

Chapter 1

I woke up to the bright late-morning sun as it filtered through my bedroom window and Jared nibbling on my shoulder. Each touch of his lips and caress of his breath sent little pulses of pleasure through my body and made me happier than I've been in a very long time. Happy wasn't the right word. I was finally content with my life and my place in it. Jared showed a bit of fang and his intense eyes had morphed from their usual light blue color to a darker hue. Both were like a mood ring of his emotions. No fangs and eyes the color of a blue lagoon meant he was calm and all business. A little fang and deep sapphire eyes showed the stronger emotions of love, hunger, and lust. All fangs and red blistering eyes exposed his true deepest nature: aggression and violence.

As he kissed his way from my shoulder to my neck, I sighed. "I love sex with a vampire – they go on forever."

His chuckle, which vibrated through my body, sent another wave of pleasure. "I gave you several hours of playtime before we showered together."

"Which extended playtime by another hour," I interrupted and ran my hands down his taut muscular back.

"Then we got back in bed for another hour and that's the best you can do? You love sex with a vampire? *Any* vampire will do?"

My stomach clenched as anxiety tapped down my playfulness. I wasn't ready to tell Jared I loved him, so I did the next best thing – I distracted him.

"You'll do," I whispered, pulled his face back toward mine and brought our lips together. It extended playtime again. Lucky me!

It was almost noon when my empty stomach growled in protest. Jared smiled and ran his fingers through my short black hair. It was getting long and he loved it. I wanted to cut it so it would spike better with gel.

He continued his caress of my hair. "I need to go over to my apartment in the city, make several calls and gather up some clothes and a bag. You want to stay here and eat and I'll send a car to pick you up in a couple of hours and bring you to meet me at the San Francisco airport?"

“Let me just grab a few things and I’ll just go with you.” My heart skipped with excitement. I have never been to Jared’s apartment – we are always at my house. Well, in truth, it is his. When I was hired as an operative with Jared’s security company, the increase in pay allowed me to rent it from the people who bought it from my parents when they moved to a smaller home five years ago. I liked the idea of living in my childhood home. Then Jared bought it. He says it’s a tax deduction. But personally, I think renting goes against everything that a two-hundred and a few years old vampire feels about the acquisition of property.

“Okay,” Jared said as he stood and brought his six-foot frame off the bed and clearly into view.

Damn, he was tall and lean with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. I licked my lips and my system flooded with desire as I watched him dress in a pair of black jeans, red T-shirt, and black cowboy boots.

He turned his intense blue eyes on me, smiled and said, “What?”

“You have a great ass.”

His eyes darkened. “If you start to talk about body parts, I will start to talk about yours and we will *never* get out of this room.” A slow grin slid onto his face. “And that’s okay with me.”

I sighed. “Werewolves are killing in Nevada.” Jared’s company has a contract with several supernatural organizations which includes the Grand Pack Lodge of Nevada. They called earlier this morning to ask him to hunt down a pack of marauding werewolves.

“The Grand Pack Lodge is only concerned about werewolves being discovered by the humans and so far, there have only been two deaths. We’ve got time, that’s not enough to cause a panic yet.”

“They don’t care about the dead people?” I asked.

“Humans die every day, Annie, they get sick or get murdered by their husbands, wives and children.”

“Now they’re being murdered by supernaturals.” I reminded him.

Jared shrugged. “They’ve been killed by supernaturals for thousands of years.”

I shook my head. This was my new life and it meant taking the bad with the good. “Not on my watch, Jared.”

Jared scooped up my jeans from the floor and threw them at me. “Then we better go.”

His phone rang and he grabbed it from the nightstand.

“Jared Remington.”

“Good, I was just about to call you.”

He turned to me and motioned with his hands for me to get dressed. He pulled the phone away from his mouth and said, “Annie, go say goodbye to Glen while I talk to the pilot and make a few more calls to get my plane ready.”

I dressed quickly in jeans, black T-shirt, a loose sweatshirt and tennis shoes; then just threw a bunch of stuff in a duffle bag. The early spring warm weather might last but I was always cold in airports and who knew what the weather in Nevada might be.

All of my makeup, hair products and jewelry are in the same case so I tossed it into the bag, too. I put the badge into the back pocket of my jeans. It was so cool – a silver badge with the words Security Service surrounding a vampire Arcanum, the symbol for both the vampire nation and Jared’s security firm. Several days ago I told Jared if I was supposed to be a cop to the supernatural community, I wanted a badge. He spoke with his other operatives who agreed it was a good idea, so now we all have them. The wallet also contained a business card with my name, Annie Bridges, Security Operative, and a number to be called if I was ever picked up by any local or federal agency. It was like a silver-plated *Get Out Of Jail Free* card and I loved it.

It was time to say goodbye to Glen and I was procrastinating. Glen Jefferson is my best friend and we’ve been inseparable since we met in kindergarten. I love him but he’s more overprotective than any brother could ever be and won’t like me and Jared to travel off to the wilds of Nevada without constant contact with him. He works for Jared, too, as a technical specialist. Basically, he makes all the cool toys to keep his eyes and ears on me. He saved my life a couple of times in the last few weeks, so I think he’s well worth what Jared pays him, but he won’t be happy.

I found him in the kitchen. He wore baggy jeans and a torn white T-shirt with his long blond hair pulled back tight in a ponytail. He was making banana bread – a clear sign he wasn't happy. When Glen is sad, he cooks; when he is really upset, he bakes. And when he's about to explode he dresses like a reject from a broken-down trailer park.

Anger.

Well, this was new. Normally Glen shields his emotions from me. I'm an empath; to have the ability to sense other people's emotions is occasionally a gift and sometimes a disability. It used to be an agonizing pain in my head. I don't have the headaches or blackouts anymore since I learned to not block my body's reaction to the enzyme that is produced when I am in danger or feel other people's strong emotions. But being an empath is still a pain in my ass. Trust me – you really don't want to know how people feel all the time.

“Glen?” I sat down at the kitchen table.

Rage.

He glared at me as he used the strength in his muscular arms to slam in the dry ingredients into his crushed bananas. It sent a dust storm into the air and bananas on the table.

“Bad date?” I hoped his anger wasn't directed at me. Glen is gay and looking for love. It's hard and he's had a couple of really bad dates these last few weeks. I closed my eyes and remembered how Jared helped me shield the constant barrage of emotions that assaulted me. I saw a gate in my mind and I closed it to shut Glen's emotions out.

“No,” he growled.

“Okay, then, what's the problem?” I leaned against the counter, feigning nonchalance I didn't feel.

“Annie, the *problem* is that you're leaving to go to Nevada to chase a pack of murderous wolves.” He scowled, which made his baby face look like a child in the midst of a temper tantrum.

“How'd you know?” I asked.

Glen put his hands on his hips and pulled himself up to his full height, which was still three inches shorter than my five-foot ten-inch frame. “Just because your bedroom isn’t bugged, doesn’t mean the phone calls aren’t.”

“Good to know,” I said lightly. I wouldn’t share this with Jared. He already thought Glen maintained too many eyes and ears in the house.

“The wireless ear devices that I made will *not* work all the way in Nevada, Annie.”

“Could they?”

Glen narrowed his eyes at me. “What do you mean?”

“Is there a system that would work?”

“Sure but it would cost a fortune.”

I smiled. “Use Jared’s credit card. It has an unlimited credit line and could be used for *any* business expense.”

A slow smile slid across Glen’s face.

“How long?”

Glen set the bowl in the sink. “Give me twenty-four hours and I’ll send you a new set of earplugs.”

He stopped in front of me, wrapped his arms around me, kissed the top of my head and said, “I know you are eager to meet the werewolves but could you, *please*, be careful?”

“I’m not excited . . .,” I began.

Glen chuckled. “You’ve got that girl in a candy store look in your eyes again, Annie. Ever since you were twelve and got to pet the white tiger and bungee jump at the carnival, you always want to touch and experience everything. Use some restraint with the wolves, okay?”

I rolled my eyes, although he was right. My exposure to the supernatural community was a new thrill and I wanted to experience it all, but I curbed my exuberance and said, “I’ll stay safe *and* subdued for twenty-four hours, but after that I can’t guarantee anything.”

Glen nodded and left to go back into his computer office to either buy or build an ear device that he could monitor from here.

Jared stuck his head into the kitchen. “Why is Glen so happy? I thought he’d be upset since you’re off to Nevada without him.”

“No, he’s fine but I’m starved. Should I eat here or can we get something on the way to your apartment? Maybe stop at a fast food restaurant?”

“You want to eat a dripping burger and greasy fries in my Jaguar?” Jared’s eyes widened.

There was a lot I could say about a man and his car, a boy with his toy, but instead I asked, “How long before I can have a real meal?”

Jared checked his watch. “A couple of hours to get you to my apartment, thirty minutes to make a few calls and gather some stuff for the trip, another thirty minutes to the airport, then I can feed you. How’s that?”

“Three hours?”

Jared nodded.

“Give me a second.” There was no way I could wait three hours before I ate – not without a snack, anyway. In the kitchen, I grabbed a plastic grocery bag and put in a banana, box of Cracker Jacks, and a bottle of sweet tea.

When I got back to the front door, Jared glared at the bag.

“I’ll keep it all in the bag,” I held up my hand and continued, “I promise.”

Jared frowned, clearly not trusting me to eat in his car.

“What food will you feed me in three hours?” I asked to pull his focus from my bag of snacks.

“Well-done steak, baked potato, and no vegetables?”

“That sounds good.” I said, although baked potatoes weren’t my favorite – I’d rather have fries or, even better, onion rings, but since he would supply the meal, I should let him choose and he did veto the vegetables.

“Plus chocolate cake for dessert,” Jared added with a smile, his eyes slid from their usual light blue to a darker shade.

I guess he’ll feed me that dessert. Vampires definitely have emotions but they learned long ago to shield their thoughts and emotions from each other, so it is second nature for him to shield from me. Their minds are more developed than humans, since they have been using mind-control on humans for millennia before the manufacture of synthetic blood. It was a matter of survival, so they adapted just like any predator. If I wanted to sense his emotions, he needed to deliberately lower his shields. He did it once and the desire and passion he felt for me slipped into the deeper anger and hunger of blood lust. That isn’t pretty; in fact it is downright scary, so he is pretty careful about his emotions around me.

I turned Jared’s radio to a country-western station, then flipped to another when a song came on I didn’t like. I did it again when they played another stupid song, too. In between songs, I carefully opened my banana and ate it.

Jared alternated between the road and me.

I held the banana toward him. “Want a bite?”

“Vampires don’t eat food, Annie.”

I shrugged and popped the top on my bottle of tea, then asked, “Where’s the cup holder?”

“I do not have cup holders,” Jared said.

“This convertible Jaguar must have cost over \$50,000, right?”

“\$82,899 to be precise.”

I coughed and then said, “And no cup holders?”

He glared at the bottle in my hand. I closed the lid and put it back into the bag. Then I opened and ate my Cracker Jacks, careful to only take one piece at a time.

When I flipped the radio to a third station, Jared put his hand over mine and said, “Annie, could you do me a favor?”

“Sure, Jared, what?”

“Pick one station and just leave it alone. I need to figure out the arrangements to make and what to take on our trip and the constant changing of the stations is driving me to distraction.”

“But . . .,”

“I’m trying to shorten the time between now and when you get real food,” he added.

Okay, the man knew me well. I am governed by my stomach. I turned to the first country-western station and sat back in the seat. When a song came on about a boy who gave up his college scholarship for a girl, I gritted my teeth and smiled.

We crossed the Bay Bridge an hour and thirty minutes later because Jared drove several miles over the speed limit. I guess he could just mind-sap the cop if we did get pulled over.

A few minutes later we arrived at the Fairmont Hotel. The entrance is quite an experience, the detailed terra-cotta exterior has mammoth ancient Greek marble columns and is draped with flags from around the world.

When we pulled up, I asked, “Why do you live in a hotel?”

“It’s easier. I don’t deal with an apartment, neighbors, and landlords. When I am in town, I stay here.”

“How often are you in San Francisco?”

“Only when there is a problem here.”

“So the vampires who kidnapped and used the young women as party food brought you here?”

“No, not until the first body turned up.” He nodded as the valet opened my door.

Anxiety.

Uncertainty.

The valet’s emotions hit me and I threw up the gate I had learned to construct. The silence that followed felt fabulous.

Another valet opened Jared's door and said, "Good evening, Mr. Remington. It's nice to see you again."

"Thank you, Anthony. Take care of my baby, please," Jared smiled.

"She's got her special spot. Nobody parks on either side of her."

Jared nodded. "I won't be here long because I actually came to check out, so keep her close."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Remington."

Jared handed him a bill, I think it was a hundred dollars. The valet would definitely miss him.

Jared took my hand and led me into the hotel's lobby. It is stunning in design and grandeur. The floor is alabaster marble with more columns and gold accents.

Three men came up quickly, the tallest said, "Welcome back, Mr. Remington. Is there anything I can do for you today?"

"I need to check out, Steffen. Can you settle my bill and send a porter for my stuff?"

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that you are leaving us again. I hope your business went well and we hope to see you again when you come back to San Francisco."

"Thank you, Steffen."

Jared and I walked into the elevator.

"I think I'm underdressed to be your escort in this place," I said looking down at my old jeans and tennis shoes. "They certainly ignored me and fell at your feet."

Jared laughed. "Since I've never brought a woman here before, I think they are unsure of what to do."

"How often have you stayed here?"

"I stayed as my father on and off for twenty years, then as his son, then my father's very much younger brother for another ten years and then as his son for the last twenty years."

"Your father and uncle?"

"Well, I couldn't stay as myself. I think they would have noticed when I never aged."

“Oh, yeah, I guess that’s true.”

The elevator’s rich paneled walls, brass railing, mirrors and rich geometric carpet were gorgeous and another example of my underdressed and outclassed appearance. There were lots of buttons for floors but no thirteenth – I guess even rich people are superstitious.

Jared left me alone in the living area as he went to make some calls and gather up his clothes. I stood in the opulent room and glanced around. In the center stood couches and chairs in blue and tan that looked totally uncomfortable but undoubtedly weren’t, given the probable cost of this suite. Wooden furniture that looked antique and draperies out of another period adorned the room. It didn’t even feel like Jared and I wondered how much time he actually spent in the room.

I wasn’t sure how long we would be gone but I needed to make a call or I would get several calls and my uncle, the chief of police, would search for me.

The phone rang and rang, then just before I figured I would leave a message I heard, “Here’s the damn thing, Ida. You always lose it.”

I just found out a few weeks ago they are not my biological parents. I’m half human and half a genetic mixture of ten different demons. I was part of a science experiment by Jared’s company, Super Security. They lost track of me twenty-five years ago when there was some kind of switch at the hospital where I was born. My adoptive parents, Stan and Ida, took me home and raised me in the small rural town of Ridgeside, thirty minutes north of Modesto, California, instead of a pre-chosen set of parents who knew they were raising a non-human child intended to be a cop to the supernatural world.

“Well, I put it on the table when we got home,” my mom grumbled, then continued, “I have no idea how it got behind the couch.”

“Hello!” I shouted into the phone.

“Oh, hello, dear. You don’t have to shout, I’m right here,” my mom said.

“I just wanted to let you know that I will be out of town for a few days,” I told her.

“For your new job as a file clerk or are you and Jared going someplace?” my mom asked, a cooing quality to her voice. She liked Jared and the fact that *she* brought him home for me and I liked him. In the past, her blind date setups were a disaster.

“Why would I be leaving with Jared?” I asked and then remembered that Uncle Curt caught me and Jared naked in my apartment. We were having rather loud and rambunctious sex and alarmed my landlord. Uncle Curt barged in and I introduced Jared as my new boyfriend.

“We ate dinner with Curt last night.”

I didn't want to say Jared and I were headed off together after we'd only known each other for a few days. That was not what I wanted my parents to think. They thought I took a job at the law firm as a clerk, so I incorporated that lie into another one. “Actually, I am going for work. They acquired a small established firm in Nevada and they need help to organize the filing system. I guess it was an older male lawyer's office and the files are a mess and they need some additional help for a few days. Since I just started at the lawyer's office, I'm kind of an extra hand.”

“That's my girl,” my dad said. “It's great that they trust you enough already to send you off to another office. Pretty soon you'll be in charge of the place.”

“When do you think you'll be back?” my mom asked.

“I'm not sure, but I'll call you in a few days and let you know after I've taken a look at the office and figured out how long it will take to straighten up the files,” I told them. I hated to lie to my parents and would have to explain about my heritage and job eventually, but today wasn't that day and especially not over the phone. It would be best done in person after one of my mom's great meals and lots of dessert.

My mom must have read my mind because she said, “I bought a nice whole chicken at Costco today and I think I'll make stuffed rosemary chicken. Do you think you'll be back in a few days or should I put the chicken in the freezer and thaw it out when you get back?”

“I don't know, Mom, best to put it in the freezer and I'll let you know when I'm back home,” I said since I didn't know how long I would be in Nevada. “I've got to go, Mom. I'll talk to you soon.”

“Stay safe, Annie,” my dad said.

“Give Jared our love,” my mom said, then giggled. “Goodbye, dear.”

She disconnected the call. I guess I didn’t fool them at all.

I closed my eyes and took in the scent of the Jared’s hotel suite. It really smelled nice, not like the disinfectant of a hotel room or the overpowering scent of flowers or new furniture, but it smelled like money. Then something started to nag at me and I opened my eyes and glanced around the room. There weren’t any bookshelves in the room but it felt like there was a book out of place – just like in the library when I was in school. Since the teeter-totter effect of the children’s and staff’s negative and positive emotions often caused my migraines, I was always given a place where I could go to get away from them. The school thought I was ultra-sensitive to noise, so the room was often in an office in the library.

I walked over to a cabinet in the corner and opened it. It was empty but still it didn’t feel right. As I brushed my hand over and under each shelf, I heard a click. I love secret compartments.

I slid the small tiny drawer out. Inside was a little blue velvet bag with a corded rope that secured one end. I untied the rope and poured out the contents. It was a ring, a man’s ring with a large uppercase “C” built with diamonds on top. Through the letter was a small dagger with a ruby red stone in its handle. I recognized the symbol. It was a ring for a member of The Covenant, a secret vampire organization whose sole task was to protect the rebuilding of the synthetic blood factories after the Masters destroyed them.

The Masters were a group of vampires who refused to drink synthetic blood. They felt drinking it was beneath a vampire’s true predatory nature. The Covenants battled the Masters in a war in Scotland over thirty years ago. All of the Masters were killed, except Matthias, their leader. Recently, the Masters resurfaced but instead of bombing the blood factories as they did in the past, they blasted restaurants and clubs where “bottle-fed” vampires gathered. I knew of three and had actually been present at a bombing of a restaurant in San Francisco. We only escaped because I sensed a human bent on hate and destruction. The Masters liked to hypnotize humans and send them in as suicide bombers. Jared thought the Masters now worked with Marshall Blower, a scientist who used to work for Jared’s company. In fact, his design to alter the DNA of

a demon was the first attempt at a supernatural cop. It didn't work, so they tried again and I was the result.

I heard him clear his throat behind me. "Are you ready to go, Annie? If you'll walk down with the porter, I'll collect a few more items and be right behind you."

The ring must mean Jared is a member of The Covenant. Would he want me to know that? Probably not, since it is a secret organization, but it was too late now. I turned around and held the ring out. "Do you need your ring with you on this trip?"

Jared looked from me to the ring and then back at me. I couldn't read his emotions but I saw them on his face. First, surprise, then chagrin making way to anxiety. He wasn't sure what to do or say.

"Let me," I said, as I walked over toward him. "It makes sense that you would have been one of the original members of the Covenant. You're a soldier, after all."

I slipped the ring into the bag, pulled the cord closed, and handed it to him. "You need to get anything else?"

He shook his head.

"Okay, then. Let's go, I'm beyond starved at this point."