

CROSSROADS

CHAPTER ONE

It's never a good thing when you're awakened from a deep sleep by someone pounding on the front door.

It's worse when you stumble downstairs and see it's a cop.

A cop you recognize.

My first impulse is to creep back upstairs and pretend I'm not home. But I know this cop. He's probably already gone around back and checked the garage. Both my Jag and the Ford Crown Vic I use for work are parked inside. He knows I'm home.

Crap.

I pull open the door.

"Detective Harris. What a surprise."

For a pain-in-the-ass cop, he's not bad looking. Five-ten—probably one hundred eighty pounds. Dark hair touched at the temples with gray. Square jaw, serious eyes. Beneath that off-the-rack suit, a body I suspect is neither lean nor flabby. Carries himself like he was once an athlete—a boxer, maybe. Now he's a fortysomething man fighting middle-age spread and from the looks of it, winning the battle.

The suit tells me he's not here on a social visit.

He gives me the once-over. I'm barefoot, wearing a pair of running shorts and a tank top. As a vampire, I'm not bothered by the effects of ambient temperature so I could be wearing anything. Or the nothing I was wearing two seconds ago when I crawled out of bed.

A bed still occupied, by the way.

Harris purses his lips, glances away as if uncomfortable. “Sorry to disturb you so early. Would you like to run upstairs and put some clothes on? I can wait.”

I pull the door open wider and motion him inside. He’s the one who appeared at the door at seven a.m. on a Sunday morning. Unannounced. I’m not exposing anything more than the joggers he sees every day on the street. I wave away the suggestion. “I’d rather put the coffee on.”

He follows me to the kitchen. He watches silently as I go about filling the coffeemaker, grinding beans, setting the machine to brew. He still hasn’t said why he’s here. We’re not friends. Our paths have crossed a few times. Most recently, with the death a couple of months ago of the ex-police chief, Warren Williams, a vampire, too, though of course Harris doesn’t know that.

Or that Williams was killed by another vampire.

Could it just be a few weeks? Seems like much longer. Williams’ death set into motion a chain of events that changed my life.

Forever.

I’ve got my back to Harris and allow a smile. To a vampire, *forever* takes on a whole new meaning.

Harris clears his throat. I turn, grab two mugs and join him at the table.

He takes one of the mugs, says, “Thanks.”

That’s it?

I pause, waiting to see if he’s going to tell me the reason for this early morning visit. The bell on the coffeemaker chimes before he does. I take cream from the fridge and sugar from the counter, set out spoons and pour us each a cup of coffee before plunking myself down on a chair across from him.

I take a sip, let the magic of caffeine awaken half-sleeping brain cells. Harris seems to be doing the same. He’s avoiding my eyes now. Concentrating on the mug in his hand with far more attention than he needs to.

This is getting old.

“Did you have a reason for stopping by unannounced at seven a.m., Harris? Or was my place closer than Dunkin’ Donuts?”

When he looks up, there is a strange expression on his face. And I’ve been on the receiving end of plenty of his expressions. Negative expressions, mostly. Anger, frustration, exasperation being the most common. This one is different. Hesitant. He’s got something on his mind and he doesn’t know how to bring it up.

That’s certainly out of character.

I wish I could worm my way into his head the way I can with vampires. But Harris is human and there is no psychic connection between vampires and humans. A design flaw for sure.

Finally, whatever battle he’s been fighting is resolved. He sits up in his chair and pushes the cup aside.

“I don’t know why I’m coming to you with this,” he says. “You always seem to be mixed up in cases you have no business being mixed up in. The child molester a while back, the murder investigation involving that model, the missing DEA agent. But you had the respect of Warren Williams, and he was a good man. You were one of the last people to see him alive.”

My turn to fix my mug with a riveting gaze. Where is he going with this?

“I know his wife believes you had something to do with his death,” Harris continues. “I don’t. But we just got the last of the forensic reports from his car. We found something—”

He pauses, as if searching for the right word. After a moment, he shrugs. “Odd. We found something odd.”

I wait, wondering. Williams was set on fire by another old-soul vampire. There would have been nothing left but ash.

Wouldn’t there?

I compose the question carefully. “What could you have found? I thought the body was completely burned.”

“So did we. At first.” He pulls a sheet of paper from an inside jacket pocket and smooths it open on the table. “But turns out, our CSI’s found something. DNA. And what they learned about that DNA has us baffled.”

To keep the shock from registering on my face, I hoist my coffee mug and take a long pull. I don’t know much about DNA, but I do know about vampires. When a vampire is immolated, there’s nothing left to run tests on. Williams was identified by his badge and wedding ring.

Finally, I lower the mug. “I don’t understand.” An understatement.

Harris raises his eyebrows. “Neither do I. When a body is burned at high temperature, like cremation, there’s usually no testable nuclear DNA left. But in this case, three things were able to be determined by something called mitochondrial DNA found in a bone fragment fused on his ring. It was human. It was Williams’. It was over two hundred years old.”

My hand tightens around the mug, a gesture not lost on Harris. He leans toward me.

“The FBI lab is asking questions. Questions I can’t answer.”

“And you think I can?”

Evidently Harris can’t or won’t answer that question, either.

My turn now to stall, my brain racing into overdrive, as I rearrange silverware, straighten the sugar bowl and creamer. I have no idea what I’m supposed to say to Harris. That Williams was indeed two hundred years old—a two-hundred-year-old vampire, to be exact—and he was killed by another vampire who was even older? That sitting across the table from him drinking coffee is yet another vampire? Not so old, but even stronger than either of them. One who had fought Williams many times and won. One who was kidnapped by Williams’ killer, and in turn, killed the bastard when he tried to rape me.

I feel Harris watching, waiting. I throw out the only lame explanation I can think of. “Maybe there was someone else in the car.”

Stupid.

Harris doesn’t mock me, though, he simply says,

“Someone two hundred years old?” A shake of the head. “The DNA belongs to Williams. There’s no doubt about that. The comparison sample was taken from a hairbrush found in his locker at SDPD. The big question isn’t *who* the DNA belongs to, but how it could be two hundred years old.”

“And you’re asking me, why? Ask the Feds. The lab must have made a mistake.”

“Could be.” Harris pushes away from the table. “They’re running a second set of tests.” He stands, lets a moment pass. Then, “I was sorry to hear about your boyfriend, Lance something?”

I look up. That’s an abrupt change of subject. “I didn’t know you knew Lance.”

“I didn’t. Just heard he was killed. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Does he know more than he’s letting on? Lance was a well-known model. He was also a vampire and the one who arranged for me to be kidnapped by his sire. A bitter betrayal that left a wound that still festers. I loved him.

It didn’t stop me from killing him.

The laws that govern vampires are different from the laws that govern humans. To the real world, Lance was killed in an automobile accident. His cremated remains were sent to his family in South Africa. The family that knew him as an eighty-four-year-old under a different name. So far, no one’s made the connection.

Still, when I meet Harris’ eyes, I see the unspoken accusation.

Men I become involved with have a nasty habit of disappearing. Or dying.

And to Harris, Williams and Lance were prominent men in my life. His scrutiny raises feelings I don’t want to acknowledge. Feelings of pain, treachery, betrayal.

Then, in what can only be described as epic bad timing, a male voice calls out from the head of the stairs. “Anna, what’s going on down there? I thought you were coming right back up.”

Harris’ eyebrows leap. “New boyfriend? You don’t waste much time.”

Shit. Stephen was headed for the shower when I came downstairs. I figured I would have gotten rid of Harris by now. I shrug.

“Does this new guy have a name?”

Why, so you can keep an eye out for an obit? I shrug again. “I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

Which precipitates a staring contest.

Harris breaks eye contact first. “Okay. You’re right. Your personal life is none of my business. Williams’ death is. I know Williams was a good cop and a good leader. What I don’t know is much about his private life. You were closer to him than most. If there’s anything you can tell me to help clear this case, I’d appreciate the help.”

He drains his cup. I wait. He starts for the door.

“His killer is still out there. Until he or she is caught, I’ll be keeping a close eye on anyone who had contact with Williams during those last days.”

The words are spoken casually enough, but the meaning is clear. I follow him to the door, eyes on his back, understanding.

He’ll be keeping an eye on me.

I close the door and lean my head against it.

Great. Harris is never going to solve this case because there’s nothing to solve. Does that mean I’m going to have him on my ass forever?

There’s that word again. Forever. This time, I don’t feel like smiling.

I trek back into the kitchen, refill my own coffee cup, grab an extra mug for Stephen and head upstairs.

He’s on the phone.

Dressed.

I hold a mug out to him and he takes it, smiles a thanks, and keeps talking.

I plop down on the edge of the bed and watch him.

Stephen and I have been together for a little over a month. He’s human, but after being thrown together on an astral plain, barely escaping with our lives, and killing a monster who

followed us back to earth, a bond was formed. It seems silly for an immortal thirty-year-old to call someone a boyfriend, and “lover” sounds frivolous, but that’s what he’s become to me. Friend and lover.

I pick up the thread of his conversation and realize what I’m hearing.

He’s leaving.

When he rings off, and looks at me, he knows I know.

“It’s just a week,” he says. “The network wants me to anchor the evening news while Katie is on assignment.”

He says it like it’s no big deal, like it’s business as usual. But I see the excitement shining from his face. For a coanchor and lead investigative reporter on the local circuit, it’s a very big deal.

“Wow. So next week, I’ll be seeing you on the evening news?”

He puts the mug on the bed stand and sits down beside me. “You could come with me.”

I trace the angle of his jaw with my finger. “Tempting, but I imagine you’ll be pretty busy.”

He slips his arms around me and pulls me close. “I’m going to miss this.”

I lay my head on his shoulder. “Me, too.”

Damn it.

Me, too.

With Stephen gone, I have no plans for the day ahead. I eye the bed, wondering if I should crawl back under the covers.

There’s an ache in my gut, though, and I know I’ve waited too long. It’s been a month since I fed from the blood of the demon Stephen and I killed.

Two months since the first anniversary of my becoming when I assumed the mantle of the Chosen One. I’ve gone about my daily routine as if nothing had changed when in reality, everything has changed.

I move out to the deck off my bedroom and sink into a chaise. The sun is hot on my face. It feels good. I can almost feel my blood warming though I know that's an illusion. Only feeding and sex warm a vampire's blood.

And it's been hours since Stephen and I made love.

He would have let me feed from him, if I'd asked. He knows and accepts I'm a vampire. But sometimes I enjoy simple human coupling. Let's me enjoy the illusion that I'm normal if only for a little while.

I sip coffee. A few blocks away, the ocean sparkles under a flawless summer sky. I live in Mission Beach, near the boardwalk. I love it here. The sea is vibrant, alive. People drawn to it are vibrant and alive, too. Kids at play in the sand, surfers bobbing on the waves, sunbathers eschewing warnings of dire consequences to bake pale skin to a toasty brown. All share a common bond. They are human. They belong.

I drain my cup, rise to go inside. I'm feeling the effects of lack of blood. Like a diabetic without insulin, my body is slowing down, my mind becoming sluggish. I'd better call Culebra and make sure he can arrange a host to meet me at Beso de la Muerte. I can't afford to let myself become vulnerable—not anymore. Not to anyone.