!!” Jay shrieked, trying to climb the wall behind him. A long gray-furred tail exited the room in a blur and the sound of a four-footed gallop down the staircase pinpointed the creature's departure route. Jay slipped from his perch atop the headboard and fell back to the bed shaking in reaction, willing his heart to slow to a rate less likely to induce immediate cardiac arrest.

A sour-toned voice from downstairs opined, “Nice going, Ryan, you probably scared the boy half to death. Laugh it up, but that was cruelly done. I should think he's been through quite enough.” Jay identified Russ' voice. An odd, growling canine whimper responded. Tate laughed maliciously.

With rising irritation, Jay slid off the bed, brushing himself off, and started out of the room to confront his early-evening assailant. He stomped down the stairs to the family room, stopping dead at the bottom. The gray canine approached him, ears flat, head low, tail tucked down and wagging fast enough to be a blur. The long muzzle was open, tongue lolling in an ingratiating smile which he remembered seeing on the face of the dog he'd had when he was a child; but this animal was clearly not a dog.

It was a wolf. An extremely large wolf.

Jay's scowl gave way to astonishment, and he held very still as the animal approached. Not so inhibited, the wolf flopped down submissively at his feet. It moaned appealingly at him, licking his ankle. He gaped at the animal, turning toward Russ, who was still standing with his arms crossed in an attitude of disapproval, glowering at the beast.

“You have a pet *wolf*?!” Jay challenged. “What the hell is this: Dracula?”

From the kitchen, Tate cackled louder. The wolf murmured again, eyeing him reproachfully, regaining its feet to walk across the room, sniffing around the base of a sofa.

“He's not a pet,” Russ snapped out, still glaring at the animal. “He's the caretaker.”

Jay closed his eyes, tilted his head down and sat heavily on the bottom stair. He ran a hand through his hair, blinking, his face a mask of weary consternation. “The what?”

“Hrrm, well, this wasn't the best way for you to get your introduction to our erstwhile allies,” Russ grumbled, shooting another glare at the creature. The older man moved across the room, sitting in a brown leather-upholstered chair.

“He's not a wolf,” Russ explained. “He's rael-shaa. These are folk our kind have known for many, many centuries. They are shapeshifters. Ryan looks like a wolf, but he is able to take on a human-seeming form as well. This is a natural ability of his species. They are not werewolves; they're a separate species of canine origin. They are also,” he added, with a pointed look at the creature, “fully sentient and allegedly capable of making rational, well-thought-out decisions.”

The wolf emitted another growling moan and rolled its eyes, flopping down by the end of the couch it had finished investigating, a portrait of canine dejection.

Jay stared at the creature in curiosity and disbelief. “He's intelligent? Like, human being intelligent?”

“Supposedly,” Russ replied in a snide tone.

The wolf snorted.

Russ sighed. “They are also telepathic. He wants me to pass on his apologies to you for frightening you, and explain that he was unaware you were completely unfamiliar with his kind and would react so

badly to his prank. He would tell you so himself, but feels that an unexpected mental intrusion would likely alarm you further.”

Jay stared at Russ for a moment, wondering if the older man was teasing him, but the man's emotions suggested he was being completely honest. He blinked at the wolf again. “Uh, that's okay, then. I... accept your apology,” Jay said to the animal with some embarrassment, feeling more than a bit lame.

The rael-shaa leaped up, gamboling over to him, tail wagging furiously. He shoved his nose into Jay's hand, full evidence of canine joy in his demeanor. Jay smiled brokenly, and without really thinking through what he was doing, began fondling the big wolf's head, stroking him and scratching behind his ears.

The rael-shaa accepted the caresses with clear enjoyment. Jay knelt down before him, running his fingers through the thick fur, impulsively hugging the beast, burying his face in its side to inhale the musky canine odor, a surge of unfocused nostalgia and regret running through him.

“I like you, Worldwalker.”

It was as if he had heard the voice, but he was sure he hadn't picked it up with his ears. It was clear, simple and honest, and nothing like his own internal 'voice.' Jay pulled back to stare at the wolf with genuine wonder, his hands still buried in its fur. “Uhh, I like you, too,” he replied. That voice had been like childhood, freedom, and sunlit meadows. It was wild and pure, holding something ancient and indomitable within it. *How could a voice carry so much?*

Jay felt his eyes filling with tears, and a sense of terrible loss welled up within him. Loss of everything he had known and things he might never know. Bitter regret and a flood of despair filled him. Helplessly, he buried his face in the animal's coat again and began to sob.

“I will be your friend, Worldwalker. Sorrow is like the rain, when the world mourns and all is muffled and dulled, and the hunting is not good. But rain brings life and cleanses and refreshes, so that in the time after, all is more vibrant, scents are clear, and sounds are sharper.”

###

A few hours later, Jay sat on the covered deck behind the house, watching the rain making lines and runnels off the roof, his hand sifting the fur on the great wolf's back.

The sliding glass door behind him grated open and Nick walked out to stand beside him. “We figured you might want to get some things. If you have a house, or apartment or something, or want to buy some new stuff...”

Jay looked up at the man, noting his distinctive feel; individual, yet held in common with some of the others. With Chara. “You aren't a vampire, either, are you?”

Nick laughed. “No, I'm not. That would be Lara, Dave, and Russell, just those three. The rest of us are donors.” He sat beside the rael-shaa.

Jay nodded. “I thought so. I can tell, somehow. I'm not really sure I can describe it, though.”

“Well, if you figure out how to describe it, the rest of us would surely be interested in hearing that,” Nick chuckled.

“I can describe it.” Ryan stated with certainty. *“It is like ***.”* The sending was an impression, an exact duplication of the donors' distinct feel, isolated somehow and tinted with Ryan's own pattern. Jay laughed, briefly.

“Good to know,” Nick said, sticking out his tongue at the wolf. Apparently he had been included in the rael-shaa's answer.

“Yeah, I would like to get some of my stuff,” Jay said. “I've got an apartment down on Fifth. I guess I should see about clearing it out. I can put everything in storage, or something.”

“We wondered if you'd want to go home, but thought maybe it wouldn't be the best...”

“No,” Jay interrupted. “I don't, really. Not yet, anyhow. I can't imagine... sitting in that place alone, and...”

Nick grunted. “Yeah, I can understand that. Well, Dave and Tate volunteered to help, too. We have a secure storage facility for your stuff, if you want to take care of it tonight. Do you want to hang onto the place, or clear out your lease?”

“It was month to month and I had it ahead. I think it's still...” his voice wavered, “ah, still paid for now, but probably not much longer.” *Has it really been only two months since I was there?* His mind shied away from the blackness filling that two-month span, and he shook his head. “I'll let it go. You think we can get everything out tonight?”

Nick nodded. “I don't think that will be a problem. There's a pickup in the garage there, and a trailer; that ought to do the trick nicely. Just give us directions and we can head out now, if you're ready.”

“Sure.” Jay stood. “But it's raining. Might be better to pick another night.”

“The rain will stop in a short time,” the rael-shaa announced.

Nick grinned. “Furry barometer. Good news, though. We set, then?”

“Looks that way,” Jay replied, with a faint smile at his canine companion, trying to shake off his reluctance.

“I will come with you as well, if you wish it?” Ryan inquired.

Jay looked down at the wolf, smiling. “Yeah, thanks, Ryan. I would like that.”

###

Clearing out the apartment was a painful ordeal. Jay sifted through bits and pieces of his former life, packing boxes and allocating some items for the trash; an old electric bill, paid months ago. A broken guitar pick. A hanging mobile made from seven free dial-up Internet service trial disks.

Jay packed his clothes, computer, CD collection, guitars, amp, and speakers. He paused over his stereo system, but remembered the rather nice one already sitting back at the house and reluctantly destined it for storage. Dave had cooed over the guitars, displaying fair knowledge of brands, and they had talked shop for a while.

At one point, Nick walked into the bedroom to find Jay sitting, where he had been for a good half hour, staring at a picture of his mother and trying desperately to decide whether or not he should call her. Ryan sat silently beside him, muzzle resting on his thigh.

They got all of it in two truckloads. Jay watched the metal roll-down door close over his old life, the padlock snapping shut. Hauling the furniture down the narrow stairs had been easy; he had marveled at his new strength and stamina. He didn't feel worn out from having done it all, at least not physically. Emotionally, he felt exhausted. Still, he had accomplished something. Something he'd needed to do. *I'll never be that person again. How could I ever live that life now and pretend...?*

“Hey, Nick?” Jay asked, as another thought came to him.

“Yeah, what's on your mind?”

“Are there any other rooms in that place not being used? I mean, I don't want to complain, you guys are putting me up there for free right now and all, but...” Jay made a face.

Nick glanced at him curiously. “But?”

“Have you seen the wallpaper in that room?”

Nick laughed heartily, for a long time. “There are plenty of other empty rooms, yeah,” he finally chuckled.

“I liked the wallpaper when I was a young cub,” Ryan sent. *“But now I think it looks sort of*

tacky.”

Nick laughed again, and Jay offered a smile.

Jay's new room had slate gray walls, dark gray carpeting, and dark navy blue furnishings and trim. It wasn't a cheery look, but it was stately, appealing, and comfortable. A large four-poster bed dominated the space, with a matching dresser and small, serviceable closet. He spent the rest of the night unpacking and organizing his things while Ryan slept on the foot of his bed. Jay slipped into bed, letting the weight of the dawn carry him into unconsciousness.

###

He woke the next evening to a strange, unsettling feeling in the household. The rael-shaa had vanished from his bed sometime during the day, and Jay wondered where the creature actually lived. Russ had identified him as the 'caretaker.' Jay tried to picture the wolf carrying around a vacuum cleaner in his jaws, doing the carpets, and shook his head at the absurdity.

He smiled, grabbing some of his clothes and heading for the shower. It would be good to not be wearing the other vampire's clothes any longer. They fit fairly well, but they smelled like Dave. Even newly laundered, peoples' clothes seemed permeated with their own personal scent. He'd been aware of it before his life had changed, but now it was difficult to ignore. He had found it disturbing, even though it wasn't obnoxious.

Jay's own clothes smelled like him, but there were differences, as though his scent had changed. That, too, was unsettling.

He finished the shower, ran a brush through his hair, dressed, and headed downstairs. Chara was working in the kitchen, fixing something for the donors to eat. Dave sat hunched over on the couch reading a novel, and Tate was flipping through channels on the television. The others appeared to be out. He saw no sign of Ryan.

Jay paused at the bottom of the stairs, trying to identify the half-familiar sensation of tightness that he felt. After a moment, it seemed clear that it was coming from Dave. Dave appeared relaxed, and was engrossed in the novel.

Jay furrowed his brow. The feeling was hard to place: it was like...

Realization hit him with a shock. He turned pale and fled, passing through the kitchen. He wrenched open the sliding glass doors beyond to get to the deck outside, pausing only to close the door behind him. Jay walked quickly down to the far end of the yard, where a small fish pond bubbled, surrounded by several stone benches. At this distance from the house, he could no longer sense the feelings of those inside. He dropped onto a bench and stared at the peacefully sleeping koi beneath the sculpted waterfall. *Hungry. He's hungry and I can feel it. And it scares me. It scares me so much.*

A few hours later, Chara joined Jay, sitting down on the bench across from him. She said nothing, allowing him to choose the moment to talk.

After several minutes, Jay said, "I'm afraid."

"I know, hon. Dave told me, but he wasn't sure why," Chara answered. "He seemed to think it had something to do with him, though. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really, but..." Jay faltered. *But, I need to know, I need to know how this is going to be, and...* "Dave... he feels like he... he's hungry," Jay continued, blinking rapidly.

"That's what has you frightened?" Chara asked.

"Yes," he whispered.

Chara nodded, sitting quietly for a while longer, then stood again. "I don't think there is any way to make this easier for you, hon. You can't run from it, you'd only get hurt or worse, trying, and I'm sure you can guess as much. I just want you to know that I'll be here for you when the time comes. I won't leave you alone. But you're going to have to face this and conquer it, because it's inside you, too." She paused, adding, "Dave will need to feed tomorrow. You can come out here to get away from it

completely, if you want to. But maybe you shouldn't." She turned, walking back to the house.

Jay spent several more hours staring at the fish pond, his thoughts whirling through areas he had partially walled up, skittering like mice through mazes full of traps and corridors. He wasn't sure what he should do, so he did nothing. He sat, listening to the night sounds, thinking about conifer boughs dripping water down onto soft, needle-padded soil, sunlight streaming through trees to light upon glistening fern fronds, and the smell of pine resin, rich loam and new-fallen rain.

###

The next evening, Jay awoke to a strong feeling of tension. Now it was clearly identifiable, and clearly Dave. *God, he's hungry... what's he going to act like, feeling this?* It took him some time to gather the courage to descend the stairs, hair raised on the back of his neck, skin prickling.

Dave glanced up at him from a newspaper, shaking his head. Jay picked up a surge of mild annoyance. Surprisingly, Dave seemed calm. Jay moved by cautiously, edging into the kitchen to get a glass of water. He wasn't sure whether his dry throat was due to nerves, or sleeping with his mouth open.

With granite counters, stainless steel appliances and fancy accessories, the spacious kitchen suited the enormous house. Jay found the high-end luxury to be slightly intimidating.

Dave's emotional emanation edged into minor exasperation. "You can calm down, Jay, you know. I'm not gonna jump up and come after you or something. I don't know what you're thinking, but if you go around walking on eggshells like this, it's going to irritate the hell out of me." Dave's voice was steeped in annoyance, his energy broadcasting the emotion clearly.

Jay blushed, staring into his glass, out of sight in the kitchen. "Sorry," he murmured, jumping a moment later when Dave appeared in the kitchen entryway. He blushed again.

Dave sighed. "Look, kid, I'm sorry I snapped at you. I admit it. I can't imagine what you're going through now. This was all normal for me, and I knew what to expect ahead of time." He moved to lean against the counter. "Look. You're acting like you're scared of me, but what do you have to be scared of? Vampires can't feed on each other, so you wouldn't have to worry about that." He held out his arms. "Do I look like a dangerous monster to you, or something? Yeah, I'm *hungry*, now, but it's not that bad. I'm not about to freak out and start hunting down some street person..." Dave winced.

Jay's eyes were wide and he stood perfectly still, like a deer caught in headlights. Shock, horror, and a mix of less identifiable emotions erupted through him painfully.

"FUCK!" Dave punched the wall, leaving a neat hole the size of his fist in the plaster. Jay to flinched, flitting back a step. "Fuck, fuck, FUCK. God *damn* it, I'm sorry Jay. I didn't fucking mean to say that." Dave's emotional field twisted into pain, disgust, and anger. He stood rigid, hands gripping the counter behind him, head bowed. "Damn it, Jay. Please forgive me. I didn't mean that the way it sounded, I swear it..."

Jay wanted to reply, but the words caught in his throat, held there by the confusion of his emotions.

Dave pushed off from the counter, stalking back into the living room. Jay heard him throw himself into a chair.

Jay slid down to the floor, with his back against the counter. He trembled, trying to sort out his tangled feelings and find some order for his thoughts.

###

The opening of the door and commotion of the others entering was the next thing Jay heard. He blinked, realizing some time had passed and he wasn't sure how much. He felt weighted down and detached. Nails clicked on the linoleum and a cold nose pressed into his hand.

"Hello, Jay, it is good to see you again. Are you okay?"

Jay ran his hands through the thick fur automatically, giving the great wolf a hug. "Yeah," he whispered in a hoarse voice. "Yeah, I think I'm okay." He stood up awkwardly, as Tate came into the kitchen with a sack of groceries and a cheerful smile.

"Hey, Jay." Tate nodded casually, and began tossing things into the cupboard.

Jay found he couldn't read Tate's emotions. *Some sort of blank barrier.* He studied it, puzzled. *Just one more thing I don't understand.*

Jay walked slowly back into the family room to find Dave still seated there, radiating depression and anger. The vampire glanced at him with visible reluctance, then stared at the floor.

Jay licked his lips. "Sorry, man. Didn't mean to freak out on you," he said, turning to walk briskly back to his room, trying to ignore the dark twist of the vampire's emotional pattern behind him. The rael-shaa trailed behind.

He sat down on his bed, smoothing the wolf's fur absently as it clambered up beside him.

"I'm a fucking basket case, Ryan," Jay said, voice soft. "Every damn time something happens that's outside my little world of experience, I freak out. Every time something reminds me..." He trailed off, starting over, struggling to find the words. "I get vivid pictures in my head of stuff I don't even remember. I think I'm having flashbacks. I look up and find out I've been staring at the damned wall for a fucking hour." He gritted his teeth in frustration. "What's wrong with me?"

"I don't know, Jay. I once found a raccoon that had been caught in a foothold trap. He had struggled very hard and long, but eventually he had become too tired to continue. He lay there and stared, and when I let him go, he didn't run away. I pushed him, and he got up, sort of, but still he only stood there, staring. My mother told me that it was shock, and that it would be a while before he would act like a normal raccoon again. She said it wasn't fair to eat him, since it was not our trap and he could not get away from us then. I watched him for a long time. He eventually moved, climbed up a tree, and fell asleep, still in the open. You stare like he did, sometimes, Jay. Have you been in a trap?"

Jay looked at the wolf, biting his lip at the innocence behind the question. "Yeah," he whispered. "Yeah, I was in a trap, Ryan."

"I thought it took the raccoon a while to realize that he was free again. Maybe in his mind, he was still in the trap, even after we let him go. Raccoons are not very smart, but maybe that doesn't matter. I wonder if I would act like that; if I got caught in a trap and couldn't get out? Maybe that is just the way things are for everyone. My mother told me once that after the prey really believes it cannot get away, it stops fighting. She said that sometimes that is why people die." Ryan placed his muzzle on Jay's thigh, staring up at him from wild, green eyes. *"I do not want you to die, Jay. I hope that you can get out of your trap. I will help you if I can. I helped the raccoon."*

Jay laughed, hugging the rael-shaa, tears filling his eyes. "Thank you, Ryan. I'm not sure there's really anything you can do to help me out of a trap that's only in my head now, but you do help me, by being here."

Ryan sent an impression of a shrug. *"I am in your head, too, Jay."*

The comment was obvious, but startling. Jay stared at the wolf, realizing for the first time just how little he knew about the creature. "You can see my thoughts, Ryan?" he whispered.

"My family taught me that it would be rude to look at a person's thoughts when they have not sent them to you, unless they say that you can do it. So I do not do that."

"But you can? You can read peoples' minds, can't you? I don't know why I didn't think of that before, since you can put your thoughts into peoples' minds." Jay shook his head in wonder.

"Yes, of course, all of my people can do that. Would you like me to look for your trap, Jay? Maybe I can find the trigger. It was not so hard to find the trigger on the leg hold trap, to release the raccoon."

Jay shuddered. "I don't think this kind of trap is going to be that simple, Ryan."

"No," Ryan sent with a tinge of regret. *"I know that, Jay. I am young, but I am almost an adult now, and I know that the trap a person would have in their mind is not like a trap that would catch a raccoon. Humans are very versatile and adaptable animals. It must be a terrible trap that could catch one that way."*

Jay was startled again. "Almost an adult?" He had thought that the creature was fully grown, perhaps even quite old. Certainly Ryan was an enormous wolf. Now he hastily re-evaluated all of his assumptions. The innocence that Ryan displayed may be due to his youth and not to some innate characteristic of his kind. He had thought Ryan often sounded like a cross between a child and a sage, but it had never occurred to him that Ryan might actually *be* a child. The rael-shaa was so eloquent. "How old are you?"

"I am nine," Ryan announced. *"I will be ten years old in one month, and then I will be grown up and can decide what I am to do on my own. My family allowed me to have the job of caretaker for this safe house, so that I could have some responsibility and get used to taking care of things by myself. It is an important job."* Ryan's mental voice brimmed with pride.

Jay was aghast. "Listen, Ryan," he whispered, "You're not to go into my mind, okay?"

"Okay." The voice seemed unhappy and Ryan's emotions turned to disappointment.

"It's not that I don't appreciate the idea, Ryan. It's just that... this sort of trap, it might... might catch anyone who touches it, and maybe hurt them, too." He shuddered. "I don't want you to see..." Terrible images rose up again. Jay closed his eyes, trembling.

Ryan thrust his muzzle up under Jay's chin licking his ear. *"I am young, Jay, but I am not that ignorant."* The sending was tinged with hurt. *"I am sorry that I cannot help you with whatever it is that has happened to you. The others would not tell me what happened either, but I do not think that it was only a trap. I think much more must have happened to hurt you so terribly. If you will not share it with me now, maybe you will change your mind when I am an adult."* Ryan stepped down from the bed, padding out of the room.

Alone again, Jay lay down on his bed and cried.

Around an hour later he heard footsteps in the hall. *Dave*, he realized. He could recognize people by the sound of their footsteps, now. Everyone had their own pattern to their steps and their own strange feel. Weight and stride-length were different. The sounds stopped in front of his door. There was a hesitation, then a quiet knock.

Jay sat up, taking a breath, and scrubbing his face with his hands. "Yeah?" He asked in a quiet voice.

The door opened. Dave stepped in, fidgety and frowning. His eyes flickered around the room, not meeting Jay's gaze. The hunger was still there, lying in wait beneath a cloud of depression, anxiety, and determination. "Hey," Dave said. He ran a hand through his hair, and his eyes met Jay's. "About earlier..." A twist of guilt framed the words.

"Forget about it," Jay interrupted. *It's all I want to do.*

"No, I really... I just want to explain..." Dave started, when Tate's voice interrupted from the hallway behind him.

"Hey, Dave," Tate giggled, slinging an arm over Dave's shoulder. Dave's eyes widened in shock as he was knocked off balance. Jay felt the other vampire's hunger rise. Dave turned and extricated himself, shoving Tate away.

"What the fuck?! Get the hell off me! Tate, God dammit, I'm in the middle of a conversation, what for fuck's sake do you think you're..." Dave trailed off, his eyes narrowing as he radiated shock. Emotional pain and horror surged through his field. "Holy shit." He grabbed the donor's arm and shoved his sleeve up. "You're fucking *using*." He dropped the man's arm again, gaping at Tate in stunned disbelief.

"Hey, Dave, it's no big deal, you don't have to get all uptight over it, man." Tate's voice was dreamy

and distant. “Hey, and you're huuungry, too, I wonder if it'll make you high,” he giggled again, drifting back toward the vampire.

Jay swore he felt the hair stand up on the back of Dave's neck as the vampire backed away in shock.

Tate caught up, throwing his arms around Dave, trapping him against the wall. In a quick motion, he grabbed the back of Dave's neck with one hand, and circled his throat with the other, before releasing him again.

A terrible rush of hunger nearly overwhelmed Jay's senses. Jay gasped in shock and near agony, terror filling him. A wave of pure fury erupted, and Dave shoved Tate violently, propelling him halfway down the hall.

“LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE,” Dave screamed.

Tate's slow, unfocused anger joined the mess beating at Jay's senses, as he sat frozen on his bed, paralyzed by his own shock, cringing from the power of the emotional onslaught.

“Fine!” Tate yelled back, voice slurring. “I'll leave you the fuck alone. Have a fucking nice life! I'm out of here, and I don't fucking need any shit from you anyhow!” He stumbled down the hall, nearly fell down the stairs, and seconds later the front door slammed like a gunshot.

Dave slid down the wall to the floor, breathing in gasps, fury fading, but the hunger was rising back up again. Jay was still trembling in reaction. Jay realized that the massive spike of hunger had barely faded, and didn't seem like it was getting any better.

Having managed to sort out that the hunger and rage were Dave's and not his, Jay slid off the bed, pausing uncertainly. *He isn't going to hurt me. He said so, and I can't fucking run away again, not this time*, he swore to himself. *This can't be normal*.

Jay rushed over to Dave's side, paused, then knelt beside him, trying to ignore his own shaking. He put a hand on the vampire's shoulder, but pulled it back immediately when it amplified the sensations he was perceiving. Dave's eyes were unfocused, pupils enormously dilated, and he was panting.

“Shit, Dave... what should I do? Do you need help? Tell me what to do.” Jay's voice was anxious, just shy of hysterical.

“Tate,” Dave's voice, a near whisper, broke, and he shook his head. “Tate's gone. Get... Nick. I need... help. Tell him... Tate... tried to force... me...” Dave trailed off, curling into a ball, the hunger surging viciously. Jay gasped again, jerking away, then scrambled to his feet, heading for the stairs.

“Nick!” Jay yelled. Nick and Chara were standing in the family room, looking at the front door with wide-eyed expressions of surprise and confusion. Nick turned at his panicked entrance, and Chara started toward him. “Nick, you've got to help Dave! He's...” Jay stumbled over the words, unable to think clearly. The emotions from the hall upstairs were so intense Jay thought they might bring him to his knees. He stumbled into Chara, clutching at her, and his head seemed to clear slightly. “He said Tate tried to force...” Nick was already in motion, bolting up the stairs, before Jay could think of an ending to his sentence.

Chara's arms wrapped around him. Jay felt her become calm, her emotional radiation distant and ordered. It helped; he was able to get his breathing under control. She spoke quietly but clearly into his ear. “Okay, Nick will handle it. Just hold still now and I'll shield you as best I can. I'm not very good at this, but I'll help block the emotions. Just stay put.”

Jay felt like he was being wrapped in a blanket of dense static, as though Chara had somehow wrapped an energy field around him, but it wasn't enough to completely block out what came next.

Hunger, spiking higher than he'd felt from any of the others before, higher than he'd felt since the first time. Hunger searing, on a knife-edge of near-ecstasy... flipping over into wave after wave of pulsing pleasure, doubled, like a chord on a guitar or piano, so intense it was almost unbearable. Jay gasped, quivering, eyes shut, feeling each pulse as though it ran through his own stomach, spreading out from the center of his body. It seemed to go on forever, and he couldn't even think about trying to disengage or keep himself from reveling in it.

When it stopped, he sagged in Chara's arms, squinting against the bright room lights. The needle

points of his fangs brushed his lower lip. His breathing slowed and he tried to regain his balance. Hunger swirled through him, making him gasp again. Chara kept a grasp on his arm to help steady him. Jay stood with his legs braced, head hanging down, catching his breath until the feeling faded away.

“You okay, hon?” Chara whispered.

Jay swallowed. He could feel the too-sharp teeth sliding back into their sockets, a sensation that raised the hair on the back of his neck. “I think so,” he managed. He felt as though he'd just finished a long workout at a gym, his nerves over-sensitized.

Chara finally released him. Jay staggered over to drop into one of the easy chairs by the hallway. She dropped into another chair nearby, looking slightly worn herself. He listened to hushed voices upstairs, too low for even his improved hearing. He closed his eyes, trying to let the stunned feeling wear off.

Nick reappeared sometime later looking more relaxed than Jay had ever seen him, heading to the kitchen to fix a pot of coffee. While it brewed, Nick picked up a newspaper and TV remote, sat in a recliner, and began channel surfing. Chara cleared her throat.

Nick answered the unspoken question without looking up from the television screen. “He's all right, just embarrassed and upset, which I can understand. I'd say he wants to be alone for a bit, so I let him be.”

Chara sighed. “Okay. Now, does someone who actually knows, want to fill me in on what the hell just happened?”

Nick set down the remote, rose to his feet, and went into the kitchen. Jay heard him pouring the coffee and stirring in sugar. He returned, sat down again, and took a sip, placing the cup on the small table nearby.

“Tate's gone. I don't think he'll be back, this time,” Nick said, radiating sadness. “He's doing heroin again, and Dave doesn't want him back, anyhow. Truthfully, neither do I. We don't have room for that kind of crap in this Circle. I've never thought him to be all that reliable to begin with, but I wasn't expecting this, either. It's one more complication at a bad time.” He sighed. “We'll have to find him somehow. We can't leave him out there. We're down one donor and we're going to have no choice but to regroup. Honestly, we'll need at least one more donor before we can even think about hitting the street again, and two would be better.”

Jay frowned, his mind whirling with questions he wasn't sure he wanted to ask. He settled on the least difficult one. “Why do we need another person? There are, uh, an equal number of...” he trailed off, still sticking over the words.

Nick glanced at him, and Jay caught a hint of surprise. “Well, we normally run with at least two donors high,” Nick explained. “That's because the sort of crap we get into, people are likely to get hurt. If one of us,” the donor indicated himself and Chara, “got gunned down in a firefight, we'd go through the change, and we'd need a donor ourselves. Provided it was a body shot, anyhow,” Nick grinned mirthlessly.

Jay blinked, feeling stupid. “Ah, okay. That was pretty obvious, I guess.”

“Not really, this is all new to you, and some things only seem obvious after you hear them. Don't worry about asking questions, no one's going to be bothered by that, and you've got to pick it all up sometime.” Nick sipped from his coffee cup.

“Well, then,” Jay mustered up his courage, “can one of you please tell me, why...? What just happened, there, upstairs? Because, I don't understand.” His voice got quieter. “Did Tate... do something to him?”

Jay, feeling their emotions plummet and darken, instantly regretted the question. He fidgeted as Nick set the cup down again.

Nick cleared his throat. “That's probably something you should have already been told,” he admitted, with a glance at Chara. She nodded. “There just hasn't been much time, though.” The donor stood, sighing. “All right. Chara probably told you vampirism is caused by a virus.”

Jay nodded.

“Well, we donors carry the virus, too. It's just not fully active in us.” Nick paced slowly back and forth as he spoke.

“It's mostly dormant, but not completely. The truth is, we're not entirely normal, either. We're human, sure. It can be argued that full vampires are, too, really. But we're different from folks who've never been bitten. The virus changes us. Those changes are primarily aimed at making us into... well, better partners, for vampires.”

Jay frowned. *We turn people into... better meals?* He felt a bit sickened.

Nick continued, oblivious to Jay's thoughts. “A few of those changes, they're actually changes to our minds. The way we tend to view things. We don't always think the way other people do, or the way you do, either. Most of all, they give us some instincts that non-donors don't have at all. Those instincts are specifically tailored to help us know what's going on with your kind,” he gestured toward Jay, “and, to allow us, to some degree, to manipulate your instincts.”

Wait, they're controlling us, instead of the other way around? Jay looked down at the floor in renewed confusion.

Nick paused before the fireplace, hands clasped behind his back, staring at the piled logs on the grate. “This can be a good thing. A vampire gets hurt, well, they can lose control. Or, helping someone who's just changed, that becomes easier. The way Chara shielded you, earlier.”

He caught a touch of guilt from Chara, but she said nothing.

Nick paused for a long moment, saying more quietly, “Tate abused his power, to put it bluntly. He used what his instincts told him along with what he'd learned to manipulate Dave. He did it in order to try to take away Dave's free will. He most likely used a specific type of touch; it triggers paralysis by stimulating nerves in a certain pattern...”

“I saw him put his hands around Dave's neck,” Jay murmured. *They can make us do things we don't want to do. Even though we're stronger, it sounds like we're not the ones who are actually in control of what happens.* He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

“Yeah, that's the one,” Nick flared outrage and disgust.

“Dave threw him down the hall though,” Jay pointed out.

“Good for Dave,” Nick said. “I don't think most vampires could have done anything like that under those circumstances.”

“I think he was just so angry, it overrode everything else. That's what it felt like to me,” Jay explained, remembering the overwhelming surge of fury.

“I think that's quite likely,” Nick replied, shaking his head. “Dave has plenty of anger. The thing is, though, there are a few responses that can be triggered that just can't be shut back off again, depending on the situation. That's definitely one of them. As soon as a pressure-point touch is released, hunger flares up. If he'd only been five or six days past... past the last time he fed, that is... then it would have faded off after Tate let him go, but any time after that and the effect builds, and keeps getting stronger. It's a pretty fucked-up thing to do to someone,” Nick finished, radiating a cold fury.

Jay had never seen Nick express anger like this before. The man had always seemed mild-natured. Jay nodded. *So, they can do it, but most of them won't. I guess... I guess that's fair, but...* “So is there anything else I should know about, that might turn me into a raving monster?” he asked, the anger in his tone surprising him. *Sure, we're not killers, unless someone touches you wrong, or...*

Jay caught surprise from both of them, along with a touch of guilt and sympathy.

Nick sat back down in the chair, rubbing his temples with one hand. “Okay,” the donor said, “that's a very fair question. There isn't that much to worry about: starvation, serious injury, or pressure-point touch. Those are the only things that would usually take away your control completely. There are strong provocations, like luring... that's something only donors can do.” Jay caught a hint of fleeting discomfort from him.

“Oh, one other, I suppose. If you were hungry and caught completely unprotected, witnessing

another vampire's feeding could trigger an escalating response, too, if you're more than six days past. We're usually pretty careful to see to it you're protected from that. There are a few things that might mess up your head for other reasons, though," Nick added. "Mostly, by making you very angry, even if you don't think you have a logical reason to be. Nothing you're likely to have to worry about any time soon. You'll be mad if a donor is threatened, or if another vampire approaches your donor when you're hungry."

Jay digested this, unhappily, for a moment, realizing he felt very tired. It was a heavy mental fatigue, rather than a physical one. He just wanted to get away again, to lie somewhere quiet. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes. "Okay. Thanks, by the way. If you don't mind, I think I need to rest."

Chara's concern flowed over him. "Okay, hon. Let me know if you need anything." She stood up and began tidying the room, picking up stray papers and magazines.

Jay retreated back to his room, closed the door, and lay back on his bed with his arm over his eyes, wondering if he would ever feel normal again. *I think I'm getting better. At least I actually asked some questions, and didn't just run away.*

The other four members of the Circle returned near dawn. Jay listened to their quiet discussions as Chara and Nick filled them in on Tate's absence and the reasons for it. Jay felt no desire to join them, falling asleep as the sun began to rise, as he had done every morning.