



## *Prologue*

“Where do uccisore come from?”

The old man sipped from the steaming cup of tea before setting it back down. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, as he watched the young apprentice’s eyes grow larger with the promise of an answer to her desperately whispered question.

“Many have wondered how l’uccisore came to be. It is a question that is as old as vampires themselves.” The old man spoke slowly, his voice low and rasping from too many years of smoking.

“Or perhaps not quite so old,” he said with a small smile. He glanced around the empty restaurant, the soft light glinting off of his shoulder length, silver streaked braids as he surveyed the shadows.

Time had etched lines of age and wisdom into his weathered face and yet a youthful twinkle was evident in his dark chocolate eyes as he relayed the story of l’uccisore.

It was a story he remembered hearing from his own grandfather when he was no older than this child. His grandfather had been given the tale by his father as had been done throughout his tribe’s generations. A story the old man had told his children and his brother’s children and hoped to tell his grandchildren one day.

His smile faded as he pointed a long, arthritic finger at the child who was filled with intrepid angst.

“Many think of vampires and vampire slayers as fiction,” he warned. “A figment of someone’s macabre imagination. Some think the mere mention of vampires is blasphemy. This is not true, little one.”

“Yes sir,” the girl said with a serious frown on her cherubic face.

“Would you like to know the true story of how l’uccisore came to be?” he asked.

“Yes! Please, Uncle Ben. I want to know.” He wasn’t her real uncle, but she thought of him as such over the short time since they’d met. He was the most interesting and smartest man, if not the oldest, that the young uccisore had ever met and she hung on his every word.

He eyed the child as he slowly pushed the cup of tea aside. He sat back in his chair and smiled at her as he began his story:

*It was the year of our Lord 1096* and the Holy Land was under the rule of the Catholic Church at the aftermath of the First Crusade. It was a time when Christians all over Europe celebrated in Christ and

followed his teachings. To show their faith in Him and to seek God's favor, many traveled on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

It was a dangerous trek for these travelers. More often than not robbers and warlords would set upon the unsuspecting seekers, killing and robbing them. But their belief that God would protect them, prodded the caravans on their journeys in spite of the dangers that lay hidden in the desert.

The few knights that remained in Jerusalem after the crusades tried to protect the travelers as best they could. But, these knights were so poor they could barely afford one horse for every two men as they patrolled and guarded their charges. It was a near impossible task for them as they avowed their protection by the grace of God and the church. Nevertheless, they did what they could to see the pilgrims to safety.

On one particularly dark, moonless night, a small band of men—one no more than a boy on the cusp of manhood—sought shelter in a tiny settlement a few miles outside of the Holy City. They bid refuge and were welcomed into a Christian home. What little food the travelers had was shared with the family that had taken in the weary men. Bread was blessed and broken, wine was drunk, and stories were told around the hearth.

As they stretched out upon their blankets to rest until dawn, their eyes drifted closed and sleep crept over them. One of the travelers stood watch over the boy, a young man of great importance.

All was quiet. Even the air was still, as a phantom swept down from the heavens. The lone guard's fate was sealed as the phantom drained away his life's blood. It moved faster than the eye could fathom and the dying man could barely utter a sound.

But, it was enough to awaken the others. In less than a moment, the small house was overrun by the demons of the desert, and all but the boy and two of his companions were left to battle against them.

One of the men fell at the boy's feet, blood pouring from his ravaged neck where one of the assailants had soared down from the rafters to land on his back.

Only one guard was left to protect the boy, his sword arm so tired from the fight he could barely lift the blade with both hands. Still, he fought on to protect the boy.

With the pounding of hooves bringing the last man a single ray of hope, nine knights on five horses charged in as the guard fell to his knees. It took the knights only a few moments to sever the heads of most of the attackers before the rest fled into the night.

With few words, the sword wielding saviors set about caring for the boy and his wounded guard, as well as the last remaining survivors.

Several of the knights helped cleanse their wounds with holy water. The screams of the tended echoed through the hills as the evil was washed from them. Then, and only then, were they allowed to rest. Those that could not be saved by the blessed liquid were prayed over as their heads were parted from their shoulders by a swift sword.

As the sun crested in the east, the knights helped the boy and his injured companion onto one of the horses and led them to Jerusalem. As they entered the city, word was sent to the king of yet another attack on travelers. This time, however, it was the king's only son and his entourage who had been set upon.

At the sight of his progeny, safe and secure upon a knight's horse, the king wept in gratitude and blessed the men who had saved his child. When the knights refused the ransom offered by the king because of their vow of poverty, he bestowed upon them a plot of land where they could build their temple.

This, the knights accepted in the name of Christ and the church.

They called their temple *Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon*.

Some believe that the land the king of Jerusalem had given the knights was the original site of the Temple of Solomon and, as the temple was being built, the knights uncovered the treasures of that infamous king. No one knows this to be true or false as there has never been a record of such a find.

It was, however, the beginning of the rise of what history would proclaim as the Knights Templar.

By the year 1129 and with the aid of Bernard of Clairvaux, the Knights Templar was officially sanctioned by the Catholic Church. The knights grew in strength and numbers as they continued to battle the rising tide of darkness. Word had spread across the known world of the evil that was sweeping across the desert lands and starting to spread across Europe like a plague.

The disease turned good men into demons who drank the blood of their brothers. They stalked the night, attacking unsuspecting travelers as they journeyed to the Holy Land, or strayed no more than a few hundred feet from their own door after the sun dropped beyond the horizon. Some died mercifully; others became soulless devils like those who sired them.

Knowing them by no other name at that time, the common people called them sons and daughters of Satan. The knights alone knew the secret to ending the evil: sever the head from the body or drive an arrow's wooden shaft through their still hearts.

After months of tireless battles and the lamentation of the masses, the church sought out those they'd shunned in the name of Christ, for help in stopping the wickedness that was upon the earth. Witches and druids were called to Rome for council. After many more months of work and study, new weapons were forged and rushed to the nine founders of the Knights Templar.

Each received a sanctified sword with a pommel carved from a single piece of polished onyx and blessed by the pope to bestow protection and courage to the bearer. Imbedded into the solid silver cross-guard, and set in the silver cross at the top of the pommel, were seven perfect bloodstones, infused with the power of strength and stamina.

The long, double-edged blade that was tempered in fires hotter than Lucifer's home in hell, was honed to an edge so fine it would split the hair of a babe. Engraved upon the length of the lethal weapon,

were these words: *Omnes animae innocetiamturi, boc ferre ominus*. Wield this blade with a pure heart to protect all souls.

Even with the blessed swords the savage battle raged between the Knights Templar and the Evil Ones called vampire, as the knights were bound by their vows and the many restraints of the laws of the church. It was feared the war between good and evil would be lost to the vampires.

Pope Innocent II saw this and, after much prayer and meditation, exempted the Order of the Knights Templar from obedience to local laws and their vows, answering only to him. At that time he bestowed upon them the Latin term *Interfectores*. Slayers. The release of the ties that bound them allowed the brave knights to do what was necessary to end that which was already damned.

The knights' numbers increased as did their wealth and power. They were allowed to marry and pass their knowledge on to their progeny who would pass it on to theirs from generation to generation, ensuring that all of mankind would have a way to battle the soulless demons.

Two hundred years passed and the evil was finally all but erased from the world. Only a few vampires were left in hiding and they'd fled into other parts of the world, never to be heard from again.

Or so the knights had hoped.

The Order of the Knights Templar had become the most powerful and the richest military unit in the world, bowing only to the pope. Soon, rumors began to trickle across the land of heresies, blasphemies, and other atrocities committed by the Order. The seemingly unchecked power and wealth of the knights had started to come into question.

Most of the rumors and accusations originated in the palace of King Philip IV in Paris. His was a kingdom in great debt that owed an astronomical sum to the knights, a debt that King Philip had no means or intention to repay. He thought that if he threw the Order into conflict with the Church and the people, it would give him some relief, perhaps erasing his marker to them completely.

One cold winter night in late December, 1305, King Philip was drunk on wine and slept in a warm bed that he'd shared with his favorite kitchen maid. He was awakened when he heard what he'd thought was a woman's scream and stepped onto the balcony to see who or what had disturbed his blissful dreaming.

The following dawn, he was found near death at the foot of the stone steps, bleeding from what looked like animal bites to his neck and shoulder. He was carried to his bed and the priest was called to give him last rites. After two days of vigil after the priest's visit, the king still lived.

Surprising to all, King Philip's weakened state did not kill him. He slowly regained his strength against all expectations otherwise. Each evening during his recuperation, a man professing to be a physician skilled in alternative medicines, came to tend to the king. It took several weeks before Philip was well enough to leave the palace once more, and even then, the bright light of the sun hurt his eyes and caused his pale flesh to redden and burn.

Once King Philip returned to his rule, the fate of the Templars turned.

The rumors and accusations against the Knights grew more heinous and the people began to demand action. In a show of support and to appease the masses, on Friday, October 13, 1307 King Philip, with the approval of the church, ordered the arrest of all of the Knights Templar in France.

Though the Knights had spies in the palace, word of Philip's treachery came too late for most of them to evade the false arrest decree.

Tortured for days, weeks, and some of them for months, many of the knights died at the hands of the king's interrogators. Others gave false confessions after promises of absolution, only to be burned at the stake for heresy and blasphemy.

A few of the Templars were able to escape France. Unfortunately, two of the nine swords were confiscated by the king of France and said to be destroyed as a symbol of freedom from the oppression of the Order of the Knights Templar. The consecrated metal and stones were secretly worked into a breastplate for the king's own dark usage.

It has been said that the Templar treasure, along with the seven remaining blessed swords, disappeared over the next several months. A treasure so massive, that it had taken eighteen galley ships to transport half of it to a hidden fortress, leaving the remainder for the Catholic Church.

In 1312, Pope Clement V officially disbanded the Order of the Knights Templar. The surviving knights were no longer allowed to increase their forces by recruiting new members nor were they permitted to call themselves Knights Templar or Interfectores.

The Knights knew the world needed their protection and that King Phillip was being influenced by the poison that a vampire had infected him with. But their concerns were disregarded by the church.

In secret meetings among the few surviving Knights, a new vow was made and a mighty prayer for God's intervention and protection went up from all who knew the truth.

The Knights could no longer use their Latin title, however, Rome had its own term for them and from the devastation of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> and King Phillip's decree the order of *L'Uccisore* was born.

The previous release of their vows by Pope Innocent II, had allowed them to have families of their own. Sons and daughters blessed by God and endowed with special gifts to help them battle an ever growing evil that would one day try to overpower humankind.

Five centuries later, the evil had exceeded its previous numbers as uccisore bloodlines grew stronger. A young Scotsman took his new English bride and their few precious belongings to start a new life in America. Being a descendant of the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar, Jacques De Molay, Samuel David Wilson prayed the vampires that infected Europe had not spread to America.

He was gravely disappointed.

By the age of three, Samuel's first born son David, showed the first signs of uccisore abilities and his training began. When David grew to manhood and took a wife, Samuel bestowed upon him his most prized possession as a wedding gift: a blessed sword that had come to him from his father, who had received it from his father as it had been passed for generations.

In that time, the Wild West had not yet been tamed and David and his wife, Abigail settled in Nevada with the hope of bringing the gospel to the savages. A young Paiute boy named Wovoka was brought to the settlement in 1870. Trying to teach and run his growing ranch, David and his wife took Wovoka into their home. They adopted the boy and named him Jack Wilson.

It wasn't long that young Jack lived with David and Abigail, before he started exhibiting traditional uccisore traits. How this could have been, David wasn't sure, since there had never been a record of uccisore bloodline in the Americas at that time. Perhaps an ancestor of the boy had had a child with a European a few generations back. Whatever his ancestry, the boy carried an odd bird-shaped birthmark across his chest as well as uccisore abilities.

David trained his adopted son, passing on to him the knowledge of whom and what uccisori were. With his innate shaman magic combined with his uccisore bloodline, Jack Wilson became a force to be reckoned with. Having no son of his blood to pass his beloved sword, David handed his to Jack.

After many years with his adopted family, Jack returned to his people, wiser, stronger, and dedicated to his destiny. He took back his Indian name of Wovoka and history would name him Father of the Ghost Dance. A legacy that would lead to Wounded Knee, South Dakota and one of the bloodiest massacres in Native American history.

*As time would pass and Wovoka's sons grew to manhood, he passed his knowledge and sword on to them who passed it on to their sons.*

Ben Blackfox let out a deep breath as the last words of the legend of vampire and uccisore fell silent.

"Wow, Uncle Ben. Are you a descendent of Wovoka? Is that how you came here to Savannah?" the young girl asked in awe.

With a rasping laugh and his wide face lined in humor, the old man said, "Yes, Little One. I am a descendent of Wovoka. I even bear the mark of a soaring bird over my heart as all of the men of my bloodline do."

"Awesome! Can I see it?" she whispered loudly, leaning closer.

"Another time, child. Another time. My nephew is here now. It is late and I am old and tired. Train well young uccisore, train well," he bid her as he pushed up from his chair.

The restaurant door swung open as Hunter Blackfox sauntered in. Surprised to see the old man and his young apprentice, Hunter asked, “Uncle Ben, I thought you’d gone back to my house. What are you doing here so late?”

The resemblance of height and features, despite the difference in their ages, told all who saw them together that these two men were closely related.

“I was telling the girl the story of how uccisore came to be, Hunter, as I’ve told you and your brother many times.”

“Chandra, why aren’t you home and in bed? It’s after ten, don’t you have school tomorrow?” Hunter asked his charge.

“Don’t blow a gasket Hunter, Uncle Chase is cool with it.”

“Yeah, but are your parents cool with you being out this late on a school night?”

“Um, maybe I’d better get going. Thanks for the story Uncle Ben. Have a safe trip back to the reservation,” Chandra called out as she raced for the door.

“Hold up there, kiddo,” Hunter said, freezing the girl in her tracks. “You’re not going anywhere alone this time of night. I’ll drive you home. Come on Uncle, let’s go. I’m beat.”



## *Chapter One*

The heat of rage radiated off Hunter Blackfox in rippling waves as he stormed through the door. It flew open with such force that it slammed against the wall with a resounding boom.

“Did you or did you not bring me in as your Second?” he said with a guttural growl as his boots thundered across the threshold.

Hunter wasn't so far over the edge with his anger that he didn't see the momentary confusion cross Chase Nightly's face. A too long lock of black hair fell across the team leader's forehead before he brushed it back, piercing Hunter with his bottle green eyes. It only took a moment for Hunter to see when realization had sunk into his boss.

“Aw shit. What has Sheila done now?” A mixture of frustration and resignation brewed in Chase's voice like bitter, day-old coffee as Hunter watched the other man fall back in his chair and throw the pen he'd been writing with on the desk.

“What's she done? I'll tell you what she's done!” Hunter bellowed, as fury turned his dark eyes almost black. “That woman is a menace. She needs to be locked up for the safety of the human race before she has a chance to breed.”

“Hunter,” Chase said wearily, as he rubbed his red-rimmed eyes. “I haven't had a lot of sleep the past three nights. Subtlety is not working here. What happened?”

Hunter could see the unspoken end of his question, “this time,” in Chase's face.

“Every time we get within sight of each other, she tries to stake my ass,” he said as he began pacing the small area. “Then she does this, ‘oops, my bad’ lame-assed apology.”

He pulled off the remains of his tattered, blood streaked shirt and let it drop to the floor at his feet.

“Look at this, Chase. She tried to kill me. *Again!*” Blood oozed from a long jagged slash from his left shoulder to his elbow and tracks of red trickled down his forearm. A matching wound marred the skin of his right side from his collarbone to the joint of his shoulder.

“Okay,” Chase said as he blew out a breath. He rubbed the back of his neck. “That doesn't look so bad. Was it a training accident?”

“You wish, Boss. And that's not the damn point. For God's sake, she tried to freaking kill me!”

Hunter placed his large hands on the desk and leaned in to face his uccisore team leader.

“I was minding my own business, standing in the kitchen at The Blue Mermaid talking to Carly and Tony before they opened for the lunch crowd. The next thing I know, Xena, Warrior Lunatic barges through the back door, grabs up a butcher’s knife and comes at me like I’m a vamp ready to sink my fangs into someone. A move like that would have killed a normal person.”

He pushed off the desk and resumed his marching pace back and forth across the carpet, before stopping and dropping his six foot three inch, two hundred pound frame, into a chair. His body deflated just a bit with the release of some of the steam his anger and frustration had built up inside of him. His bare shoulders slumped, and his head fell forward in defeat.

Hunter’s ebony hair was pulled back into a thick tail that fell between his shoulder blades, and tied with a hand beaded, leather strap, a gift from his Aunt Lucy.

She and Uncle Been had raised him and his brother Lucas, after their parents were killed in a tragic accident in Peru while exploring an ancient ruin. His Native American heritage showed proudly in his high, sculpted cheekbones, straight, thin nose and dark copper-toned skin. The birthmark he carried over his heart in the shape of a soaring bird was as much a point of pride to him as the two bloodlines that flowed in his veins.

“What the hell is up with that woman, Chase?” he asked in a lower voice. “I’ve never done a thing to her that I know of, but since the moment we met she has been the bane of my existence. Why does she hate me like that? Did I wrong her in a past life or something?”

“I don’t know, Hunter,” Chase said. “In all the years I’ve known Sheila Maxson, I have never seen her take an instant dislike to someone like she has to you. She’s never been the overly friendly sort, but this is out of character even for her.”

“I have been in Savannah for six months and from day one that woman has treated me like her mortal enemy. I just don’t get it.” Hunter’s wide, full lips drooped into a frown like a little boy who’s had his favorite toy taken away from him.

He remembered the first day he’d met Sheila. He had walked into The Blue Mermaid for his first meeting of Team Nightly. He’d arrived in town two days before and Chase had told him to get settled into his new home first and he would introduce the team at the next meeting. The condo that Chase had found for Hunter before he’d left North Carolina, was perfect for him. Two bedrooms and two baths on the first floor of a brand new development. It didn’t take Hunter long to unpack, since he’d had most of his things shipped down ahead of time and, apparently, Chase had the whole team getting the condo ready for his arrival. Hunter was impressed and warmed by the act and felt at home almost immediately. Still, he wasn’t sure how the team would accept him as their new second in command since the man he was replacing had been loved like a brother by all.

He had walked into the restaurant with the intention of giving them his gratitude and wanted to extend a hand in friendship and camaraderie.

His first reaction to the sight of Sheila, however, had been a primal one.

Hunter was a large man and when he saw the leggy, blond amazon with her back to him, his libido had gone into overdrive and he hadn't even seen her face yet. His first thought had been, "Her mouth would come almost even with mine. I won't even have to stoop much to kiss her."

When everyone at the table stopped talking at his approach, she turned around to face him. His breath caught and his step hitched ever so slightly. She was Aphrodite, Helen of Troy, and Jackie Onassis rolled into the perfect woman. Sex, beauty, and class melded into one long, luscious package just for Hunter Blackfox.

He couldn't take his eyes off her. He could see his reaction to her reflected in Sheila's astonished eyes and parted lips, and his heart fluttered as though it were ready to take flight on the wings of the dove that graced his broad chest.

By the time Chase had introduced him to the team, including Chase's wife Rae, Sheila's entire demeanor had changed to one of intense, unprovoked animosity.

It had shocked him and, if truth be told, hurt him.

"I know Hunter." Chase's words brought him back to the troubles of his most recent encounter with his soul mate/mortal enemy. "I don't understand her reaction to you either. I'll see what I can find out."

"When I left the rez, I thought my life would get a little more exciting but, damn Boss, I'd rather fight a dozen vamps unarmed and bleeding, than deal with her one more day." Hunter's resignation vibrated through him, replacing the anger that he'd carried when he barreled into Chase's office.

"Have you tried talking to her? Have you asked her what was going on?" Chase asked, sounding slightly distracted.

Dumbfounded at the obviously ridiculous question, Hunter gave Chase a "get real" smirk. "Well, gee whiz, Boss. Why didn't I think of that the first time she tried to take my head off?"

"Hunter, for the love of God and my own sanity, cut me some damn slack here." The plea that came out of his team leader caused a moment of guilt to flash across Hunter's mind. "Rae has had me up for three fucking nights. This heat has her miserable and the baby is due in two weeks. Between Rae's moods, my mother's constant sniping, dealing with my students, and your and Sheila's piddly-assed squabbles, I am ready to walk into a nest of feeding vamps and open a vein."

Chase was right. Hunter's problems with the woman weren't his boss's jurisdiction. "Damn . . . I'm sorry to drop this on you, too."

He lifted his hands and dropped them back into his lap as though at a loss for words. “Of course I tried to talk to her. More than once, in fact, and all I get is a ‘what do you mean?’ response like she treats everyone the same. I know better. Her brother is my best friend and he’s even baffled by her attitude.”

Seeing the fatigue etched in Chase’s face, Hunter felt ashamed that he’d piled one more issue onto Chase’s already overloaded shoulders. It was Hunter’s job as Second to ease the burden on the team leader. His ongoing battle with the only active female on the team had kept him from focusing on his duties, something that had never happened before.

Hunter Blackfox never let his responsibilities slide. His emotions were held in rigid check and no one had ever shaken that control before. His last girlfriend had asked, as she was walking out the door, if he was due back at the robot shop for his annual upgrade and reboot. She had called him a cold, emotionless, bastard with no idea of what the word intimacy really meant. He knew she wasn’t talking sex. He had no problems functioning in that respect.

“Look, don’t worry about it,” he continued. “You have enough to deal with. I’ll handle Sheila and whatever else comes up. I was just blowing off steam and I shouldn’t have bothered you with my personal issues. I came in here spoiling for a fight and since I can’t beat the shit out of a woman I figured I’d . . . hell, I don’t know what I wanted to do.”

Chase chuckled and said, “First of all, I can empathize with you on a few of those points. When Rae and I first met, we tore into each other in front of her eleven-year-old niece who happened to be one of my students at the time.”

Hunter had to laugh at the mention of Chandra Chandler. That pint-sized uccisore in training, thought she could take on Gordon Charles, vampire king, all by herself.

“Chandra probably instigated it,” Hunter joked.

“Nah,” Chase said with a smile. “Rae did. Believe me, we had some shit between us back then. The point is, buddy, we worked through it. You and Sheila need to find some common ground and at least try to build an amicable working relationship. I need you both in top form and working as a team.”

Chase was silent for a moment, and Hunter knew there was more that his team leader needed to tell him. “There’s been some stirrings in the wind, Hunter.”

Hunter leaned closer, narrowing his eyes. “What’s happened?” he asked, suddenly all business.

“They found another floater last night. That’s three in a week. Dalton told me this morning that he’s gotten half a dozen reports on missing persons from here, Hilton Head, and even up in Beaufort. That’s not counting tourists in transit and unreported runaways.”

“Shit. Any news on Gordon Charles’ whereabouts yet?” Hunter asked.

“Not a whisper. But we know he’s still building his army even after closing down his lair last year. He’s found someplace else to nest.

“I got word from a friend in Charleston a few minutes before you stormed in here that a couple of bodies have gone missing from their morgue a few nights ago,” Chase informed his second in command. “They’ll keep me posted. They’ve also had an increase in vamp activity. I was going to tell everyone about all of this at the meeting tonight.”

“It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, Boss. There hasn’t been much movement since I joined the team. And I was beginning to wonder if maybe you didn’t really need the extra help. Why now, after so much time?”

“That’s a good question. We need to find out the answer and fast. The last time my team went up against Gordon, Rae put a hurting on his ass we’d all hoped would be fatal to the son of a bitch. It may have taken him all this time to recover from his wounds.”

Chase rubbed his hands over his face, his rough palms rasping against a day’s growth of beard. “My first responsibility should be to my team . . .” Chase let his words fade away.

Hunter caught the flash of emotion that crossed the other man’s face and another wave of guilt washed over him.

“No, Chase. Your first responsibility is to your wife and child. It’s my job to take up the slack and I’ve been letting myself get side-tracked. No more,” Hunter vowed as he stood up. “Why don’t you get some rest? I’ll handle whatever comes up. You have a few hours before the meeting and if you want, I’ll fill in the team on what we discussed.”

He headed for the door and stooped to pick up the remains of his bloodied shirt and shook his head in disgust. “I can’t believe I let this happen.”

“We all have issues, Hunter. Deal with it and move on. You should have Simon look at those cuts for you,” Chase suggested. “They may not be deep but they’re probably painful.”

“Will do, Boss.”

Before Hunter walked through the door, Chase said, “And Hunter, a word of advice.”

Hunter turned back with a questioning quirk of his dark brow. “Sheila can be a button pusher. Yours, where she’s concerned at least, are bright neon and easily accessed.”

Sheila was the only person—man or woman—that pushed said buttons with ease and relish, and it pissed Hunter off that he rose to her bait each time she dangled it. “What’s your point?”

“Stop reacting to her.”

“Yeah. I’ll get right on that,” Hunter grunted as he disappeared down the hall, grumbling to himself about some women needing to be locked up in a padded cell.

“My goodness, Hunter, you look like a man on a mission,” Rae Nightly’s voice broke into his tirade from the other end of the hall. When he saw her waddle toward him a gentle smile crossed his face, easing

away the tension. Her short dark hair accentuated her pixie face, making her blue eyes seem bigger and her dimpled cheeks a little more obvious.

“Hi, Rae. How are you feeling?” Hunter asked, watching mesmerized as she caressed her hugely rounded belly.

“As well as can be expected for a woman in her fifteenth month of pregnancy on the hottest day of summer.” She grimaced slightly before looking past him toward the office. “Were you just in to see Chase?”

“Yes, ma’am. He’s in his office. Anything I can help you with? I’d be happy to help out and give the boss a break.”

“That’s so sweet of you, but I just wanted to tell Chase that I’m heading over to my brother’s place,” she said as she started to waddle around him in search of her husband.

“Shouldn’t you be resting or something?” he asked, concerned.

“Oh, pooh. I’m fine. I feel wonderful as a matter of fact. I feel like I could take on a horde of vamps then vacuum up the dust.”

“Well,” he replied, not knowing what to say to that. Hunter’s eyes darted from Rae’s face to her protruding abdomen then back into her big blue eyes, alight with humor at his discomfort in the presence of a woman in her condition.

“Okay, then,” Hunter finally said, his distress obvious. “I guess I’ll, uh, I’ll just let myself out.”

“You do that. I’ll see you later at The Blue Mermaid.” She turned to go, and Hunter could hear her soft laughter behind him.

There were very few things that frightened Hunter Blackfox. The second scariest thing on his list of horrifying events was extremely pregnant women. Specifically, not knowing what to do should they go into labor and he was required to deliver the baby. His Aunt Lucy in a fury topped the list.

Hunter stepped out into the early afternoon sunlight. The heat and humidity of the mid-June day spread through him, giving him a renewed sense of purpose.

He loved Savannah. The history and the people were unique. A world apart from the reservation where he’d lived since the age of nine.

He thought about his brother’s words to him when he had first refused Chase’s offer to come to Georgia as Team Nightly’s Second in Command. Hunter’s brother, Lucas, had inherited their ancestor’s shamanic visions but not the uccisore bloodline. Both Lucas and their Uncle Ben had tried to persuade Hunter to make the move south, but it was Lucas’ vision that had swayed Hunter’s final decision.

“How the hell is this my true destiny?” he asked his absent sibling as he threw his long leg over the seat of the Ducati motorcycle he’d purchased from Rae a few weeks after he’d arrived in Savannah. He still got a good laugh every time he thought about how Rae and Chase had argued over the sale of that awesome bike.

Chase had told Rae she *had* to get rid of it since she was pregnant, and Rae had told him he was her husband not her lord and master. He wasn't going to start telling her what she had to do and that she could ride the bike after the baby was born. When Chase had asked her how she was planning to put an infant safety seat on the back of the motorcycle, Hunter realized it was time for him to leave the area if he valued his life.

The next day, Rae had finally agreed to sell the Ducati to Hunter for, in her words, "a reasonable price." Maybe to her it was a fair market value but to Hunter, it was highway robbery. He had thought about trying to negotiate the price down some, but he was afraid that in her hormonal state he might make her cry and then he'd probably offer her twice her asking price just to stop the tears. He really wanted that motorcycle, and his bank account only winced a little bit when he wrote the check. The F250 crew cab pickup truck he'd driven down from North Carolina was a great truck. It was big, black, and mean, but not very convenient when trying to outrun vamps.

He cranked up the bike and reveled in the roar of the engine before kicking it into gear and heading back to the restaurant to face the wrath of Sheila. They were going to have it out once and for all. At least, as soon as Hunter made sure there were no weapons in the area with which she could slice, stab, jab or otherwise maim him. Not out of fear but a need for self-preservation.

He hadn't made it more than four blocks from Chase and Rae's house when he saw the blue flashing lights of a police cruiser in his side view mirror.

"Well hell. This day is just getting better and better every minute," he said to himself as he pulled into the nearly empty parking lot of a strip mall. He killed the motor and held the bike steady between his hard muscled thighs. The sudden silence was a little disconcerting.

Experience had taught Hunter that so long as he cooperated and didn't make any threatening moves or smart off to the cops, he would get through the ordeal quickly. This was the first time he'd been stopped in Savannah, so he wasn't sure what to expect. With the luck he'd been having the past couple of days, he just might end up in a cell with a good old boy named Bubba, with a family connection to General Custer or some other Old West fighter.

As he leaned forward to reach for his wallet in his back pocket, Hunter glanced into the side mirror again. The blue lights strobed as it pulled to a stop several yards behind him. It took a full minute before the passenger side door slowly opened and a patrolman stepped out of the vehicle.

"Kind of scrawny for a cop, aren't you?" he asked under his breath, relaxing slightly. This might not be so bad after all. If this kid was a rookie, maybe Hunter would get off with nothing more than a warning about helmet laws in Georgia. The policeman's cap was pulled down low and his eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark-mirrored aviator sunglasses.

Hunter's senses spiked. He didn't like not being able to see the full picture of the person he was dealing with. It led to too many different possibilities and most of them were bad. It could just be a rookie trying to look intimidating to a guy that was almost twice his size, or it could be a vamp slave whose eyes can't handle the bright light of the sun.

When the cop slammed the door with unnecessary force, Hunter was sure he wasn't going to like what was going to happen next and he prepared himself for a battle. He pushed out the kick stand and let the bike lean on it while he watched the figure in the mirror.

As the police officer drew to his full height, shoulders lifted and chest out, Hunter had to laugh. A girl cop. She filled out the uniform quite nicely too, he decided as he watched her strut toward him. He admired the way her full, firm breasts stretched the starched shirt. His eyes trailed over the tapered waist that flared into very curvy hips and long, lean legs that swaggered . . .

Hunter knew that walk. He'd know it anywhere and every muscle in his body relaxed as he began to chuckle to himself.

When she drew closer to him, Hunter said with a laugh, "Son of a bitch Carter, what are you doing this far south?"

Officer Carter snorted, a small smile playing on her lips. "Busting asshole Indian's riding around half naked and with no helmet in my city, Blackfox."

"Where's your partner? Waiting to see if I try to scalp you or something?" Hunter retorted as he kept one eye on Carter and the other on the driver of the patrol car.

"Shit, I can handle you with one arm tied behind my back."

"In your dreams, Carter. You want me and you always have. You're only embarrassing yourself by denying it.

"Jesus, Blackfox! There's not enough brain-bleach on the planet to get that image out of my head! That's too twisted even for you," Carter said as she pulled off her sunglasses and slid the earpiece into her pocket.

Hunter climbed off the bike, laughing at her. He scooped Carter up into a bear hug and spun her around as though she were a small child. Apparently, his sudden movements toward the officer had startled her partner into action as he charged from the car with weapon drawn and said in a fierce tone, "Hands in the air! Now!"

Hunter immediately dropped Carter to her feet and took a step back with his hands above his head and a mile wide grin still on his handsome face.

"Holster your weapon, George," she called out to her partner. Carter turned to her partner with a smile of her own. "He only thinks he's dangerous."

"I'd like you to meet my cousin, Hunter Blackfox," she said.

“Holy shit, Carter. I almost shot him. I thought he was . . .” the officer let his words trail off as he craned his neck to look up into Hunter’s face. “Uh, your cousin you say? Jesus, he’s a big one.”

“Yes, one of them anyway,” Carter said with another laugh. “So Hunter, when did you escape the rez?”

“About six months ago. I cannot believe you’re here, Carter. What the hell brought you to Savannah? Last I heard you were up in Athens.”

“It’s a long story, Cuz.”

Her eyes drifted to the cuts on his arms and shoulders and a frown creased her brow.

“Damn, Hunter, what happened to you? Don’t you know when a woman says no, she means no?” she asked drolly.

“You’re a riot, Carter. It was a training accident.” Hunter felt a little bit chagrined and decided not to tell her that a woman had snuck up on him and gotten the better of him. “How long have you been in the city? I can’t believe no one told me you were here when I made the decision to move to Savannah.”

“I guess they thought you must have known. I’ve been here about four years now. I’ve been with the PD since I left Georgia State.

“Damn, Hunter, it’s great to see you again.” She gave him a friendly, albeit hard, punch to the shoulder. “How are Aunt Lucy and Uncle Ben doing? I haven’t talked to them in a while.”

“They’re good. Lucas will be surprised to hear you’re here, too. But then again, maybe he won’t be knowing my brother. Why didn’t you let someone know where you were? Aunt Lucy and Uncle Ben didn’t say anything about you being here. Not even when I told them I was moving down.”

“Geez, what are you, my daddy? Knowing you, you had your head so far up your own ass you just didn’t hear them when they mentioned it.”

“You’re so full of shit, Carter, your eyes are brown.”

“Okay, maybe I didn’t tell them exactly where in Georgia I was living and might have mentioned Athens. Like I said, it’s a long story and I don’t have time to go into it here on the street. You’re going to cause an accident if you don’t put some clothes on, Blackfox.”

Hunter laughed, shaking his head at his cousin. He couldn’t believe she was really standing right there in front of him. They’d been like brother and sister when they were growing up and he missed her constant intrusions after he left the reservation for college.

“Hey, I’m on my way to The Blue Mermaid, why don’t you join me for a late lunch? You too, George. You can fill me in on how you keep my cousin from shooting herself in the foot,” Hunter joked.

“We’ll meet you there. We were on our way back to the Barracks when I spotted your half naked ass cruising around. Nice bike, by the way,” Carter said, with a nod to the big, black machine.

“Yes it is and you only wish my ass was naked.”

“You are a sick, sick man, Blackfox. Meet you there in an hour.” She slid her shades back over her eyes and sauntered back to the cruiser.

“Coming, George?” she called out as she opened the door of the car. “And, Blackfox, put on a shirt or I’ll have to arrest you for indecent public exposure. And wear a helmet next time or I’ll cite you.”



## *Chapter Two*

“You know Sheila, maybe it’s not my place to say this,” Carly said slowly. “But, that was really crappy of you.”

“I don’t need this right now,” Sheila whispered to her reflection as she gazed into the mirror of the luxuriously appointed ladies room of The Blue Mermaid. The long beveled mirror stretched across the powder blue ceramic tiled wall above four sink basins.

Sheila watched the other woman’s reflection for a moment before turning on the tap. She held her cupped hands under the stream of cool water then splashed it over her heated face in hopes it would help ease the humiliation she was wallowing in. For six months, she had been trying to clear her mind of the image of a gorgeous man with raven hair that fell to his shoulders and stood tall enough that she had to tilt her head up to look into his eyes. That was a rarity in itself, since Sheila stood nearly six feet tall. Nothing worked to erase the reaction that went through her every time *he* walked into the room. Her emotions morphed into something she didn’t recognize and every nerve in her body craved to be near him. To touch him.

“Why do you hate Hunter, Sheila?” Carly asked as she crossed her arms beneath her ample breasts.

“I don’t hate Hunter, Carly.” Sheila grabbed a towel from the dark wicker basket by the sink and patted her face dry. “I have no feelings whatsoever for the man.”

“Then why did you go after him with a butcher knife this morning?”

“Carly,” Sheila said, dragging out her name in a frustrated breath. “We were just . . . training. I was trying to see if I could catch him off guard and I did.” What more could she say? Certainly not the truth.

“Training for what? Are you spies for the CIA or something that you have to be on your guard every second of the day?” Carly sighed and looked up at the other woman. “I’m not stupid, Sheila. I may not have a college education, but I do have eyes and I have a brain. I’ve worked at this place long enough to know those meetings you and Tony and the rest of your group have here, aren’t just friends getting together for drinks, a meal, and some laughs.”

“Please let this go, Carly,” Sheila begged. “You wouldn’t believe me if I tried to explain it so let it drop, okay?”

*I'm going to have to let Tony know to keep an eye on Carly. She's a lot more observant than most normals,* Sheila told herself.

“Really? You and I have been friends for a long time. Here’s what I see,” Carly stated and started ticking off on her fingers as she spoke. “Last year, Gabe was killed in a mugging gone wrong. Rae started coming around shortly after that. Don’t get me wrong, I like Rae a lot and I’m glad she and Chase are together.

“Then Chase gets attacked and almost killed. Greg, the dishwasher, goes missing and no one has seen him in months. Chase’s mother gets kidnapped.”

Carly took a deep breath and plowed on. “And let’s not forget the body count has skyrocketed over the past two weeks. I heard there was another body found in the river yesterday, Sheila.”

“Dammit, Carly,” Sheila heaved out as she pressed her fingers against her eyes, trying to relieve some of the pressure that was building behind them. “Have you said any of this to anyone else?”

“What, you think I turned into a moron at the stroke of midnight? Of course not. Who would believe me anyway?”

Carly stopped and grinned. “And now we are officially off topic. Hunter.”

“Hunter is an ass who is going to get himself killed. Everything is a freaking joke to him, just like . . .” Sheila halted her words, unable to voice his name.

“Just like Gabe,” Carly finished in a soft voice. “You were going to say, just like Gabe, weren’t you?”

At her friend’s nod, Carly wrapped her arms around Sheila’s waist. Since Sheila was over a half a foot taller than Carly, the gesture was a little awkward. Still, Sheila was warmed to the core by it and was grateful to have such a caring friend. Carly was such a sweet young woman, filled with kindness and an innate willingness to give.

“I’m getting the feeling that ambivalence isn’t really what you’re feeling for Hunter,” Carly said with a knowing grin.

“That’s the perfect word for my feelings for him. Ambivalent,” Sheila declared as she straightened and turned back to the mirror.

“Yeah, okay. If you say so.” Carly turned and headed for the door. “I have to get back on the floor. One thing, though Sheila.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re going to have to face the truth about your feelings for Hunter one day very soon.”

“The way you face the truth about your feelings for Tony?” Sheila stated sharply, then immediately regretted the words when she saw the look of pain on her friend’s face.

“That’s cold, Sheila. Tony’s my boss and anyway, you don’t know anything about it.” Carly jerked the door open and stormed out of the restroom.

“Damn it! When will I learn?” Sheila cursed herself for her lack of a word filter whenever she’s angry.

It took another moment of self-recrimination before she could bring herself to leave the ladies room in search of Carly to apologize. Just because Carly was so astute, in her observations and assessments of Sheila’s feelings for Hunter, that was no reason for her to be cruel.

She made her way past the bar and headed for the dining room where Carly was sure to be. The lunch rush had passed, and the crew would be cleaning up and preparing for the next onslaught of customers.

“Hey, Sheila.”

The voice from behind her was a welcome sound. She turned to face her friend and an involuntary smile graced her beautiful face as she watched Chase walk toward her. The emerald fire that sparked from his eyes had her smile slipping a notch or two as he neared.

“Hey Chase. What’s up?” she asked.

“We need to talk. Now,” he demanded.

“Um, can it wait? I really need to apologize to Carly,” she said and tried to side-step him. She really didn’t think she could handle another emotional episode and the look on Chase’s face told her that he was ready to go a few rounds.

“Why? Did you go after her with a butcher knife too?” he asked heatedly.

“Crap.”

“Yeah, that pretty much sums up your attitude with Hunter. This can’t wait. I’ve had it with you, and we need to clear up a few issues. Let’s go.” He took her arm in a firm grip and headed toward the kitchen.

“But I have to . . .” Sheila didn’t have the opportunity to complete her excuse as Chase dragged her into Tony’s office and slammed the door behind them. He pointed to a chair and she sat down without a word as Chase paced for several moments. He stopped and looked at her then shook his head and began his march across the carpet once more.

Being a firsthand witness to Chase’s temper on more than one occasion over the past eight years, Sheila wisely chose to sit in silence until Chase was ready to vent.

With a growl from deep in his throat, Chase said, “Sheila.” He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He blew out the breath and continued. “I love you like a sister. And like a sister . . . I could choke the living shit out of you sometimes.”

“What did I do?” she asked unable to hide the guilt that rang in her voice.

The flabbergasted look on his face was enough to make Sheila want to laugh out loud. But, being an intelligent woman with a boat load of self-preservation, she refrained the impulse.

“What did you do?” Chase asked incredulously, his voice raising three octaves higher than his normal baritone, as he glared at her.

“Holy shit, I don’t believe this.” Chase rubbed both of his hands over his face. “How about the fact that you attacked one of your fellow team members this morning? Unprovoked, I might add.”

“It wasn’t unprovoked . . .” Sheila said but the fury emanating from Chase had her clamping her jaws shut without finishing the challenging excuse.

Sheila could count on one hand the number of people who intimidated her. Chase Nightly in a rage was one of them. His mother was the other.

“Don’t,” Chase ground out, holding one finger up in warning. “Do not bullshit me, Sheila. I know you too well. Hunter Blackfox is not only my Second but he’s my friend. Hell, he’s your brother’s best friend and they’re practically joined at the hip. You’d think they’ve known each other for years instead of months.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” she mumbled. Yet another reason Hunter was a total enigma to her.

“I just don’t get it. Why do you hate Hunter?” Chase asked as he dropped into the chair behind the desk and faced Sheila.

She squirmed uncomfortably in her seat and refused to look Chase in the eye. “I don’t hate Hunter,” she finally grumbled.

“Then what is it? Why do you have such a powerful urge to hurt him every time . . . oh my God,” Chase fell back in his chair in shock as he watched the flush wash over Sheila’s face. “You don’t hate him.”

“That’s what I just said. What’s the big deal?” Her words were weak, and she still couldn’t face him, opting to cross her arms and legs and look at the floor. It took several moments of silence before she finally looked up at Chase. A knowing smile curved his mouth as he watched her.

No longer able to sit still, Sheila rose from the chair and began an inspection of the small office.

“Is Tony going to buy this place from Gabe’s uncle?” she asked, an obvious ploy to change the subject to something more benign.

“You’re in love with him.”

“Are you nuts? How or why would you think that I’m in love with Tony?” Sheila laughed nervously, knowing full well that was not what Chase had meant.

“Now you’re being deliberately obtuse,” he chastised. “I’m talking about Hunter. I get it now, Sheila. Why I didn’t pick up on it before, I haven’t a clue. Maybe I’ve just been so focused on Rae and the baby, I’ve let everything else slide by me.”

“That’s natural,” she said, a little too brightly. “It’s your first child and you and Rae are excited and absorbed in getting ready for its arrival. How’s Rae doing, by the way? I’ll bet she’s as nervous as a three legged cat in a doghouse. I remember when my cousin was pregnant with her first kid. That was all we heard from her. The baby this and the baby that. Then when the kid popped out, every day it was oh he’s done that or he’s getting so big. He rolled over for the first time. He sat up by himself. He fed himself for the first time. New parents are obsessive when it comes to their babies . . .”

When Sheila finally reached the end of her ramble, Chase asked, “Are you finished avoiding the issue?”

She looked over her shoulder at the man who had become as much a brother to her as Michael. With a heavy sigh she plopped back down in the chair and looked at her feet.

After a few seconds of coming to terms with her predicament, she said, “This is not like me, Chase. I don’t know what to do. Every time I see Hunter and that glint of mischief in his eyes, I think of Gabe. I still feel this empty place inside of me where Gabe lived. He was so full of life and laughter and everything was a joke to him. Even though I wasn’t in love with him, his death hurt me.

“I know I hurt Gabe when I couldn’t return his feelings. He’s dead now and each time Chandra gives you a message from him the guilt of that eats a deeper hole inside of me. I see a lot of Gabe in Hunter and it scares the hell out of me,” she confessed.

“Bullshit,” Chase said with a laugh. “Nothing scares you. You are the most intrepid woman I know, except for Rae. Now there’s a scary woman. Nine months pregnant and she can still kick my ass.”

Sheila laughed at Chase’s very apt description of his wife. “She could probably kick all of our butts and never break a sweat.”

“You are very good at that.”

“At what?”

“Changing the subject when you don’t want to discuss the current topic. I know Gabe’s death hurt you. It hurt all of us. But the guilt you feel for not loving him in return is no reason to punish yourself. Or Hunter. He never even met Gabe and you’re using him to assuage your guilt. It isn’t fair to either of you and it makes it damn hard for the rest of the team as well.

Chase’s green eyes softened as he watched Sheila struggle with her dilemma. “Take it from a man who was in love with his soul mate and rejected the fact for months. Face your demons, Sheila. Put them to rest and get on with your life.”

“What if something happens to Hunter, Chase?” she asked. “What if I let my guard down and he ends up dead? The man is always so flippant about everything. If I let myself have feelings for him and he doesn’t have the same feelings for me, what do I do then?”

“Life and love are a gamble. We all have to deal with it in our own way. You can either choose to hide from it or you can grab on with both hands and ride it to the end. You’ve heard the old adage, ‘it’s not the destination that matters but the journey.’ You can protect your heart all you want to but it’s still going to get bruised and battered along the way, no matter how hard you try to shield it. Unless you hide in a cave for the rest of your life with no human interaction, people will affect you. You either adjust or you bleed. Your choice.”

“Geez, Chase, since when did you get all deep and wise?”

“About the same time I learned I was gonna be a father,” Chase quipped. “Let me ask you something, Sheila. What’s the worst that could happen if you were to offer Hunter a handshake instead of a stake in the heart?”

After a moment of silently contemplating the question, Sheila hissed out a breath. “I guess you’re saying I should play nice with the new guy, right?”

“You never play nice, Sheila, but cut the guy a break. He’s a good man and could be a good friend to you if you give him half a chance.”

“Okay. Fine, I’ll try,” Sheila relented. “Much as it goes against the grain, I’ll be a good girl.”

Shaking his head and laughing, Chase stood up and headed for the door.

“He can’t be that great an uccisore if he came running to you because I was being mean to him,” Sheila stated, unable to stop herself from getting in a final jab.

Her words stopped Chase in his tracks, and he turned around.

“You just couldn’t let it go, could you? You had to get in one last punch,” he snarled. “For your information, smartass, if you were a man he’d have taken you down that first day.”

Chase drew in a long breath and blew it out again as he stalked back to face her. “He came to me as a last resort. If you two can’t resolve your differences, he will go back to North Carolina. I don’t want to lose him, Sheila. But, I don’t want to lose you either.”

Sheila jumped up from her chair and stuck a long, sharp finger into Chase’s chest as she shouted at him. “You can tell that chauvinistic son of a bitch not to let my being a woman stop him from trying to take me on. I’ll put him down like a rabid dog in five seconds flat.”

He grabbed her hand before it could poke him again and pushed it away. Ignoring the anger flashing in her eyes, he grabbed her shoulders and gave her a hard shake.

“Sheila!” Chase bellowed loud enough to rattle the woman out of her rant. “Knock that shit off right now.”

He let her go and stormed around the office, pulling at his hair. “I can’t believe you! What did I just say?”

He spun around to face her. “Get to know the guy for Christ’s sake instead of jumping to all of the wrong conclusions. For the love of God, don’t you ever listen? Get this through that concrete skull of yours. Talk. To. The. Guy! Find out what’s on the inside. You give men so much shit because all they see is the pretty package and not the brain that you’ve got in your head.

“Show the same respect,” Chase stated as he towered over Sheila. “Hunter is Native American from the Wolf Clan of his tribe. Women are respected and revered to them. If you could step back and look beyond your own crap, you would see there are people out there that want to be your friend.”

She glared up into Chase’s face, mottled red with rage. She slid out of her chair and took a couple of steps backward. “Okay, geez, don’t pop a blood vessel. I’ll make nice with him, alright?”

He moved slowly toward her as he spoke. Each step closer that Chase took, Sheila took a step back. “And you will not,” he warned. “I repeat NOT, attack him again. Do I make myself understood, Miss Maxson?”

When he used her last name, it was a sure sign that he had reached the end of the leash on which his temper was tethered. The back of Sheila’s legs touched the chair and she dropped into it. “Yes. Perfectly clear.”

“Good.” Chase rubbed his hands over his face and mumbled unintelligibly.

“What was that?” Sheila asked.

“Nothing. Forget it. I have to go see if Rae’s gotten back from her brother’s house. You just remember what we talked about and everything will go a lot smoother for everybody. Deal?”

“Deal,” she agreed.

“Find some other way to deal with your feelings for Hunter,” Chase said as he made his way to the door. “I will kick your ass off my team if you don’t get your shit together ASAP.”

Chase left a dazed Sheila sitting openmouthed as he quietly closed the door behind him. A few seconds later he opened the door again and said with a wide grin, “By the way, not answering my question about being in love with him, doesn’t make it go away. Just FYI.”

He disappeared again quickly, and the door clicked shut.

It took a full two minutes before she was able to move again. She dragged herself to an upright position and stumbled to the door. She leaned against the dark wood panel and drew in a long deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart.

*Chase wouldn’t really throw me off the team, would he? She asked herself. No, he wouldn’t do that. He needs me. Doesn’t he? Oh shit!*

She left the office and headed to the dining room to find Carly. She needed to apologize to her friend. And she needed a dirty martini. A double.



Hunter spotted Michael and Simon sitting at the corner table as soon as he entered The Blue Mermaid. He made his way over to them quickly and called a quick hello to Carly as she set an empty tray on the bar to his left.

“Hunter,” Michael said by way of greeting.

“Mike, how you doing, buddy?” He nodded to Simon who returned the gesture with a smile.

“Simon, what are you all dressed up for? You got a hot date or something?” Hunter asked as he dropped into a vacant chair next to Michael.

“Hey man, I always look my best. You never know when a lovely lady needs to be impressed,” Simon said with a wide smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

“True that, brother. True that,” Hunter laughed.

“Speaking of lovely ladies, mmm-mmm. Look what just walked in,” Simon said as he straightened in his chair. “That is all kinds of fine.”

Hunter turned around with great interest and watched as Carter sashayed toward him. She’d taken the time to change out of her uniform and into a pair of taupe capris and a turquoise tank top. Shaking his head at the picture his cousin presented, Hunter thought it best to warn his friends about the viper that was headed their way.

“Simon, my friend, make sure you’re wearing a cast iron jock strap.”

“Blackfox, are you telling me you know that gorgeous piece of female?” Simon asked. “You gotta introduce me to her. I think I just found the next love of my life!”

“Simon, I’m telling you as a friend, she’s my cousin and she may be small in stature but she’s a rabid tiger when she’s crossed. She could give Sheila a run for her money.”

Michael snorted out a laugh but said nothing.

“I doubt that,” Simon told him, his eyes still following Carter. “You’ve never seen Sheila in a real temper.”

“Yes I have. Every time she sees me she gets her temper up,” Hunter grumbled with a frown.

“No, she’s just playing with you. You would lose precious body parts if she was really mad. I’ve seen it happen,” Simon said. “Of course, they were all vamps but still—oh here she comes. Introduce me.”

Simon rose to his feet as Carter approached the table. He pulled out the chair closest to him as he smiled at the beautiful woman.

Hunter dropped his arm across her shoulders and looked down at her. Topping the chart at five feet three inches, Carter fit neatly under his arm.

“I told them they needed a cast iron jock for this introduction, but they wouldn’t listen,” Hunter told her.

She jabbed a sharp elbow into his ribs hard enough to cause him to grunt. Still holding her close to his side, Hunter turned to introduce her to his teammates.

An odd look crossed Michael's face as he slowly rose from his seat. Tension hardened his features and a look of panic flashed in his eyes, as the man focused all his attention on Carter.

Before Hunter could make the introductions, he felt his own pulse quicken and his flesh grew warm. *Sheila.*

It happened every time she was near. He could sense her even if he couldn't see her, something in him knew she was there.

"Damn, Blackfox. Fondle your girlfriend in private, please. You don't have to prove what a stud you are in public, for God's sake," Sheila snarled angrily.

The little chat with Chase had flown right out of her mind when she saw how Hunter smiled down upon the younger woman. With his arm draped so possessively about her shoulders, the green-eyed demon named Jealousy, devoured all of Sheila's common sense like a ravenous beast.

All heads turned toward Sheila as she faced off with Hunter. She had to force herself to remember what Chase had told her only moments ago. One more time, and she was off the team. That was the only thing that had kept her from grabbing a knife and making the man a eunuch.

Each time her parents had rejected her for someone or something better or more exciting, Sheila envied and yearned. But, never had she felt it towards a man showing interest in another woman.

As her eyes bounced from Hunter to the lovely, exotic looking woman, Sheila's mind was bombarded with questions she wasn't sure she wanted answered. Was that what he liked? A woman that was small and fragile looking? Someone he could protect and take care of so he could feel all manly?

Well, that wasn't Sheila Maxson. She could protect and tend to her own needs. She'd been doing it for a long time, and she was pretty good at it. She didn't need a man.

God, she wanted him, though, and it tore at her that he found her lacking.

It didn't matter to Sheila that the woman was more astonished at her outburst than Hunter. Nor did it matter that everyone looked as though they were about to explode.

"Sis, step back and rewind," Michael warned. The flash of humor in his blue eyes as they swung to her, went unnoticed.

"Don't tell me what to do. You couldn't get away with it when we were kids and you won't now either." Sheila informed her brother.

She turned back to Hunter and his little girlfriend and a wash of triumph went through her as she watched the tiny girl tremble. The girl placed a dainty hand over her mouth but not in time to stop the very unladylike snort of laughter.

Sheila's triumph was replaced by confusion as she looked up to see Hunter's face turning red from the effort he was making trying not to laugh. He lost the battle and a loud guffaw burst out of him only to be joined by everyone else at the table.

The laughter grew to a deafening roar that had both Hunter and his girlfriend doubled over, holding their sides. Tears were streaming down their faces. Each time Sheila thought the gaiety was finally coming to an end, Hunter would see the perturbed look on her face, point at her and the raucousness would begin once more.

Even Michael, her brother who was supposed to stand by her and support her no matter what, had tears of laughter running down his face. She crossed her arms at her waist and stood tapping her foot as she watched the nearly hysterical maniacs. The loudest laugh seemed to be coming from the smallest person. The little woman was so weak from her laughter, she tried to sit down in one of the chairs, only to miss the seat and end up in an ungraceful heap on the floor, sending everyone into an uproar once more.

"You guys are making a spectacle of yourselves," Sheila said fighting a grin. "There are other people here ready to call 911 on you. Get off the floor!"

Sheila had to chuckle at the picture the woman made as she tried to climb to her knees only to be knocked back down when three men jumped up to help her. They stumbled over each other to get to her, making little headway. Finally, Sheila had had enough. She put her thumb and forefinger between her teeth and let out a shrill, ear-splitting whistle.

When the noise subsided and everyone was holding their hands over their ears, Sheila asked, "You want to let me in on the joke? I could use a good laugh. It's been a bitch of a day."

"Yeah, what's so funny?" Tony, who had walked up behind Sheila as she let out the whistle, asked. "I could hear you guys raising the roof all the way in the kitchen."

"I haven't the slightest idea what these idiots are laughing about but I'm about to bash a few heads in if they don't knock it off," Sheila demanded as she looked from Hunter to Michael and back again.

Hunter was the first to gain control of himself. He couldn't help smiling and chuckling a bit as he explained.

"It's just that when you called Carter here my girlfriend," Hunter began as he climbed to his feet. "And that part about fondling her in public, I couldn't help it."

He began chortling again, though he honestly did try to control it more. Carter wasn't helping by making kissy-faces at him as Michael tried to help her to her feet.

"What's your point?" Sheila didn't miss the air kisses the other woman was throwing at Hunter, and it set her temper boiling. Snickers and giggles circled the room as Sheila waited for him to answer. He covered his mouth to hold in another bout of guffaws.

"She's his cousin, Sis," Michael finished for Hunter, as he helped Carter to her feet.

“His cousin?” she repeated. The disbelief on her face turned to mortification when she turned back to Hunter. “Really? Your cousin?”

“I’m Carter,” the woman said as she extended her hand to Sheila, a bright smile lighting up her face. The same smile Sheila had seen on Hunter’s handsome face more often than not.

“I’m sorry about all of this, but this big butt-head is more like a brother than a cousin. We were practically raised together, and it just struck me funny that anyone would think he was my boyfriend.”

“Um, sorry.” Sheila took the offered hand and shook it. “And I have a few other names that I’ve called him that’s not as polite as butt-head.”

A slow flush crept up Sheila’s face. “I’m Sheila Maxson.” The moment her hand touched Carter’s, Sheila felt a kinship. It wasn’t just the uccisore bloodline but something more.

This tiny woman would be her sister.

*Wow, does Michael feel it too?* She wondered, glancing toward her brother. His face had taken on the mask of sobriety, but she could still see the turmoil in his eyes.

“Hey, Hunter!” The high pitched squeal from behind them, had Hunter turning to see Chandra dodging around tables as she hurried toward him.

“Hey, half-pint, what’s up?” Hunter’s face split into an even wider grin than before as he caught Chandra in a warm hug. “How’re you doing today?”

“Great. Aunt Rae was hungry for Tony’s deviled eggs, so she brought me over with her.” Chandra explained as everyone turned to watch Rae slowly shuffle across the dining room. “Is Uncle Chase still here?”

“I think you just missed him, Chandra. He told me he was going to see if your Aunt Rae had gotten home yet,” Sheila told the girl.

Every man seated jumped to their feet and offered Rae a chair, as she approached. “I need sweet tea, a gallon of it before I melt into a puddle. This heat is going to fry this kid before she even gets here,” Rae complained as she took Michael’s seat.

“Aunt Rae always says that,” Chandra announced loudly. “Hunter, guess what!”

“What?”

“I learned a new move! I took what you’ve been teaching me and added something of my own. Watch this!”

Before anyone could speak a word, the child uccisore grabbed up a butter knife from the table and did a double backflip. She then placed her left foot against the back of a customer’s chair—with the startled customer still holding a fork full of pasta halfway to his open mouth—bounded over the table and landed on her feet. She let the butter knife fly as she landed. The entire episode took less than four seconds to complete, ending with the knife impaling the door jamb that led into the kitchen with a sharp *thwannngg*.

The new dishwasher dropped the tray of clean glasses she was carrying in from the kitchen, screeched like a banshee and scurried back the way she'd come.

Then, pandemonium ensued.

"Chandra Chandler!" Five familiar voices screamed her name in unison.

"What? What did I do?" she asked innocently.

"Holy shit, Chandra! I told you not to do that in my restaurant when there are customers around!" Tony bellowed.

"Hunter, for Christ's sake! What's wrong with you? You're her handler, handle her already!" he demanded as he raced into the kitchen to make sure the young woman he'd only hired that morning, was alright.

She wasn't. The sound of her voice screaming out, "I quit!" rang out through the entire restaurant.

The customer that Chandra had used as a springboard joined in the fray. "This place is a madhouse!" the middle aged man with the receding hairline and souvenir tee shirt stretched across his basketball sized stomach, stated emphatically, throwing his fork onto his plate with a clatter.

"I came here for a quiet lunch and I'm bombarded by people falling down drunk and accosted by a juvenile delinquent throwing knives. I demand to speak to the owner!" He shouted, shoving himself out of his seat and facing the frantic mob. "I demand satisfaction!"

He wadded up his napkin and threw it onto the table by his half eaten meal. "I demand . . ."

His face contorted in pain and turned a darker hue. He gasped out, "I demand . . . an ambulance. I think I'm having a heart attack!" And crumpled to the floor.

"You'd better make that two. My water just broke," Rae said as she looked down at the puddle that had formed at her feet and drenched her flowing summer dress.

Pandemonium became bedlam.

It only took a moment or two of the surrounding chaos before Hunter took charge. With his ability to envision several possible scenarios of any given situation, he began barking orders.

"Chandra, sit!" he ordered the dejected girl. "Sheila, help Rae. Carly, ice chips. Now."

No one thought twice about doing as they were told. The authority that exuded from Hunter was like that of a general commanding his troops in battle.

"Chuck, you, Mike, and Simon, help the civilian. Carter, you're on crowd control," he told his cousin after she'd made the 911 call.

In less than thirty minutes from the time the party started, two ambulances were screaming through the streets of Savannah on their way to the Memorial University Medical Center on Waters Avenue.

As Hunter instructed those left standing in the wake of Chandra's antics, Hunter looked at the pre-teen uccisore and shook his head. "Chandra Rae Chandler," he said in a hissing, frustrated breath.

“I didn’t do anything, Hunter. All I did was show everybody my new moves,” she explained in her best innocent voice.

“*Excuse me?*” he asked. “This is unbelievable even for you. How many times have I told you that you *do not* show off your uccisore skills in public? And what do you do? You not only perform a complicated move that you shouldn’t even know how to do yet, but you do it in the middle of a restaurant with civilian witnesses.”

He glared down at her, forcing himself not to turn her over his knee and give her the spanking that she deserved. “Let’s not forget that you nearly decapitated an innocent employee, gave a civilian a heart attack and sent your aunt into premature labor. What have you got to say for yourself young lady?”

Dear Lord, he was starting to sound like his uncle when he’d scolded Hunter and Lucas when they’d misbehaved.

Hunter brushed off the uneasiness of the brief thought and focused his concentration on Chandra.

“So, you thought the move was too complicated for me?” she asked, her eyes bright with excitement. “I did awesome then, didn’t I?”

“That’s the only thing you heard from everything that I just said?” Hunter asked, incredulous. He groaned and rubbed both hands over his face. When he looked up he saw Sheila standing off to the side watching him with a slight, wistful smile on her face.

*What the hell?* He shook off the thought that that woman could look wistful and turned back to Chandra.

“Here’s what’s going to happen and there will be absolutely zero argument. Do you understand me?” Hunter waited for the child to respond before continuing.

When he saw her head nod and her mouth turn down into a pout, he said, “You are grounded.”

“But, you can’t ground me. Only my parents can do that.” The smug look on her face nearly sent Hunter’s ire into the red zone. The kid had no idea what evil power she truly held over adults.

“You want to bet on that, Little Girl? There will be no more training classes after school. No more trips to the river for fishing lessons, no more stories from Uncle Ben and absolutely, without exception, no more public displays of your uccisore talents.

“If there are,” he said interrupting her when she opened her mouth to protest. “I will personally see to it that Chase removes you from the team.”

That last threat, Hunter knew was the clincher for the deal. Chandra was so proud that she was considered part of Team Nightly, that she pointed it out at every opportunity. Expulsion from the team would devastate the little shit, and that would be akin to her whole world collapsing.

“But, Hunter, you can’t do that!” Chandra cried, her voice full of fear.

“I can and I will. From this day on, you will do things my way. No highway option here, Chandra.” He drew in a deep breath as he watched huge tears well in the little girl’s eyes and slide down her pale cheeks. Seeing a woman cry tore his heart out. But a child’s tears turned Hunter to mush.

“Okay, sweetie. Don’t cry.” He watched Sheila shaking her head and trying to stifle a laugh at seeing this weakness in him. He tried to force back the impulse to pull Chandra into his arms and tell her everything was okay, that he wasn’t angry anymore.

“Chandra. You have to learn that every action, every decision you make affects everyone else around you. Look what happened today,” he pointed out. “If that girl had come out of the kitchen and moved only an inch to her left, you could have killed her when you threw that knife. Bouncing off that man’s chair, scared him to the point that he had a heart attack. That is a life threatening event, honey. He could have died.”

The tears kept falling but Hunter could see by the horrified look in Chandra’s crystal blue eyes that she finally realized what he was saying. She wiped her eyes with the palms of her hands and sniffled as she looked down at her sneaker-clad feet.

Hunter gave her a moment to see if she would respond. He had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling at the expression on the kid’s face as realization finally dawned.

“You mean like what my science teacher says, ‘every action has an equal and opposite reaction’ right? That’s the law of physics.”

“Something like that,” Hunter said unable to contain the little chuckle at the unexpected insight. He looked up as Sheila approached and hoped the easy smile he gave her would be accepted without some snide remark.

“Come on, kiddo. Let’s go to the hospital and meet your new cousin when she gets here,” Sheila said, as she held out her hand to Chandra and avoided his eyes.

