

Staring at us from a seat on the couch was Penny's twin Jenny. She was frozen in place with a wild look in her eyes.

"Oh, tell me she didn't—" Penny sank down on the couch next to her sister.

"Read her mind, Pen. She's freaking out, sure you're going to bite her on the neck any minute." I headed to the kitchen for a fortifying bottle of synthetic I knew wasn't doped. I took my time opening it. When I got back to the living room I heard Penny telling her sister how sorry she was about all this.

"The first thing we've got to figure out is if I can thaw her." I took a swallow then set the bottle on the kitchen table, out of the way in case I was successful and Jenny made a break for it. I was going to stop her, of course.

"Look at me, Jenny." I sat on her other side. "I'm going to try to fix it so you can move and talk again. But here's the deal: you can't scream or run out of here. You and Penny need to talk. And I'm Penny's mentor in this so I'll be here too. To help her explain things."

"Whoa. Did you read her mind then, Glory?" Penny's eyes were tearing. "She hates me. I think I'm going to have to just erase this whole night from her memory."

"It would probably be for the best." I took Jenny's hand. "Thaw first. Decisions later. Now no screaming, Jenny. Penny, lock the door and stand in front of it in case she bolts." I stared into the girl's eyes and thought hard about thawing her. To my relief she jerked her hand from mine and glared at me.

"Don't you dare think you're gonna erase my thoughts, you two blood suckers. That demon—oh, Jesus save me!—warned me you'd try it. She said she'd come right back up here and do terrible nasty *hellish* things if you did such a dirty trick."

"Well that's not good." Penny abandoned her post at the door.

"Get back!" Jenny darted across the room when Penny reached for her. "My sister a

vampire! Oh, my blessed Lord. I can't believe it. Show me your fangs but stay waaay over there."

Penny sniffled but did produce a fang-filled grimace. "Satisfied? You think I wanted to become one of these nightmares? It was the most horrifying night of my life." She wiped her eyes. "I wanted to tell you, Jen. But look at how you're reacting." Penny glanced at me. "You were right, Glory. I was crazy to think she'd get it."

"Get that you're an even bigger freak now than you've always been?" Jenny was shaking so badly she had to lean against the wall. "How did this happen?"

"That's not important. It's done. I can't go back." Penny tried to approach her sister but Jenny squealed and tossed a book from the shelf at her.

"Stay away from me. I mean it." Jenny frantically searched for escape but quickly figured out we had the only avenue blocked.

"I won't bite you. Ever." Penny held up her hands.

"Pinky swear?" Jenny started to hold out her little finger then seemed to think better of it.

"Jeez. Are we in third grade? Quit looking at me like that. I repeat: I won't bite you." Penny slouched over to the couch. "Yeah, I'm a certified freak now. It was bad enough being a brainiac. Never having a date in high school that Daddy didn't pay for."

"Oh, that was just for prom and Daddy didn't exactly pay Cousin Jimmy, just offered to gas up his truck once a week until he graduated from vocational school." Jenny felt her way across the wall to a chair and collapsed into it. Then she jerked up the neckline of her sweater until it was at her lower lip. "Glory, that d-d-demon said you were a real old vampire, hundreds of years old. Is that right?"

I got my bottle of blood off the table and took a drink. "Yes, that's right. So kind of Alesa to fill you in. And, quit worrying about your neck. This is a bottle of synthetic blood. I drink it instead of people."

"What about you, Pen? Are you into the bottled stuff too? Or"—Jenny swallowed—"draining people dry and leaving their dead bodies in alleys."

“Quit sounding like a grade B movie, Jen. I drink the bottled stuff or hit my boyfriend’s vein during sex.” Penny flushed. “At least as a vampire I don’t have trouble getting dates. Trey’s actually an ancient shape-shifter. He appreciates a woman with a full figure. And his blood is awesome.”

“My God in Heaven!” Jenny shrank back in the chair. “You people are insane. That demon—Jesus save me!—she proved to me that she’s real with some horrible tricks. So I know you’re not lying, but Pen! This world, what you are . . .” Suddenly Jenny’s eyes rolled and she fainted dead away.

“That was fun.” I stomped the hardwood floor. “Thanks a heap for the parting gift, Alesa.” I glared at Penny. “And did you have to brag about taking Trey’s vein? That was the final straw, you know.”

“I couldn’t help it. She’s a cheerleader. And all that in her sorority. This vampire thing is my one bragging right.” Penny flushed then knelt in front of Jenny and patted her cheeks. “What are we going to do, Glory?”

“I’ll get a cool cloth for her cheeks. Why don’t you move her to the couch?” I finished off my synthetic then headed for the kitchen where I ran water over a dish towel. I carried it into the living room while I went through all the potential Jenny complications in my mind. I understood where Penny was coming from and wasn’t about to fuss at her again.

“She’s coming around. I know you don’t want me to do it, but I have to make the offer.” Penny gave me a hard look.

“I get it, she’s your twin. Now that she knows the truth about you, make it and see what she says.” I settled into a chair to watch the show.

“Jenny...” Penny wiped her sister’s face with the cloth. “Wake up and talk to me.”

“What?” Jenny sat upright with a wild look on her face. I was familiar with it. It was the look of someone who expected to be taken down a pint any minute.

“Please. I promise you will never need to be scared of me. I won’t drink from you. You smell

delicious, of course”—Penny smiled and I wanted to pinch her for stirring the pot—“but I just couldn’t do that to you.”

Jenny had started murmuring the Lord’s Prayer at that smell comment.

“If I have to shake you like a tambourine to get you to calm down and listen to your sister, I will.” I said it quietly but Jenny got the message.

“Uh, okay. Talk.” She looked from me to Penny.

“Vampires, like Glory and me, are immortal. We live forever unless some wiseguy manages to stake us.” Penny paused when Jenny’s eyes darted around the room. “Looking for a stake? Trust me, you couldn’t do it. Not only aren’t you strong enough to take me out, but,” Penny reached out and gripped Jenny’s arm, “I don’t think you really want to kill me, do you?”

“N, n, no.” Jenny’s eyes filled with tears. “But this is bizarre.”

“I know. I still wake up from my death sleep and think it can’t be true.” Penny shook her head. “Can you believe it? I’ll look like this forever. Nineteen. Exactly this size.” Penny frowned down at her admittedly chubby figure. “That part’s a bitch.”

“Seriously? You can’t diet or exercise to get rid of that roll?” Jenny actually reached out and lifted Penny’s jacket to snag the bulge at her waist. The immortality thing seemed to have gone right over her head.

“No, but I’ve invested in a lot of Spanx. Now hear me, Jen. You have a perfect figure. Are young and beautiful. If you want to stay like that forever . . . Well, I can arrange to have you turned.”

“Turned.” Jenny snatched her hand back. “Vampire? May God have mercy on us both. You would do that? Condemn me to hell along with you?”

“Now just a damned minute. Penny is a good person. The same good person she was before a deranged vampire made her a vamp against her will. She is not going to hell. Get that into your pretty, empty head, missy.” I jumped to my feet and got in her face. I also let her see my impressive four hundred year old fangs. That sight was enough to make her fall back into the

corner of the couch, pale and shaking.

“N-no offense, Glory. Seriously. I just thought . . .”

“No, you didn’t. You judged us based on comic books and movies. You don’t know who we really are.” I sat back down. “Penny, this is a bad idea. The council will never go for it.”

“You don’t know that. I could ask Damian first. Explain the circumstances. He has a sister in the program.”

“Program?” Jenny’s voice went up three octaves. “This is a program?” She shoved Penny away from her. “I’ve been thinking. I haven’t seen you during the day for months, have I, Pen? I bet you can’t go out in the daylight.”

“No, I can’t.” Penny frowned as Jenny sat up.

“And our donut and coffee runs are history now. Can you even eat real food?”

“No again. We drink blood, that’s all. But we have good synthetics like Glory said. I can get you set up with that.”

Jenny dug into her purse. “I’m thinking the movies aren’t all a crock.” She pulled out her compact then swept me with a disdainful glance. “Glory, you fall onto your blush brush tonight? Obviously you people can’t see yourselves in a mirror.” She checked her reflection, wiped lipstick off her front tooth then passed it to Penny.

“That would be a no.” Penny passed it back without pretending to glance at it.

“And you expect me to buy into this?” Jenny thrust the compact into her Dooney & Bourke tote. “You’re nuts. How would I go to cheer practice? Attend class? Organize the pledge breakfast? I could go on and on. Things you two wouldn’t understand but are important to me.” Jenny gave me a superior look. “While I realize Glory knows some interesting people . . .” She grabbed Penny’s thigh, suddenly not so high and mighty. “Oh. My. God. Are you telling me Israel Caine is a vampire?”

“Not telling you anything. I just happen to know him.” I got up and sent Penny a mental message to let this go for tonight.

“Now listen to me, Jenny. Penny made the offer. We get it. You’re not interested. Fine. But you will not tell anyone else about your sister, vampires, any of it. Understand?” I looked her in the eyes. “If you do there will be bad consequences. To you and your family.”

“My family?” Jenny turned to Penny. “You wouldn’t let them hurt Mom and Dad, would you?”

Penny understood even if her sister didn’t. “Our survival depends on staying under the radar. I couldn’t stop the vampire council if they decided you were a danger to vampires in Austin. They might come after you, or just start with Grammy and Grandpa. To make a statement.”

“Oh, God save us all. What have you gotten us into, Pen?”

“Penny didn’t get you into anything, Jenny. She was dragged kicking and screaming into this paranormal world but she’s making the best of it. You really should be proud of how she’s adapted after a major trauma. But you’re too self-involved. Obviously.” I gripped Jenny’s elbow and got her to her feet. I could tell that she didn’t like my hand on her. “Now I bet you have to get back to the sorority house. And we crash at dawn.”

“Oh, right.” Jenny glanced at her watch. “Look at the time. I don’t know how long I sat there. And then that demon—Lord above watch over me!—told me you had moved out, Penny. You should have told me!” She glared at her sister.

“It was recent. And you don’t usually drop by.” Penny kept apologizing until Jenny shook her head.

“Never mind. I, uh, love you no matter what you are but I need some time. And my lips are sealed.” She put up her hand and shook her head again when Penny tried to hug her.

“They’d better be. Vampires are everywhere, Jenny. We will know if you let our secret slip. Believe me.” I was aggravated that Jenny still wouldn’t touch Penny when she so obviously needed reassurance.

“Okay. I get it. I said I’ll keep quiet. You tell that to your nasty council. No one needs to get hurt to make me keep my mouth shut.” She grabbed her purse and made it to the door on wobbly

heels.

“Jenny.” Penny was tearing up. “I’m sorry. About that demon. She really scared you, didn’t she?”

“I’ll say. Look.” Jenny held out her shaking hands and we could see that she’d bitten her cuticles until they were red and bleeding. The smell of that blood made Penny and me sigh. “You know how I worked to break that habit. One bad night and I’m ruined again.”

“I’m sorry. Best get home and put some cream on them then.” Penny practically shoved her twin out the door. “Good night.”

We looked at each other as soon as Jenny was out of sight. “Synthetic.” A trip to the fridge for both of us and then Penny had to hurry to Trey’s before the sun caught her. I was ready to hit the sheets. It had been a long night.

First I looked in a mirror. Yep, Lucifer had taken away that gift. No surprise there. So I grabbed my computer monitor that had a webcam I used like a mirror. Ian’s tranquilizer that he’d obviously slipped into my synthetic had given me a case of ruddy cheeks that would have made a Highland sheep herder look pale. I wasted a few minutes rubbing in moisturizer I knew wouldn’t help then fell into bed. I didn’t want to think about what came next.