

TOUCH OF MADNESS

Chapter 1

Something was lurking behind the clean white paint and tasteful carpet of the hospital hallway where I walked. It raised the hairs on my neck and tingled right at the edge of my psychic senses. My mind screamed *vampires*, even though I couldn't see them. But that was to be expected. After all, despite my better judgment, the Thrall were the reason I was here.

"Hey, Reilly! Kate!"

I started at the sudden noise hard enough to nearly stumble, and realized just how tightly strung I was today. Denver Detective John Brooks was walking toward me, looking natty, but uncomfortable. While I hadn't expected to see him here, when I thought about it I realized I shouldn't be surprised. After all, he's Not Prey, just like me.

He smiled, but underneath was the same tension I was feeling. Funny how we're having the same reaction to the psychic parasites that had nearly killed us both a few months before.

"I was hoping I'd know at least one other Not Prey here today. How you doing?"

"Better than last time you saw me." I raised my arm over my head and wiggled my fingers. "See, I've got use of the shoulder again. Definitely an improvement. How about you?"

"Well, I'm still employed and haven't been demoted—which is saying something after the fall-out of Queen Monica's death." He raised up the corner of one snow-white cuff, with a real gold cufflink attached, reminding me he looked good today, better than me. Despite being a large man, made of muscle, not fat, he's one of those almost impossibly well-groomed people. Today his suit was a dark charcoal that wasn't quite black. His shirt nearly gleamed under the fluorescents, and his perfectly knotted tie was red with charcoal stripes that matched the suit. He's shorter than I am, but is almost as broad as he is tall. It made me wonder if somewhere in the background there was a Mrs. Brooks who took care of getting his suits specially tailored and his shirts starched. I'd never asked. There hadn't really been the opportunity when we'd first met, and it hadn't come up since.

I could see three pale, shiny lines against his ebony skin that disappeared up under the cloth. "Your fingernails left a nice set of scars down one arm, though. I can't *tell* you how much I've enjoyed the ribbing about that down at the station." He snorted and it made me laugh. First time today, which is why I like the man.

"Well, it's not my fault you only had one set of handcuffs to hold me down while that *thing* tried to turn me into the freaking new vampire queen." I paused for a moment and fought off a shudder. Maybe a subject change, even though it wouldn't be much of one. "So, how did they drag you into this?"

Brooks' eyes darkened. He gave me a look of utter disgust. "Office politics. The Chief of Police called me personally. He went on and on about how we need to do everything we possibly can to reassure the public under the circumstances."

"Under what circumstances?"

"We had a hundred fifty corpses, Kate, including political big wigs. The whole mess was

on the national news, complete with photos. All the people who'd tried to pretend vampires don't exist came face to face with the ugly truth. Now they expect *us* to do something about it." He gave a derisive snort. "How about you?"

"Familial blackmail." I answered dryly.

He laughed, loudly enough to draw the attention of several of the nurses who stood down the hall leaning against the raised counter, their brightly colored cotton scrubs still immaculate. One or two of them waved, still cheerful and energetic. It was early, the beginning of a new shift. I could tell. Everybody was too clean, too happy. That shiny good humor usually wears off about the first time they wheel a gunshot wound or accident victim through the doors.

"My brother Joe—you remember him, don't you?" When Brooks nodded, I continued. "Well, he works here at St. Elizabeth's, and he's been getting a lot of pressure from higher up in the food chain. They pushed him to convince me to participate in this stupid research study. Naturally, I told him where to go and how to get there, so he finally had to resort to emotional blackmail to get me walking down this hallway." I paused. "The last thing I ever wanted to do again in this lifetime was deal with those damned parasites."

Brooks nodded and his whole body took on a serious-as-death stance. "It almost *was* the last thing you did. But we don't have any choice—not really. We're two of only a dozen or so humans acknowledged as Not Prey. We get a certain level of hard-earned respect, but there's a price."

Shaking my head, I turned and we started toward the elevator, side by side. We garnered more than a few nervous glances as we did. I'm six foot one, a redhead, and was clad in thick black leather with plenty of snaps and zippers. I was keeping a brisk pace with an obviously annoyed black man who is built like a brick wall, and has that undefined quality that screams *cop*. "Yeah, yeah. I know. That's what finally convinced me. You'd think being bitten but avoiding infestation would be enough, wouldn't you? My natural psychic abilities have given me a near-permanent connection to the hive. Only three things seem to help shut them out."

"Yeah?" he asked as he pushed the button to call the elevator. "What works?"

The bottom of my braid had gotten caught in one of the sleeve zippers again, so I yanked it free. "The first, heavy metal or hard rock music played *loud*."

"Better you than me. I can't stand rock. I'm a jazz and blues sort of guy."

I laughed, because I could actually imagine Brooks hanging out in a smoky Harlem speak-easy in the 20's. "The second is shielding—something I'm just beginning to learn. The third, and most effective by far is staying in the presence of a lycanthrope."

His eyebrows raised lightly and he fought not to smile. "I'll bet I know your preferred choice of werewolf, too. How is Mr. Bishop lately?"

I did smile, because he was right. The werewolf I met when Queen Monica targeted me as her replacement, and who had risked his neck to save me from losing my mind to the hive, was pretty much my steady date now. So far, we're pretty happy. "Tom's doing well. He kept his job too, and is hoping to get into fire jumping school. The jury's still out on that."

Brooks checked the heavy gold watch on his wrist and frowned. "That elevator had better get moving. We're going to be late."

The bell rang and the doors opened with a soft whoosh. A moment later, we stepped into the brightly lit hall with a faint antiseptic smell. I felt . . . something, a much stronger something

than downstairs. I stopped, laying my hand on Brooks's arm.

"Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?" His eyes narrowed. He looked from one end of the hall to the other, his expression cautious.

I shook my head. There was something stirring. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end and I felt my skin begin to crawl under the heavy leather of my biker jacket.

"I'm not sure." I admitted. "You don't feel anything?"

"Nah." He snorted instead of laughing. "But I never do."

"Lucky bastard." I meant it. My latent psychic abilities were what had drawn the Thrall to me in the first place. They'd tried twice now to make me the local queen. If I'd been as head blind as Brooks they might have left me the hell alone.

"Oh, I don't know. It might be handy having an early warning system."

It was my turn to snort. "That advantage is *so* outweighed by the problems it isn't even funny."

"Let's get this over with." He loosened my grip on his suit coat and started down the corridor, turning left and following the little black and white sign glued on the wall at eye level. I followed a few steps behind. I tried to convince myself there was no reason to be nervous. Even I didn't believe me. Brooks sure as hell didn't. I could tell from the tension in his shoulders and the way his eyes darted suspiciously around the hall, missing nothing.

Dr. Miles MacDougal was waiting in the corridor outside the conference room. He's a small, slender man standing 5'6" or so with a huge, bushy moustache that unkind souls would say is meant to compensate for the thinning dark hair that barely covers his head. He kept checking his watch, then looking down the hall impatiently.

When he saw the two of us approaching his homely face broke into a satisfied smile.

"Kate! John! You came!" He sounded both delighted and relieved. I could tell he'd had his doubts whether Joe could deliver me as promised . . . money or no. Actually, I'd lied a little to Brooks. The truth was the money had swayed me—especially since the money from selling my motorcycle was nearly gone.

He turned, pulling open the door and holding it open for us.

"Samantha, they've arrived."

A stunningly beautiful woman stepped forward. She had dark hair and wide blue eyes set in a heart-shaped face. The body beneath her white lab coat was slender, but perfectly proportioned. She turned, giving Dr. MacDougal a dimpled smile that would've melted a heart of stone. His reaction was typical. There was a good three-second pause before Miles collected himself enough to make introductions.

"Kate, John, this is Dr. Samantha Greeley. Dr. Greeley is in charge of the study—"

"I thought—" I started to interrupt, but he talked over me, as if he'd actually expected the interruption.

"She's managed to gather together Not Prey from all over the world to participate." He gestured to the oblong conference table. Eight of the seats were taken by a remarkable variety of people, all of whom were eyeing Brooks and me with interest as they munched on their bagels or sipped the drinks they'd selected from a refreshment table tucked discreetly into the corner of the room. Next to it was a young black man half-hidden behind a tripod and video equipment.

“Ms. Reilly, Mr. Brooks, it’s a pleasure. I’ve heard so much about you both.” She gestured for us to take a seat as she began making introductions around the table. “Mr. Yakimoto is visiting us from Japan.” I gave a brief nod to a tall, elderly Japanese man with thick rimless spectacles and a crisply pressed navy pinstriped suit and received a similar nod in return.

Greeley continued down the table introducing a teenaged girl wearing an oversized letter jacket of green wool and white leather as Antonia Webster, who was here with her mother, Julia. Next were Digby Wallace, a redheaded Aussie with a broad freckled face, and a 350 pound, bleached-blond biker chick named Rikki Jacobs.

She sat silently, staring into space, her eyes vaguely unfocused. I recognized the gang logo on the sleeveless vest she wore over her black Harley-Davidson tee-shirt. There were elaborate “sleeve” tattoos on each of her arms, beautiful work if you appreciated such things. She turned slowly at the sound of my name. The look she gave me was . . . unsettling. I didn’t have time to dwell on it, though. Samantha Greeley had moved on to introduce Mrs. Emily Patterson, a prim little schoolmarm of a woman in a pretty floral print dress with a white lace collar. I wondered what might have caused to earn the Not Prey title. She didn’t seem capable of much more than attending a quilting bee.

Last, but not least, was Henri Tané, a small, withered black man with liquid brown eyes and a stiff new suit. Something in the shape of his face made me think of Jamaica or one of the other tropical islands.

Haiti. A voice leapt in my head, thick accent and all. It is a true pleasure to meet you, Kate Reilly. I have heard much about you, though perhaps from unusual sources. He smiled, showing slightly crooked white teeth.

Following good meeting etiquette, Brooks pulled his seat forward and turned toward the screen. I, on the other hand, was much too unsettled to do anything of the sort. I’m paranoid by both profession and nature. It’s served me well over the years. I took my chair and pulled it away from the table until I sat with my back to the corner with a clear view of the door. While his eyes were focused steadily on Dr. Greeley, Henri continued speaking to me mind-to-mind while I poured a glass of water from the sweating pitcher on the large black tray in the center of the table.

You felt it as well? I do not know what it is she plays at – but it is a dangerous game. We shall be cautious, you and I.

I couldn’t help but glance at him. I’m just not accustomed to talking without looking at the person. *I’m always cautious.*

*Which is why you are here – and why **they** fear you.*

I somehow doubted the Thrall *feared* me – or much of anything else. Although things had certainly changed in the past few months. The Thrall had always been a fact of life, existing mostly in the shadows, in the larger cities. The nests and herds had generally been kept small and secret enough that most people had considered them to be yet another “urban legend.” The previous queen of Denver had changed all that. She’d increased the size of both the nest and the herd, and had chosen prominent, highly placed people. The plan had worked to a point. Under her “rule” herd members lived longer, healthier lives. The nest, too, had prospered. But she’d made two major mistakes. Ignoring her own mortality, she left off breeding her replacement queen until almost too late. As her host body weakened, so had her hold on her nest so that a few

of the strongest and most desperate had gone against the orders of the queens to attack me directly.

Her second mistake was to choose me as the replacement host. It had been touch and go, but with the help of my friends and family I'd managed to kill the eggs and hatchlings – causing the death of the Denver nest and most of its herds. I gave an involuntary shiver and pulled my jacket tight around me to fight a chill that had nothing to do with the breeze blowing down from the air conditioning duct.

Did you notice, all of us here are from the western nations? Do you know why? Henri's voice in my mind was pleasant, almost amused.

I hadn't noticed until he mentioned it. I shook my head no ever so slightly, while fighting to keep my eyes on Dr. Greeley at the front of the room.

When you destroyed the nest the pictures were shown all over the world. In those countries less sensitive to human rights issues anyone even suspected of being host or herd was hunted down, executed.

I snorted lightly and took a sip of water to cover it. *Bet quite a few political dissidents were accidentally eliminated in the process.*

No doubt. But the queens, they are afraid now. They were few, now fewer. They fear extinction.

Aw damn. Wouldn't that just break my heart?

I saw Henri's shoulders shake with silent laughter. Brooks might not be psychic enough to have heard the conversation, but he's observant as hell. He noticed the old man's mirth and gave me a warning look just as Dr. Greeley turned to glare at me.

I didn't wilt. Then again, I never do. I went to Catholic schools for twelve years. Far as I've been able to determine nobody, and I do mean *nobody* can give you a worse glare than a pissed off nun.

"Now that everyone is *here*," she said the word to have double meaning, "I'll begin the presentation."

I gave her my brightest smile. It wasn't sincere, but it was sweet enough to rot the teeth out of her head. It didn't take a psychic gift to know I had thrown her off her game. "Mason, get the lights . . . and hurry it up."

I turned to see the young black man step from behind the tripod long enough to turn off three of the four rows of overhead lights. She hadn't introduced him, and the condescension in her voice when issuing the order had been enough to raise my hackles. Mason didn't appear offended: his entire being seemed focused on his work. Brooks' eyes, however, had narrowed significantly, and I could see the tension spread in his massive shoulders.

Dr. Greeley hit a button on her laptop and a PowerPoint slide appeared on the screen on the far wall. It depicted the life cycle of a Thrall in sterile, clinical detail. She began speaking to us using a voice polished from frequent public speaking. "The *heterotroph hippocratia* are a highly developed species with a unique culture and highly evolved hive society. Until very recently, the exceptionally short life-span of the host/heterotroph symbiant—" she prompted the next slide to appear, as she continued unabated, "created a fundamental conflict between the two primary intelligent species of our planet."

I saw her glance discreetly around the room to see if she'd lost us yet. While none of the

audience appeared particularly riveted, nobody's attention seemed to be wandering . . . except for Rikki. But she was no more unfocused than she'd been when I'd walked in, so I was betting it wasn't the lecture.

“Recently, however, a particularly intelligent *heterotroph* queen discovered a means of significantly extending the lifespan of a symbiant. Working with this queen we were able to obtain a number of eggs which were cryogenically preserved until funding could be obtained for the full project.”

There was no hiding the admiration in her voice. I sat dumbstruck. The queen she was referring to was the late Queen Monica, and a nastier piece of work you've never seen.

“Until the *heterotrophs* merge into the human and enter the symbiant stage, they are only able to communicate telepathically. Since telepathy is a very rare gift among the human population, early communication has never previously been attempted.” She hit the button and a slide showing a new hatchling appeared. I gave an involuntary shudder. Only a few months ago I'd had one of those slimy little maggots trying to climb into my mouth to take over my mind and my body. The mental wound was too new, too raw, for me not to react.

Dr. Greeley was droning on. “Until recently, becoming a host meant a severely shortened life span, along with the loss of free will. The goal of this study is to cut off the original bond to the Heterotroph collective and create a conduit of communication between the heterotroph eggs and psychically gifted humans so that both species can work together to find a way live a full cooperative life span with joint awareness and control of the shared body.” She turned, looking at each of us in turn, her smile bright and shiny as a newly minted coin, while a weight, heavy as lead, began to form in my stomach.

“We hope that by working together we can come up with solutions to so many of the issues that try our peoples, where telepathy could play a significant and helpful role. The possibilities are nearly endless, but some examples would be the ability to communicate with coma patients, the possibility of reviving Eden zombies, and so very much more.”

I understood now why Joe had been so insistent – and how Miles had “hooked” him on the idea. My baby brother Bryan is a former Eden zombie. The only good thing that had come from my confrontation with Monica was that he'd had what the doctors were referring to as a “partial recovery.” Now instead of being a total zombie, he had the mind of a four year-old child. Since not one single Eden zombie had ever recovered even that much of their ability, physicians from around the world were flying in to study my brother to see if there was any way to duplicate the effect.

Drug abuse, in general, was up in all the developed countries. But Eden was the worst. Not only was it the most addicting – but one single misstep in the preparation would result in anyone who used the “bad” drugs becoming empty shells with no mind or will of their own. Hope for a cure was no doubt the lure Greeley had used to obtain her funding.

While my mind had been wandering Greeley kept talking. I missed some of it, and would have missed more if I hadn't heard Henri gasp inside my mind.

“You *what?*” Brooks' voice was a controlled roar and I fought my way back to reality to figure out what was happening.

Greeley gave him a steely glare. “We have incubated one hundred of the eggs provided by Queen Monica—”

I stared at her, horrified. “Where?” I kept my voice controlled, despite the panic that was tightening my chest. I asked, though I was very much afraid I knew the answer. Suddenly the buzz that had been in the back of my mind from the time I’d entered the hospital had a logical explanation.

“The eggs are being maintained in a safe, sterile—”

“WHERE?”

She placed hands on her hips, which caused the wireless remote in her hand to flip to the next slide—and a picture of what must be an incubation chamber appeared twice real-life size. “Really Ms. Reilly! There’s no need to shout!”

It took every ounce of my self-control not to rise from my seat, grab her by the lapels and *shake* the information out of her. Instead, I gripped the edge of the conference table, my nails digging little half-moon shapes into the blonde wood.

“Oh my God.” I heard a whisper from the far side of the table. The teenager in the letter jacket was staring at the screen. She’d paled until her skin was the color of bleached paper. “Mom, we need to go NOW.” She turned to face her mother, white showing all around the irises of her eyes. “She has them *here!*”

Mrs. Webster didn’t need to be told twice. She rose to her feet abruptly enough to send her chair clattering backward onto the floor. “Dr. Greeley, you’ll receive our check returning your money within the week.”

“Antonia, Mrs. Webster, there’s no need—” Dr. Greeley’s protests were nearly inaudible over the sound of chairs scraping back from the table as most of the meeting participants prepared to leave.

“Ladies and gentlemen . . . if you’ll just—”

It was no good, and she knew it. I could see it in the thinning of her lips, the angry set to her shoulders as she watched her hopes dwindle as the others walked out. Frankly, I didn’t give a damn about her feelings. I was much more worried about what was in the incubator. I knew how powerful the mind control of a hatchling was. I’d had one in my mind once, and to this day didn’t remember everything that happened that night. All it would take was one susceptible human walking by and opening the lid for all hell to break loose. I shuddered at the thought.

Only Henri, Brooks, the videographer and I remained.

“Well, aren’t you going?” Her acid-tinged words were directed at me. “This is *your* fault after all. They were fine until you started a wholly unnecessary panic.”

“Hardly.” Brooks corrected. “If it’s anyone’s fault it’s yours for getting us here under false pretenses.”

“No one was lied to.”

Henri and Brooks snorted in unison at her feeble protest. By their own rules they couldn’t/wouldn’t lie to the Not Prey, but they were champions of misdirection and omission. I was used to it. That wasn’t the problem to my mind. But it occurred to me, and probably the others as well, how much her logic was like that of the Thrall collective. Just to be safe, I opened my senses, searching for any parasite inside the good doctor. There was none, but I couldn’t guarantee that she wasn’t herd—one of their meals and, thereby, under the control of a queen.

Henri gave a curt nod to me, and said, “You two do as you will, *I* will go to find Dr. MacDougal. It was at his request that I am here, and I want an explanation and assurances that

the situation is not as bad as we believe it to be.” Eyes blazing with a dark anger, he strode out of the room.

I wasn’t leaving until I was satisfied about the safety of the public. The critical issue was that there were one hundred parasite eggs close to hatching in a public building. It was a recipe for disaster.

I stood slowly. It was taking every ounce of my self-control not to throttle the stupid little bitch. I forced myself to speak softly, enunciating each word with exquisite care. “Where . . . is . . . the . . . incubator?”

Her eyes shifted from me to Brooks. You could almost see the gears shifting behind those beautiful baby blues.

“Fine. Give me five minutes to get things set up in the other room, then you can come see for yourself the protocols that have been instituted to protect both the eggs and the public.”

“Five minutes.” Brooks agreed, but his voice was heavy with controlled anger. “But know this. If the three of us don’t agree that your ‘protocols’ are adequate to protect the public, you *will* be shut down.”

Greeley’s voice was cold. “I’m not intimidated by your threats, Detective Brooks.”

“That wasn’t a threat Dr. Greeley. It’s a promise.”

She didn’t have a reply for that, so she left, her heels beating an angry tattoo on the linoleum.

I hate waiting. I’m not good at it. As the second hand crawled around the face of the wall clock I found myself twitching in my seat. My stomach was in knots, and I desperately wished that I had stayed home, or gone for an early morning run with Tom. I’d rather be anywhere than here, in this hospital right now.

I lurched to my feet as a male shriek rent the air. Brooks beat me out the door and into the hall, his gun drawn. The sound was cut off abruptly, with a wet gurgle that I recognized from past experience. Apparently Brooks did too, because his face paled and set into stony lines. He gestured for me to follow behind him. I had a knife drawn, and didn’t remember pulling it.

I looked down the hall, wondering where the reinforcements were. People *had* to have heard that scream. But there were no running footsteps, no code-blue pages on the intercom, just an eerie silence so complete that I could hear every rasping breath, hear my own pulse pounding in my ears. Keeping his back against the wall Brooks turned the knob and flung open the door.

It was a scene from one of the lower levels of hell. Samantha Greeley knelt on the floor next to Mason, the videographer. He lay on the ground, his throat torn out. Blood sprayed from the severed arteries in his neck, spraying against the wall as a living blanket of squirming, writhing maggots swarmed up the clear plastic walls of the opened incubation tank and up Greeley’s arms. She reared back at the sound of the door slamming against the wall. The front of her clothing was so soaked with blood it clung wet and impossibly red against the milk white of her blood-splattered skin.

She hissed, lips pulling back to expose brand new, bloodied fangs.

“Shit!” Brooks swore.

I couldn’t hear him, even though I saw his lips move. The collective mind of the hatchlings crashed into mine like a sledgehammer blow between my eyes. Instead of the many voices of the hive it was one voice—one being with a hundred bodies.

I AM FREE.

Chapter 2

The district courthouse in Denver is an elegant old building. The front has huge columns that flank a main entrance that faces the Capital across the Civic Center Park. It was winter, so the view from the top of the steps wasn't as impressive as it would be once the spring flowers were planted. But it was still worth seeing. Once you come inside the building the marble, polished dark wood, and ornately decorated ceilings with gold-foiled relief are meant to impress, even awe.

Unfortunately, the old girl is beginning to show her age, and while they are working hard on the restoration project, it's hard to ignore the scaffolding and plastic sheeting that drape sections of the second floor where the trial was being held.

I was being sued—along with everybody else involved in Samantha Greeley's project. Well, everyone except Samantha herself. She was missing. Since the Supreme Court had recently ruled that anyone under the control of a Thrall is not considered *in their right mind*, she probably wouldn't be found culpable even if the cops could find her.

So the Plaintiffs, being the family of the late videographer, Mason Watts, had decided not to wait to find her. And in a freak of scheduling that had more to do with the notoriety of the case than justice, we were on the docket and in front of the judge a mere three months after the incident.

I was seriously hoping that I wasn't going to get paint or something on my suit. It was brand new, and expensive as hell. I probably wouldn't have bought it if Tom hadn't talked me into it. I'm not much of a clotheshorse, and the coral designer suit had a jacket cut to emphasize my athletic build, with a skirt short enough to make me worry every time I crossed my legs. I had bought pumps and a bag and had them dyed a shade of peach that exactly matched the silk blouse I wore. The outfit had cost more than the rest of my entire wardrobe combined. Thank God for gift certificates and the after Christmas sales. Still, the look on Tom's face every time he saw me in it was worth the price. I'd also left my long red-gold hair down, loose except for a pair of small gold combs that pulled the front sections away from my face. None of it was practical for fighting, but I really didn't expect a pitched battle in the halls of justice.

I glanced over at the man holding my hand. Tom Bishop is gorgeous. We're talking calendar model, stop in the middle of the street and gawk at him gorgeous. He has hair that shade of dark brown that isn't quite black, and even though he keeps it fairly short it falls in soft curls that I can't resist running my fingers through. His eyes are the warm brown of good milk chocolate and shine with intelligence and good humor. I still can't quite believe my good luck to have hooked up with him.

He'd shown up on my doorstep this morning, dressed in the gray pinstriped suit he'd had on the first day I met him and told me he'd taken the week off to be with me during the trial. I hadn't asked him to. He'd just done it. He's like that—kind, thoughtful, supportive.

"Penny for your thoughts." He whispered into my left ear after we were seated behind the table in the courtroom. The acoustics are such that sound carries clearly, not only from the witness stand, but frequently from the audience as well. The judge had made it very clear that he wasn't going to put up with any interruptions from the spectators, and that included snide

remarks.

At the moment, though we were just sitting waiting as the plaintiff's attorney and his assistant set up equipment for everyone to watch the videotape that had just been put into evidence.

"I'm wishing I was back home in bed." I whispered back.

Tom gave me his most lascivious grin, flashing bright teeth and deep dimples. I blushed. I hadn't exactly meant that the way he'd taken it. Not that I minded, but the relationship was still new enough that I kept waiting for something to go wrong. I have always had a *very* bad history with relationships. I mean, my first serious boyfriend left me *to become a priest*. The second one cheated on me with a woman I had thought was my best friend and tried to help turn me into a queen vampire. To say I have trust issues is like calling the Grand Canyon a pothole.

The lights in the courtroom dimmed, and the screen in the front left corner that had been angled to maximize the viewing of the jury, judge and spectators lit up. Silence settled heavily over the audience, until the only audible sound was of people breathing.

The attorney's voice carried clearly through the courtroom. "Ladies and gentlemen, the video you are about to see contains graphic violence. Anyone in the courtroom and not of the jury who has a delicate constitution should consider leaving now."

Nobody rose to leave. If anything there was a collective gasp of excitement and the room took on the same kind of energy you find just before the showing of a much-anticipated horror movie.

The attorney began speaking again, listing the people who would be appearing on screen. My name was among the first: Defendant, Mary Kathleen Reilly. When he finished there was silence except for the shifting of people in their seats and the running of the equipment.

Dr. Samantha Greeley appeared on the video screen. She wore the same white lab coat over traditional business clothes. The beautiful face I remembered had been transformed by rage, her blue eyes blazed with fury.

"They're idiots. Superstitious idiots, all of them." She let out her breath in a long, irritated sigh. Squaring her shoulders, she turned to the camera. "Come along Mason. You might as well get a good look at what it is that has them so terrified. It's feeding time anyway."

"Hang on, let me get the camera onto the tripod."

The picture jiggled slightly, then settled.

People shifted in their seats in the dim courtroom. When the image steadied, we had a good view of the laboratory. Microscopes and test tubes adorned a black counter that ran the length of the far wall. Underneath were cabinets. But dominating the room, in the center of the screen, was a huge glass incubation case. Tubes ran to and from a pair of pumps to the case, one pumping clear fluid, the other a red fluid I knew was blood.

I heard the click of latches, saw her lift the top of the plastic case an inch or two. "Help me with the lid." Greeley ordered.

"Is that a good idea?" A handsome young black man joined Greeley onscreen. He kept his distance. His body language screamed reluctance and suspicion.

"Don't tell me you're afraid, too!" Greeley sounded utterly exasperated.

"Of course not." Her words had pricked his vanity, which was probably exactly what she'd intended. He took a pair of steps toward her, but stopped short of the case. Her hand snaked

out in a lightning fast move to grab his arm and jerk him toward her.

He jumped backwards, his eyes wide, but she had his arm in a vise grip. “What in the hell!” He struggled, managing to pull loose. Stumbling over a stool, he tried to feel his way to the door of the lab without ever taking his eyes from her.

She lunged for him, but he dived out of reach. She hissed then, and it was not a human sound.

When he shrieked, I closed my eyes, covering my face with my hands, unable to watch any further. I knew how the story ended. She’d caught him, and ripped his throat out. A dozen or more of the hatchlings had escaped and fed, and then crawled into the doctor’s willing mouth while we watched, frozen and horrified for the brief moment it took. All hundred would have gotten loose if it hadn’t been for Brooks. We’d burst in together, but it was Brooks who had risked everything to close the incubator. I’d been too busy fighting the good doctor—fighting, and losing. Because of me, she’d escaped down the hospital hall leaving the door to the lab unlocked.

I heard Brooks stomping on the hatchlings that had escaped before he stooped to check on me.

“I’m fine!” My voice from the video was choked with pain. “GO, catch her!” There was the slamming of a door, and the thud of footfalls retreating in the distance.

In the courtroom Tom put his arm around me, holding me close. “It’s all right.” He murmured the words in my ear. “You did your best.”

It wasn’t all right. The boy in the video was dead. But so were most of the hatchlings. I straightened up, opened my eyes and forced myself to watch the screen where I saw myself using the counter to haul my body up from the floor. I dragged myself across the room, my left leg useless from the kick she’d used to dislocate my knee. Wearing heels today had probably been a bad idea, since it might give the jury the impression I was faking just how much pain I was in every day.

I watched myself grab a lab stool and throw it through the glass window of MacDougal’s adjoining private office. There was the sound of me rummaging through various drawers. When I came back on screen I was carrying a large bottle of single malt scotch. Without hesitation I limped over to the case, disconnected the blood bag, and poured the amber liquid from the bottle to make its way through the pumping system. But it was obvious when it did, because the hatchlings began to writhe and shrivel. Onscreen I dropped the empty bottle to slam both palms against my ears before I collapsed to the floor with an agonized scream.

Somewhere in the courtroom a woman, probably Mason’s mother, was quietly weeping. A gagging sound came from the jury box. I leaned into Tom’s body, and took slow deep breaths while counting to a hundred.

The sound of movement drew my attention back to the picture. I looked up at the screen in time to watch Henri Tané and Miles MacDougal stride into the room. Kneeling beside the fallen boy, Miles tried to find a pulse in a throat that was mostly ravaged meat. He closed his eyes, muttering what looked like a quick prayer, before grabbing the phone and calling in a Code Blue.

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The judge called for a break. It wasn’t quite time for lunch, but several of the jurors were

looking more than a little bit sick. I doubted that anybody was hungry. I certainly wouldn't be able to eat. My head was pounding and I was nauseous from the rage of a thousand Thrall that had watched the event through my eyes—another side effect of being connected.

Once upon a time my life had been relatively normal and my thoughts had been my own. Now I was reviled in the press and facing a wrongful death suit, even though I hadn't been responsible for their son's death. And suing me, or taking money from my insurance company wasn't going to bring their son back to them.

I'd let my insurance company talk to them, but the lawyer for the Watts family had wanted more money than the insurance company had been willing to pay. So, I was here in civil court, defending myself. I'd be *back* in front of a judge again in a few weeks facing criminal charges of destruction of property and vandalism because of my actions in the lab. Oh fucking goody.

I stood and gathered up my coat and purse from the seat beside me then followed Tom behind the retreating backs of the people filing from the courtroom. I hadn't seen Brooks here. That surprised me a little. As one of the other defendants, I would've expected him to be present. I considered asking my attorney about it, but changed my mind. He was in the middle of an animated debate with opposing counsel.

"Kate . . . Kate, wait." I recognized the voice calling behind me as my hand touched the brass guard plate of the courtroom door. Miles MacDougal hadn't spoken a civil word to me since that morning in the lab. Joe said Miles blamed me for what happened, which didn't make sense to my mind. But emotions frequently *don't* make sense, and Miles had lost the woman he loved that morning. Samantha Greeley wasn't dead, but she wasn't Samantha any more either, and God alone knew where she was. Even the collective didn't seem to have knowledge of her. Or, if they did, they were hiding it from me.

I made sure to keep my expression completely neutral as I turned to face him. I liked Miles. His anger had hurt me more than I'd care to admit. I'd tried to hide my pain by acting pissed. It hadn't fooled Tom or my brother. They were both being very gentle with me at the moment because I still wasn't completely over it. But I wanted to be. I wanted things to be right so that I could have my friend back.

Miles approached carefully. He looked older than he had a few weeks ago. There was gray in the bushy moustache, and in the thinning hair. But more than that, the shoulders beneath the navy suit slumped, and there were dark circles under his eyes that spoke of sleepless nights.

"I'll meet you outside." Tom gave me a quick peck on the cheek and ducked out the doors that led to the hallway. He was giving us privacy, and I appreciated it. A lot of the guys I know wouldn't have been able to suppress their protective instincts. My brother Joe, for example, would've hovered, glowering. Fortunately for me he was out of town at a conference.

"Miles." I kept my voice steady and neutral.

Miles MacDougal straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath to gather his courage. His gaze locked with mine with no flinching. "I owe you an apology." His eyes were red with suppressed tears, but his voice was strong. "I needed someone to blame. It was easier than blaming myself. This wasn't your fault."

"No." I agreed.

"It was mine."

“No. You’re wrong.” I spoke firmly. “It wasn’t. It was her mistake. She underestimated them. Most people do. They don’t look threatening. They’re small, not physically imposing, so people let their guards down.”

He shook his head, sadly. “Thank you for saying that. But you’re wrong. I . . . I had misgivings about the project from the beginning, but Samantha was so enthusiastic. She wanted it so *very* badly. I let her talk me into it—helped her get funding and volunteers. She wouldn’t have been able to get hospital approval without my backing the project.”

I wanted to comfort him, but I didn’t know what to say. He’d made a horrible, tragic mistake. He obviously had been in love with the woman, hell, still was. People in love do stupid things all the time. His mistake had just had tragic consequences.

“I’m sorry.” It wasn’t enough, and I knew it the moment the words passed my lips. But nothing I said was really going to matter. Miles blamed himself. It didn’t matter if anyone else blamed him, or what they might say. This was his very own, personal hell.

Miles gave me a weak smile, and held out his hand. Instead of shaking it, I pulled him into a hug. It was awkward. I’m not really the “huggy” kind and I didn’t think he was either. But he needed comfort and it was the best I could do for him.

“You’d better get out of here. Tom’s waiting.” He pulled back slowly. I let him go.

“Are you going to be okay?” I caught his gaze and kept it.

He didn’t dignify the question with a response, just gave me a sad smile and a gentle shove toward the door. I went, both because he wanted me to and because I was too awkward and chicken to know how to deal with such raw emotions.

Tom was waiting in the hall just outside the door. Putting his hands on my waist, he looked me straight in the eyes. The kindness in his gaze warmed me to my toes, made me wonder, yet again, what I’d done to deserve this man. “How’d it go?”

I gave a small shrug. “He blames himself.”

“No surprise there.” Tom pulled me into his arms. I didn’t fight it. It felt so good to rest my head on his shoulder, feel his heart beating and listen to the soft, quiet buzz that blocked out the angry voices in my head. I took a deep breath, inhaling the masculine scent of skin and soap. We were still standing like that when the police officers rounded the corner and said my name.

“Excuse me, are you Mary Kathleen Reilly?”

I stepped out of Tom’s embrace reluctantly, taking a small step back. Tom took my hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“That would be me.”

There were two of them, both a few years older than me, probably thirty-five to my twenty-eight. Both wore suits that fit well enough and looked as though they got a fair amount of use. Not shabby, but not new either. The one on the left stood about 5’10”. He wore a tan suit with a brown belt and loafers. The color suited his sandy blonde hair and hazel eyes. The officer on the right was Italian-American. It showed in his olive coloring, his features, and somehow, in his attitude. I would be hard pressed to say how I could tell, but it was unmistakable, at least to me. And while they weren’t uniforms, and weren’t flashing their badges, it was just as obvious they were cops.

“Could we have a word with you?” The blonde gestured toward a wooden bench a short distance down the hallway.

“May I ask what’s going on?” Tom’s voice was even, but I could feel the tension singing through his arm and the hand that held mine. Something about them was bothering him. Normally, I’ve learned to trust his supernatural instincts, but I let go of his hand instead, turning to resting it lightly on his chest. The gesture was meant to reassure him. I wasn’t sure it would work, but I knew that any more strain and he wouldn’t be able to hold on to his beast. The last thing he, I, or anyone else wanted was for him to change forms in the middle of a crowded courthouse. Unlike most of the werewolves, he retained his personality, but that didn’t make changing unexpectedly a good thing. Nobody else in this hallway would know he was still himself. There could be a panic. With the rampant prejudice and fear that lycanthropes faced it wasn’t inconceivable that one of the officers might draw a weapon. There were far too many negative possibilities for me to be willing to risk it. I might not be armed with weapons, but I was still pretty good in a fight if it came to it. But my psychic senses told me neither of the men were Thrall hosts.

“We just want to ask Ms. Reilly a few questions.” The blonde smiled as he said it, raising one hand in a placating gesture. But there was a tension in his body language that I didn’t like.

“Fine. No problem.” I agreed. I started walking toward the bench they’d indicated earlier. Tom came with. Apparently his willingness to let me handle things myself only went so far. For the life of me I couldn’t decide whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. But I didn’t have time to think too much about it. As soon as my butt hit the wood the Italian introduced himself and his partner and started in on the questions.

“I’m detective Frank Martinelli. This,” he gestured toward the blonde, “is my partner, detective Al Cook.”

Neither one held out a hand for me to shake, so I nodded my acknowledgement.

Cook took the lead then. “Ms. Reilly, can you tell us where you were last night at around 10:00 p.m.?”

Tom was still standing. He looked from Martinelli to Cook, then back at me. “I think I’ll go get your lawyer.”

“I really don’t think that’s necessary, sir.” Cook forced himself to smile when he said it. He was being the very picture of the polite police detective in dealing with Tom, but I got the impression he wasn’t happy about it.

“I do.” Tom gave me a look that said as clearly as words that I should shut up and wait for the attorney. It was probably good advice. That didn’t mean I was going to take it.

I watched him hurry toward the courtroom. He’d barely stepped through the door when I turned my attention back to the detectives and answered the question.

“Last night at 10:00 I was watching a DVD with Father Michael O’Rourke and my brother Bryan in the rectory at Our Lady of Perpetual Hope parish.”

Cook’s expression changed. He looked almost like he’d swallowed a bug. Martinelli let out a bark of laughter. He stifled it with difficulty in response to a glare from his partner, hiding it behind a cough.

“Right.” Cook pulled a small spiral notebook and pen from his trouser pocket. It reminded me forcibly of all the police procedurals I’d watched on television. I wondered just exactly what crime had been committed. I didn’t, however, ask. I hadn’t done anything wrong. I really *had* been at the rectory. But I already had one pending criminal case and as the saying

goes, anything I said can, and would, be used against me. I wasn't looking to get myself into any more trouble.

"And Father O'Rourke can verify this?"

"Of course. Let me get you his number." I took a minute to rummage in my bag to pull out my cell phone, by which time Tom and the attorney were walking out of the courtroom and hurrying toward us.

"Officers." The attorney's voice was smooth, cultured. It matched his appearance perfectly. He wore a suit in dove gray with a faint charcoal pinstripe. It was almost the exact same shade and cut as Tom's, but I'd have bet most of a paycheck that it cost at least twice as much. It had been cut to perfection and had that indefinable something that made me think it had been hand tailored. If I was right, that suit had cost him more than my last, lamented vehicle. He had been selected by the insurance company to represent me, and while I probably wouldn't have chosen him if it were up to me, I had no complaints thus far. "May I ask what this is about?"

"Ms. Reilly has been charged with vandalism of a laboratory and destruction of specimens at St. Elizabeth's hospital. Last night, someone broke into that same laboratory and stole similar specimens. We thought that was quite a coincidence, and decided we'd like to have a chat with her." Cook was pissed and it showed. Either that or he was putting on an act. Most cops don't rise to detective, and the ones who do don't make it by losing their tempers just because someone brings in a lawyer.

"First," the lawyer held up his index finger as he spoke. "She has been charged. She has *not* been convicted." He held up a second finger. "Second, as you no doubt know, my client has been declared *persona non grata* at St. Elizabeth's hospital. Security has been ordered to escort her off the premises on sight. Since, as you can see, she has a very distinctive appearance, I doubt she could have made it through the doorway, let alone to the laboratory."

"The perp didn't come in the front door." Cook answered.

I heard him, but I wasn't really listening. My mind was spinning. Someone had broken in the lab and *stolen similar specimens*. Shit. Specimens . . . he meant eggs. There had been more thrall eggs somewhere in that lab, and somebody had stolen them. Oh, this was *so* bad.