

TOUCH OF EVIL

Chapter 1

“Katie?” The sound of a familiar voice calling my name made me turn and grin. Peg always has that effect on me.

She was a sight for sore eyes; we didn't get to see each other much, usually staying in touch via email and cell phone. As always, she looked crisp and professional in her dove grey flight attendant's uniform. Her short blonde hair was perfectly coiffed, her make-up flawless. You'd never tell from looking at her that it was four in the freaking morning. With me, you could tell. Oh my, yes!

I had just stepped off my third red-eye in a week, the last in a long string of flights delivering valuables around the globe. I'm a bonded air courier, which sounds glamorous — and sometimes it even is.

This was so *not* one of those times.

Her wide blue eyes narrowed as she looked me over from head to toe. “Here.” She handed me the cup of coffee she'd been carrying. “You need this worse than I do. You're limping again. Is that old vampire bite bothering you?”

Had I been limping? As soon as she said it, the whispering in my head started. I slammed down my mental shields and the voices faded, but the cold chill down my spine remained for a moment. “Gee, thanks, Peg. Now you've got me thinking about my least favorite person in Denver.”

She grimaced and blushed. “Oops. Sorry. How's the coffee?”

I took a gulp of scalding coffee and let out a small, happy sigh. “Nirvana! If coffee isn't the nectar of the gods I don't know what is. You saved my life.” The drink was strong enough to peel the fuzz from my teeth. No cream, no sugar — just the way I like it. Without caffeine I wasn't sure I'd make it to the truck, and none of the airport restaurants or coffee shops would be open for a while yet.

I gestured to her bag with my pinkie. “Where are you off to?”

“Paris, then Rome.” She grinned at me, showing white teeth and deep dimples. “Who knows, maybe I'll actually get to be there long enough to see the sights this time.” It was a running joke between us. We refer to ourselves the great young globetrotters. We travel the world — but we're too damned busy to visit the sights or play tourist. Most of the time our schedules don't permit it, and when they do, we're too exhausted to take advantage.

I could, however, write a book about the best sheets and pillows in Europe.

Peg shook her head as I took another long pull on the coffee. I knew that look. “What?”

“Are you *ever* going to retire that blue blazer?”

I glanced down at the jacket. It was looking a little bedraggled, but it had been a long flight. “What's wrong with it? I've only had it a few years.”

“Try *five* years, Kate. I was with you when you bought your work wardrobe —

remember? Jackets, pants and skirts in navy blue, black and green, along with a armful of white cotton shirts. Even the *airline* changes their uniforms more often than you!”

I didn’t dignify that with a reply. I just raised an eyebrow and then stuck out my tongue while she laughed. It was too soon for the caffeine to be taking effect, but I would’ve sworn I felt more alert.

“Um . . . how’s Joe?” Peg tried to keep her voice casual as she inquired after my older brother. It wasn’t easy. She’d fallen for him hard not so long ago, and he’d behaved like a world class jerk. I love my brothers, but now was not the time for me to talk about Joe. I was absolutely furious with him, and not over Peg.

I sipped the coffee, trying to think of a response that wouldn’t turn into a rant. There wasn’t one.

“Same as always.” I winced. I hadn’t intended my voice to sound quite that bitter.

“Oh God, what has he done now?” Peg steered me toward the nearest bank of chrome and vinyl chairs so that we could both take a seat.

“He bought himself a brand new H2.”

“A *Hummer*? But he lives in the city. Where’s he going to *park*? How’s he going to afford it?”

My voice was cold and hard. I couldn’t help it. If Joe wanted a new vehicle — fine. But Peg was right. He should’ve bought one he could afford. “Oh, he can make the *payments*.”

Peg groaned a bit but nodded. Joe’s a doctor. He makes good money, especially now that all his student loans have been repaid. But he doesn’t think things through too well when he wants something bad enough.

I gritted my teeth, and used my fingers to make the little quote things in the air from around the coffee cup. “But he *didn’t count on* the increase in his car insurance. So now he *can’t afford* to pay his part of the bills for Bryan’s care.” A harsh laugh escaped my lips. “He doesn’t think that’s a problem. Do you know that he actually told me I should raise the rents in my building to make up the difference! I just barely got my first tenant and now I’m supposed to raise the rents?”

Peg stared at me, blue eyes wide, her mouth slightly ajar. It was a long moment before she was capable of speech. “I don’t believe it.” But I could tell from her voice that she did.

I took a long drink of coffee, trying to force myself to calm down and come up with a different subject of conversation. I needn’t have bothered. Peg caught a glimpse of my watch, paled and swore.

“I’ve got to go! I’m late!” She rose in a fluid movement. She bent to give me a quick hug, promised we’d talk more soon, and took off at a half-run, dragging her wheeled carry-on bag behind her. The rapid tattoo of her heels against the floor echoed through the nearly empty concourse.

I shook my head and rose. I looked around for a waste can for the empty coffee cup. I was still tired, but running into Peg had cheered me up immeasurably. And hey, the combination of caffeine and fury at Joe had gotten my blood pumping nicely.

I was halfway to the shuttle train to the main terminal when I felt the first stirrings of unease.

I was being followed.

The rhythm of my footsteps on the patterned marble floors had been joined by a second set. I would've liked to think it was coincidence, just another weary traveler headed back to the terminal. But the person stepped only when I stepped. Normal people don't do that. They're in too much of a hurry. While I wasn't exactly dawdling, I hadn't been rushing either.

I don't like being tailed. But it happens fairly frequently — and I imagine that it's happening even more often. I'm paranoid by both profession and nature. I've got a huge insurance policy to cover any thefts of client's valuables, but of the items I deliver are irreplaceable — and I have a good reputation in the business because I don't take unnecessary risks.

I was busy working out how to lose the person behind me, so I almost missed the announcement overhead. "Adam Dexter. Sam Franks. Mary Kathleen Reilly. Please pick up the white courtesy phone."

I didn't even have to guess who was on the phone. There are only four people still alive who use my full name. Only Joe knew my flight time. He was pissed about something. Otherwise the page would've been for Kate, or Katie. Yeah, right. Like *he* gets to be miffed at *me*! Dream on.

Enough of this shadow business. I turned around abruptly in the darkened hallway, but there was no one there.

That wasn't good. If the person wasn't content with approaching me in an empty, dimly lit spot, it meant they were waiting for somewhere even more secluded. Whatever crisis my brother had in store could wait.

At least I'd come back empty. It's a nuisance trying to fight and keep track of valuables. This way my hands were free. It also meant that whoever it was, they weren't after cargo I was carrying. I slipped my hand into my pocket and started walking at a brisk pace past the phone bank. Using the reflection from the shop windows to watch behind me I kept a close eye out. No luck. Whoever it was, they were good. They stayed just far enough back so that I couldn't even catch a glimpse.

Since I couldn't see anything with my eyes, I debated looking with my mind. I don't *like* doing it. It makes me feel so damned vulnerable. The parasites are a constant buzz in the back of my mind at the best of times. Letting down my guard enables me to use my abilities, but it leaves me nearly defenseless if they try to attack. They haven't yet — but that doesn't mean they won't. So I usually rely on the physical instead of the psychic. It's just safer.

I decided it was worth the risk. I lowered my shields and felt outward in a circle with my mind. Nothing. Utter silence. Not even the angry buzz of the hive queens. I felt a shiver of unease run down my spine. That I couldn't hear them meant they were shielding me out— hiding something. That was *so* not good.

One problem at a time. I slowed and did an odd two-step, as though I'd tripped.

There was a solid footstep that wasn't mine during that little dance. Nope, it wasn't my imagination. I ducked into the nearest women's bathroom. I stopped just inside the doorway and flipped open the antique pocket watch I'd pulled from my purse. It doesn't keep time. I have my wristwatch for that. Not being able to carry an actual mirror since 9/11 really sucks, so I've been forced to improvise. I've polished the case to a reflective, albeit slightly fuzzy, finish. I use it for things like applying lipstick and watching my back.

Most tails will either stay nearby or deliberately walk past and then wait further up the hall. I had a couple of options. I could set a trap to confront the bastard, but if it was a Thrall host they could easily have used mind games to get a weapon past airport security. Hell, even a truly determined *human* can manage to smuggle things in.

I sighed. The fact was that I just wasn't really up to a physical battle right now. The combination of coffee and adrenaline had sharpened my nerves enough to recognize the danger, but it wouldn't last. I needed to avoid this fight if I possibly could.

I closed the watch and slid it back in my pocket. I stood utterly still, eyes and ears open, waiting long enough that anyone who'd *not* been deliberately following me would have gone past. No one passed. Shit.

I was still standing there, debating what to do when I heard voices I recognized from the plane. A weary young couple was bickering in hushed tones. I peeked out of the doorway. The woman was juggled her purse, diaper bag, and a carry-on. Her husband struggled with the dead weight of their sleeping toddler. Perfect. I popped out of my doorway just in time to join them.

My stalker kept a distance behind us. More people appeared as I reached the underground train from my concourse back to the baggage claim area. I kept trying to find my tail, but he eluded me. Evidently he wanted to get me alone — probably on my way to the parking lot. Still, I could be wrong. Just in case, I made sure the less-than-happy family was standing close at my back so that no one could sneak up on me as we waited for the train. When it arrived, I bulled my way to the front and sat on the bench facing the crowd.

About half the people stared blankly forward. The other half talked with companions or watched the pinwheels. But today I ignored the pretty, twirly spinners that I usually watch. Instead, I kept my eyes watching of the passengers in the car in turn. All by itself that annoyed me, because I'd rather be oohing and aahing out the window with the little tow-headed girl and her brother sitting next to me. Nobody made me nervous, although I couldn't say the same for them. I got more than a few odd looks.

I couldn't exactly blame them. I stand six foot one in my stocking feet, and have long red hair that usually wear in a tight braid, plus the kind of attitude that makes most people think twice about messing with me. Joe calls it my "tough act." It's not an act. There's a reason they called me the Terminator when I played pro volleyball — a reason why the Thrall consider me a threat. Joe just doesn't like to admit it.

I made sure I was the last to exit the car when we reached the terminal, jumping out just as the doors were starting to whoosh closed. Everyone scattered to their various destinations. Nobody lurked. Nobody even glanced at me.

I stopped in the middle of the floor and opened my mind again. There was nothing but a solid white wall of static. Despite the heavy blazer, I felt chilled. The Thrall usually aren't active during the day, but the sun wouldn't be up for a while yet, and their human Herds are always a threat.

People on the street call the Thrall vampires. Yes and no. They're not the evil undead of legend. "Thrall" is their own term for the mind control they have over their human hosts and the Herds. The scientific name for the parasite is complicated and Latin, so people call them either vampires or the Thrall. It's easier.

They have a hive mentality, ruled by a group of queens who control individual hosts and

the human Herds. They despise most humans, referring to them as “Prey.” Only a very few humans, perhaps two dozen in the world are “Not Prey.” We’ve earned our place, earned the respect of the Queens — usually by dint of killing one of their kind. They have “rules” for dealing with us. Of course, that means there are rules for us to deal with them, as well. Not Prey don’t run, don’t hide, don’t use guns or other distance weapons. If they do, they lose their status. And the status is useful. As Not Prey the Hosts and Herds can’t lie to you, and the Queens have to treat you as an equal.

There is, of course, wiggle room in the rules — usually in favor of the Thrall, who take every advantage of it.

I earned my title the hard way. I killed the former Queen of Denver, but in the process I got bit. Since then, the Thrall have been a constant presence in the back of my head. I hate it, but I’ve learned to cope. Most of the time even the strongest of them can’t cloud my mind--- at least, not for long. Still, it helps to have something to listen to. It keeps them from seeing my thoughts. For me, that’s usually heavy metal music. But good old distracting conversation will do nicely. So, when I caught a glimpse of my buddy Leroy, I greeted him with more than my usual enthusiasm.

“Hi, Leroy!” The big ebony skinned guard turned at the sound of his name. He saw my waving hand and smiled.

“Jeez, Reilly,” he replied in greeting, “Do you *live* here? Didn’t I just see you a couple of days ago?”

“Actually, It’s been a week.” I chuckled. Leroy Williams has worked at the airport almost since it opened. You’d think he’d have enough seniority to have his pick of shifts, but I’ve seen him here at all hours of the day and night, always wearing a freshly pressed uniform and a friendly smile. We’d become fast friends one night when we’d both been trapped at DIA because of a blizzard. We’d played what must have been fifty games of cards while we waited for the storm to clear. I’d learned all about his family life while he’d happily taken a fair chunk of my spending money. The guy’s an incredible card player.

Leroy was wearing a jacket over his uniform. He was either just coming on shift or just getting off. I was hoping for the latter and told him so.

His chin tipped and his face grew concerned. “You got trouble, girl?”

“Maybe.” I shook my head to clear it. “Hell, probably.”

Leroy glanced around the nearly deserted food court. No one looked suspicious.

But then my tail made a mistake. He’d gotten too close and I felt him. *Thrall*. Our eyes locked across the huge room. The moment he knew he’d been spotted the shield of static vanished. The Thrall presence slammed into my consciousness. My head buzzed with the sound of a thousand voices and I clearly heard my name. I shook my head to clear it and slammed my best mental shields into place. I could still sense them, but distantly. Fortunately, with the shielding, they wouldn’t be able to read *my* thoughts.

Leroy saw my sudden panic. He moved close to me, projecting menace from every pore. His massive bulk of muscle was comforting. When he removed his nightstick and started to twirl it, the host gave one last glare and left. Good.

If the Thrall wanted something, they’d be back--- I knew it. My goal was to make sure I was ready for a fight when they returned.

“Adam Dexter. Leonard Hamilton. Mary Kathleen Reilly. Please pick up the white courtesy phone.”

Ah, hell! I’d forgotten all about the call from Joe. How Freudian is that?

“Watch my back,” I hissed as I headed to the phone bank. Leroy took the command literally. He turned his back to mine when I reached the nearest phone and glared at the crowd as though they were all terrorists.

I went and picked it up, stating my name. I looked past Leroy’s broad back as I waited on seemingly perpetual hold. An abstract sculpture built into the east wall caught my gaze. Stark metal twisted and soared torturously upward to the white tent roof. It had cost the city a fortune, and was supposed to have some deep symbolic meaning to the residents of Denver. Speaking as one of them, it didn’t. But staring at it passed the time as I waited.

I inhaled slowly, basking in the scent of Leroy’s lemon grass cologne and shaving soap. It was a comforting scent that reminded me of my grandfather for some reason. Finally the line connected.

“Kate here.”

“You’re back.”

It *was* Joe. He was probably just coming off of his shift in the ER at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital. He sounded as tired as I felt so I bit back a smart-ass remark about stating the obvious.

“What’s up?”

“I popped by to water your plants.”

Oh, *please!* If he thought a ten minute errand was going to get him off the hook about his half of the bills he was wrong.

“Ok. Thanks.” My voice was flat and annoyed. I think he was expecting a little more appreciation, but the plants are on automatic misters, which he knows full well.

There was a long pause. I considered pushing the conversation along. After all, Leroy wasn’t just here for giggles. Instead, I fought down my frustration and forced myself to wait him out.

“You got a call while I was there.” He was pissed. That much was obvious from his voice. “From *Dylan*.”

“Shit.” The word popped out of my mouth. Dylan Shea was my former fiancé. I’d nearly gotten killed saving his life almost six years ago. In a rush of gratitude he’d run off with my best friend and my cat.

I still miss the cat.

“What did he want?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t leave a number on the recorder. He just said he’d call back.”

Yeah, if I didn’t answer, he knew Joe would be watching the place and would try to wring the reason from him, so he wouldn’t give any info. Joe just can’t help bullying Dylan. He’d said it over and over again while we were engaged: Dylan’s weak.

The fact that he’s right galls me. Dylan isn’t a Host. No, he’s a step below that: Herd. Read: *food*. Why he chose that fate is something I will never comprehend.

“Why call me?” It was a rhetorical question, but not a bad one. Dylan had *chosen* Amanda and the Thrall. I couldn’t think of a single reason he’d want to contact me. After all, we hadn’t exactly parted on the best of terms. My stomach tightened into a painful knot. What

an interesting coincidence--- Dylan looking for me *right* when I'm being followed by a Thrall Host.

"Katie?" Joe's rich baritone tried to drag me out of the bad memories. It didn't work. It just reminded me of another morning with him, when I was deciding whether to hunt down the queen in the daylight, or wait for Dylan to be slaughtered when nightfall arrived.

That morning Joe had tried to scare me out of rescuing Dylan. He'd dragged me to Dr. MacDougal, the parasitic specialist at St. Elizabeth's. I got a long lecture on the Thrall.

"The queen vampire lays her eggs in the arm vein of a Host human," Dr. MacDougal had said. "When the first egg hatches, it releases a toxin that temporarily paralyzes the Host so that the hatchling can move freely through the bloodstream up to the base of the brain. Once there, it settles in to live. It sends its primary ganglia to wrap around the Host's spinal cord and the two secondary ganglia through the nasal passages and roof of the mouth where they break through the skin beside the eye teeth. Hard and sharp, these hollow tubes are used by the creature to suck human blood, and, in the case of the queen, to lay her eggs."

Dr. MacDougal made sure that I got to view the autopsy of a dead Host. It was supposed to scare the hell out of me. It did. Because of that lecture I'd taken the precautions that saved my life. As a thank you, I'd bought him a bottle of his favorite, very expensive, single malt scotch.

"What are you thinking, Katie?" Joe's voice brought me back to the present.

I didn't answer. Telling Joe the truth wasn't an option. But funny thing, just thinking of the Thrall had dropped me back into the habit of not *quite* lying.

The silence stretched between us. I could hear his harsh breathing in the background. It was an interesting counterpoint to Leroy's quiet measured exhales behind me.

Joe broke the silence first.

"You're going to do it, aren't you? You're going to talk to him. He nearly got you killed--- but that doesn't matter to you."

I shuddered with a chill that had nothing to do with the air conditioning blasting above my head. Oh, it mattered. I'd come very close to being turned that night. The scars on my ankle and the buzz of the hive in my head are a constant reminder of just how close a call I had. I had been saved by preparation and no small bit of luck. I'm Irish. Luck's in my genes, thank heavens.

"Kate, are you still there?"

I realized the silence had dragged on a little too long. "I haven't made up my mind, Joe. I'll have to think about it."

"*Why?* Why think about it at all? It's not your problem. *He's* not your problem. Why would you care if he's called five times? Just let it go."

"Joe, I'm tired. I need to get some sleep before I deal with this. We can talk about this lat---" His words finally sunk home. Too much had been going on or I would have noticed earlier.

My voice dropped a few notes and dripped with suspicion. "Joe, you said you were there when *a* call came in. That's *one*--- not five. How would you kno--- Joseph Thomas Reilly! You've been listening to my answering machine!"

I'd thrown him off balance and he started to fumble his words. "I . . . he . . . it's . . . it's that blasted BEEP, Katie! Why can't you have voice mail, like a normal person? I tried to just

shut it off . . . then I punched the wrong button and . . . and then Dylan called. And . . .” His voice softened. “You’re right, I shouldn’t have messed with the machine.”

Oh, no. He was not getting out of this with a simple apology. My teeth ground audibly and the tips of my fingers were white from gripping the receiver until the plastic groaned. The fuzzy reflection of my face in the metal phone was twisted with fury. “I cannot *believe* you, Joseph! Did you go through my mail? Did you write down the license plates of the cars in the garage and run a check on them, too? We’ve been over this . . . *how* many times now? I’m a big girl. My business is none of yours.”

I heard him take a deep breath, loud enough that it came over the wire. “You’re right, Katie. I shouldn’t have messed with the machine. But Dylan did call five times. I didn’t erase them, I promise. They’re all still there . . . well, at least I *think* they are.”

“You *think!*” Och! Why couldn’t the Reilly heirlooms have included a whomping big sword to smack him over his thick skull instead of Irish lace and china! *Maybe* then I’d get through to him!

It took effort, but I forced my voice back into normal range. People were starting to stare and I could actually see Leroy’s back shaking with laughter.

“Before you forget--- who called?”

“Um, whats-her-name in 1B called twice about some plumbing things, the diamond guy from Israel called once and said he’d call back. Some guy called about the second apartment--- *Chuck*, I think? Mike asked you to stop by this week, and then Dylan’s five.” I could hear him counting off the calls on his fingers. “Yep, that’s all of them. But I *should* have deleted Dylan’s.” He was getting his fire back.

“Look, I have to go, but we haven’t finished this discussion. Not by a long shot.”

He slammed the phone down without saying goodbye.

I hung up my end just as hard. I really did want to throttle my brother, not that it did any good to get angry. Our folks are gone, so he thinks he’s the head of the family. He’s great in a crisis; it’s what makes him a top ER doctor. He’s not nearly as good at the day-to-day grind. We spend a lot of our time butting heads--- particularly when he tries to run my life for me.

Joe has a redheaded temper. My hair is what most people refer to as strawberry blonde. It hovers on that border between blonde and red--- which side of the line it falls on depends mostly on how much time I spend in the sun. But while I may sometimes *look* blonde, my temper is every bit as nasty as Joe’s and I don’t take well to being bullied. I’m more than up to any knock-down, drag-out if things ever got physical. Not that they ever actually *have*. No, we limit ourselves to verbal sparring matches. I forced myself to count to twenty slowly and calm down. There was no point in *borrowing trouble* as mum used to tell me.

“Calm, Katie. Calm.” Calm is not my best thing. My brother Bryan had always been the even tempered one in the family.

“Man trouble, huh?” I’d almost forgotten about Leroy. He nodded knowingly.

I shrugged. “Not really. One stupid brother, and one ghost from the past.” I punched his arm lightly and winked. “If you ignore them, they’ll go away.”

“Some spooks aren’t that easy to shake, Kate.” His voice was soft. It held an edge of regret. When I looked up, his eyes were hard. I thought about asking but I believe that personal

demons should remain personal. I wouldn't want to tell Leroy about Bryan, so I shouldn't ask *his* story.

I sighed and started walking toward the baggage claim area with Leroy at my side. Thinking about my baby brother was not going to improve my mood. Sometime this week I'd stop by Our Lady's parish and visit Mike--- *Father Michael*--- and Bryan. Some days it's hard to put the title in front of Mike's name. We'd grown up together. Mike hardly *ever* called. Hmm, that wasn't good. I should go there today. It might be something important. Maybe Bryan had gotten hurt, or . . .

Stop it, Kate! I shook off the brief moment of panic. If it was urgent, Mike would have said so. There was no hurry. Bryan wouldn't know the difference. I hated that fact, but I knew it was true.

I moved quickly through the slowly awakening airport to pick up my luggage. Leroy remained at my side. Most trips I just bring a carry-on and the package. Since I knew I'd be gone a week in several different climates, I'd indulged myself and brought a suitcase. It had been almost more trouble than it was worth--- almost. I have to admit that having my swimsuit for the pool at the Paris hotel had been nice.

I edged my way between an overweight businessman in a rumpled suit, his tie at half-mast, and a stroller with a screaming infant. The metallic whirring of the motor took my attention from chatting with Leroy. The carousel began circling with that odd squeaking/grinding noise that is distinctively multi-national. I watched with one eye for my luggage to come out the chute, while keeping my other eye peeled for bad people.

My luggage is ugly. I make a good living, and could buy pretty stuff if I wanted. But I'd discovered that most "nice" luggage looks pretty much alike. Rather than risk getting somebody else's bag by mistake, I'd bought myself a used, hard-sided, Samsonite bag in olive green, then proceeded to plaster it with bumper stickers. It's unmistakably eye-catching. In all my travels since buying it, the airlines haven't lost it once. Except that it didn't come out this time. The final "rattle-flap-shump" gave way to muffled whirring and then the machine stopped without relinquishing my bag.

I checked the board overhead. This wasn't my flight! No wonder I didn't remember the squalling baby. I walked back to the flight display. Yes, this was the right carousel. I settled down for the wait. Leroy agreed to stay to keep an eye on me. It was nice of him and I was grateful for the company.

It was nearly an hour later when I grabbed my bag from the carousel and stepped out of the way. Jeez Louise! Strip searches in Amsterdam moved quicker than this! Thank God for Leroy's ever present deck of cards. He trounced me, twelve games to two.

I slid a quarter in the machine, tossed my luggage in a liberated cart and went to find Edna in the very expensive covered lot near the terminal. Edna is a fully restored fire engine red 1955 pick-up truck. I bought her as a used piece of junk when I was sixteen years old, and have spent many a weekend with my head buried under the hood. Now that she's restored I've been offered quite a lot of money for her--- but things will have to get a lot more desperate than they are now before I'd be willing to sell.

I tossed my bag onto the floor of the front seat and climbed in. She fired up as soon as I turned the key. That was a surprise. Usually I have to coax and flatter the old broad. I cracked

the driver's window enough to shout my thanks to Leroy.

He turned and raised a hand. "See you next time, Reilly!"

I watched his broad back disappear into the building before driving out of the parking garage and heading for home and my waiting bed.

It's miles and miles from the airport to the city, and there's nothing like a wide expanse of empty prairie to get your mind working on all the wrong things. I drove through the dark of pre-dawn trying to make sense of everything that was going on. Would the queen of the Thrall have someone tail me? Yeah, if it suited her purposes. There's very little Monica *isn't* capable of. But the big question was . . . *why*? And was it connected to Dylan's calls? I couldn't imagine why my lying, cheating excuse for an ex-fiancé would track me down after all these years.

Traffic was flowing smoothly toward the distant skyline as my mind drifted. Then I saw the first bright red set of brake lights. I nosed over in my lane to see that a lighted directional arrow had been placed on the roadway, just where the airport access joined the interstate. I had to fight a wave of annoyance. Seems like every time I leave town, another construction zone springs up.

Vehicles were supposed to merge into my lane so I stayed put. Still, as always, drivers insisted on zooming past the building line of cars to try to butt in ahead. Vehicle after vehicle sped past at highway speed, only to be shut down when their lane ended. Soon there were cars stacked up in both lanes as we moved closer to the barricades, still at a good clip.

As soon as I realized the barricades were concrete I started swearing under my breath. The type of barricade is an indicator of the length of the proposed construction. Orange cones signify a day or two of frustration. Those orange and white barrels filled with sand mean weeks. Concrete walls mean you're in for months; maybe even *years* of inconvenience. There's one highway in Denver that's been under construction for over two years and isn't even close to finished. I noted with annoyance that there were similar barricades on the opposite side of the highway. I started mentally calculating the extra time I would need for my next trip to the airport. No! Think about something nice!

Okay, how about the renovations to the building entrance? Ahhh, yeah, that's got it. I still get the little-girl giggles whenever I think about finding the exquisite mosaic tile floor under the dirty linoleum I'd torn up in front of the elevator last month. The tiny jewel-toned tile bits formed the face and upper torso of a lovely dark-haired woman. Considering the building was constructed during the silver boom of the late 1800s, she could have been anyone from a society matron to a red-light madam. Heck, from the books I've read on the subject, she might have been *both*. It was now covered with canvas until I'm completely done with painting and trim.

A blasting of car horns behind me brought me back to reality with a panicked jerk. We'd reached a section of highway lit bright as day by poles holding banks of artificial lights. The glare was awful. I checked my rearview mirror, but I couldn't see the source of the noise. The horns continued, beeps of all different tones and lengths. The angry squeal of tires against pavement made me twist against my lap belt to look through the back window, but a large panel truck behind me blocked my view. I was two car lengths from the beginning of the construction zone. A Toyota Camry on my left stepped on the gas to try to nose in ahead of me. I'd probably let him when the time came but right now I wanted to know what was going on behind me. I rolled

down my window so I could hear better. The sound of screaming metal now joined the horns. As tight as traffic was packed, there was a good chance I was going to be rear-ended by that panel truck, but there was no helping it.

As I reached the barrier, the Camry pulled in front of me from the left lane. I tried to put a little distance between me and the panel truck when a one ton truck with dualies, towing an oversized trailer, moved up fast and hard along the quickly narrowing emergency lane. The wheels of the trailer were off the pavement on one side. The trailer was clipping off the plastic delineator posts at ground level. I realized in a panic that the stake-bed trailer was headed straight for me!

The next few seconds were a rush of sound and motion. The panel truck behind me honked and swerved. He collided with the car to his left, driving it into the concrete barrier with a screech of protesting metal.

What in the hell is he doing? I couldn't believe it. Was the driver of the dually *insane*? He seemed intent on entering traffic exactly where my truck was. He swerved toward me and then away, sending the trailer careening in my direction. Twice, then three times in rapid succession. I swerved to give him room and touched my brakes to let him enter but it wasn't enough. He slowed and swerved again. The trailer just missed my bumper. I had nowhere left to go. Even stopping wasn't an option. The panel truck behind me wasn't giving way. It was right on my bumper, close enough that I couldn't even see its headlights.

I said a quick prayer, slammed on my brakes and at the same time cranked the steering wheel as hard right as I could. I swerved onto the shoulder of the road behind the trailer. Edna skittered wildly on the sand and I fought to control her. The panel truck careened by me without a glance. As the road joined the highway, the driver of the one-ton swerved across the double white lines into the far left lane and the whole works ended up sliding down the sloped median. It teetered, tipped sideways at high speed and nearly flipped. The trailer was all that held it upright.

My knuckles were white where they gripped the steering wheel. My heart was pounding a mile a minute and my left eye started to twitch. I had almost regained control when a motorcycle cop sped past me on the shoulder. I instinctively turned the wheel away from him. It was too much for the poor old truck.

The landscape raced by me in a blur as Edna executed a 360 degree spin on the shoulder. The passenger wheels caught the edge of the pavement, and as the driver's side of the truck raised into the air enough that I could look down the steep embankment, every second seemed an eternity.

Edna doesn't have shoulder belts. This could be really, really bad.

Chapter 2

I threw every ounce of my weight against the driver door and prayed. My heart stilled as the truck balanced on two wheels. Finally, gravity won and the chassis returned to the pavement with a teeth jarring thump. I sat there, frozen, remembering how to breathe as wailing sirens filled the air. I patted the steering wheel of my faithful truck like I would a puppy and congratulated her. "Attagirl, Edna!"

My legs were rubbery as I exited the truck and checked for damage. A state trooper came running over and I spent the next twenty minutes trying to convince him, and the off-duty EMTs that just happened to be at the airport, that I wasn't hurt. They seemed convinced that I must have suffered a concussion.

Fortunately, there were enough people who *did* need an ambulance that they let me leave after taking my statement. The Denver cop on the motorcycle made me promise that I would check in at Denver General for testing. While it seemed silly to me, he threatened to write me up for careless driving if I didn't.

As I eased back into traffic, I glanced again at the truck in the ditch. Christian charity aside, I got no small amount of satisfaction from seeing that dually end up there.

I didn't go to DG. Instead, I drove to St. Elizabeth's. It's just one of many sprawling brick buildings on hospital row. Joe was off shift, but I was sure to know someone on duty in the ER.

I crossed the parking lot and came in through the ER entrance. An ambulance was just arriving. I had to leap sideways through the door to avoid the speeding gurney and attendants. I had to wait a few minutes to check in. The receptionist took the insurance card I pulled from my wallet and made a quick photocopy. As I slid the card back in my wallet she gestured toward the reception area.

"Have a seat. It'll be a few minutes." I turned and looked around. It'd be *more* than a few judging from the crowd. People occupied nearly every chair lining the walls of the waiting room. Most of them looked worried, and were probably waiting for word on a friend or relative. One woman rocked a sobbing young boy of about eight in her arms. His head was a mass of blood from a nasty cut. As I watched, another red splatter landed on the mother's arm. Despite the blood, that they hadn't already taken him to a room was a good sign--- head wounds bleed like crazy even if they aren't serious.

I sat down in one of the two remaining seats. Fortunately, it was right at the edge of a busy aisle. If I spotted someone I knew, I could nab him or her and jump ahead of the line. I didn't feel guilty. I'd only take two or three minutes and be out of the others' way.

As I watched the passersby for a friendly face, jet lag decided to settle in. My limbs suddenly felt like lead and my stomach was growling enough to warrant a glance from the man next to me. A quick scan around the room cheered me. While I'm not terribly fond of either vending machine food or coffee, anything is better than nothing. I fished around in my pockets and was rewarded with a pair of quarters. I walked over to the machine debating internally--- more caffeine or food? Caffeine won by a hair. I'd pay for it later of course. I'd probably have a stomachache by noon for having a second cup.

As I stepped up to the machine I noticed something odd. A brand new Gucci purse sat unattended on the chair next to the machine. I shook my head as I plunked the quarters into the coin slot. I didn't remember it being there a moment before. Why would someone leave an expensive purse lying around in a room of strangers? I glanced around. Nobody else seemed to notice the tooled leather bag, but it seemed really familiar to me.

I turned my attention back to the machine as the hissing ceased and coffee began to pour into the cardboard cup. I saw movement in the shiny black surface. I started to turn, but it was too late. A fierce blow hit the back of my skull solidly enough to drop me to my knees. I didn't pass out, but only barely. I rolled out of the way of a second attack, running into the legs of the mother with the boy. She didn't notice. I looked up into her glazed eyes. I realized that none of the people were seeing what was happening to me. With a sudden chill, I remembered the last time I'd seen that expensive handbag--- swinging from Monica Micah's slender arm as she backhanded me across a restaurant while all of the patrons stood blindly hypnotized. The queen of the Thrall was paying me a personal visit. Shit.

The nurse from the check-in desk came for me again. I shook my head frantically, forcing the remaining cotton candy from my brain. I let her believe that I didn't notice her until she was close enough for me to slam my boot into her kneecap. She dropped to one knee with a grunt but got up so fast that you'd think she'd been kicked by an errant child.

"*Enough!*" came a voice that crawled along my skin like rows of biting ants. My attacker froze in place, arm raised. A brick fell from her instantly limp fingers.

Monica hadn't changed at all. She was still the same vibrant raven-haired beauty with milk-white skin and violet eyes. She looked both elegant and sexy in clothes that had been cut to make the most of every curve. Luring prey has always been easy with her sultry voice, cover model looks and wanton sexual appetite. She could look cherubic, professional or even demure. But underneath the good looks were a mind and a body capable of unimaginable evil. Her enemies tend to scream a lot and then die very, very slowly. So far, I've been the lone exception.

Hello, Kathleen. She spoke directly into my mind, her voice deceptively pleasant. I hate that she can slide so casually into my thoughts. I raised myself stiffly to a sitting position while trying to increase my mental shields. It was a struggle. Her force of will pushed at my body enough to make my muscles ache. My God! I hadn't seen her for a couple of years, but I didn't remember her being this powerful. The scent of her expensive perfume made me sneeze, sending a shooting pain through my skull. Oddly, it helped. By concentrating on the pain I was able to push her mind aside just enough to throw up a stronger shield and not be overwhelmed. She hissed. It was a very inhuman sound that seemed even more evil coming from those perfectly painted lips.

"What do you want, Monica?" I forced the words through a throat that didn't want to work.

Her smile was dazzling. Her laugh was bright but cold. and words again appeared like magic in my head. *Want? Why, what I've always wanted, darling. I want you dead. But not quite yet. We have other plans for you first.*

The last syllable was followed by a surge of pure power that seared my brain. I gasped and brought my hands up against my temples, but white spots and flowers threatened to eat away reality.

When I could force my eyes open past a slit, I saw the nurse taking the cap off a syringe. Monica's eyes glinted with wicked pleasure. *We'll go somewhere less . . . crowded, and we'll chat. Won't that be fun?*

No, it wouldn't. And we wouldn't. Not so long as I had an ounce of fight left in my body. I tensed body and mind to fight. I cast my eyes around the waiting room, looking for something, anything I could use as a weapon. Nothing. But I did see a familiar face walking in the hallway beyond Monica. So, Monica didn't have enough power to do the whole hospital. It was only the people in this room who were enthralled. As liquid leapt from the needle in a broad arc to clear the air, I called in the loudest voice I could manage.

"DR. MACDOUGAL!"

The man turned to my voice and he saw Monica. He knew her. He sees a lot of people who she's *chatted* with. But only for a few seconds before the face is covered and the body is taken downstairs. He ran and grabbed the arms of two burly attendants. Monica bared her fangs and hissed at me.

The blonde was still moving steadily toward me, needle extended and thumb on the plunger.

I couldn't stand. I knew that. Monica's power was too strong. But I knew that if she enthralled the doctor and the attendants, she'd lose her hold over the room, or me. In any case, she was undone.

Or so I thought.

The first attendant grabbed the nurse. He had to struggle to hold onto a woman that couldn't have weighed more than 98 pounds. He was winning, but only barely.

The other attendant reached for Monica. Big mistake. One slender arm shot out and the man was suddenly in the air, held effortlessly by her superhuman strength. A flash of movement later, he was on the ground, his throat ripped into shreds by her perfectly manicured nails. Blood spurted from his torn arteries. I grimaced as she licked the blood from her fingers while he lay thrashing.

This isn't over, Katie.

Both women disappeared. That's the best I can describe it. I lay still on the floor for a second, stunned and grateful. I'd been lucky. She could've killed me in those seconds when she'd clouded our minds to leave. Why hadn't she? What in the *hell* was going on?

With Monica's departure, the waiting room came alive again. The mother looked down at her blood covered arm with a start. The boy had been bleeding steadily the whole time, and she hadn't noticed.

"Kate!"

I turned to see Dr. MacDougal, a slender middle-aged man with thinning black hair and a bushy moustache. He was still dressed in a lab coat. He was on one knee next to his fallen employee. I watched as he snapped on a pair of latex gloves taken from his pocket. I could tell the man was badly wounded, but he'd probably live. He was lucky. Monica seldom leaves survivors. A gurney arrived with a contingent of doctors and nurses and the unconscious man disappeared down the hallway in a rush of voices and motion.

I would've expected him to follow along, but he stayed, giving me a long intense stare that carried the weight of his displeasure.

“Hi, Dr. MacDougal,” I replied wearily. I was truly sorry about the guard--- and confused as hell.

“What happened here, Kathleen?” He removed the gloves and dropped them into the biowaste container hanging on the wall.

His guess was as good as mine. I couldn’t fathom why Monica would suddenly appear. She’d left me alone for years. I reviewed her words in my mind. “*We have other plans for you first.*” *We* had to be the hive. But what other plans? I didn’t have a clue. My pulse began racing with fear. One of the benefits of being Not Prey was that they were *supposed* to challenge me one on one, not hunt me like an animal. Somehow the rules had changed. My body started to shake, and it wasn’t just a physical reaction.

“I had a near miss on I-70 and promised the police that I’d get checked out by a doctor. I checked in. Monica was waiting for me. I don’t know how or why.” My stomach tightened into a tense knot. There were too many questions, not the least of which was why my free pass had abruptly expired. I needed to find out, just as soon as I could get my feet back under me and enough rest for my brain to start working again. But I was just too tired, too hungry, and my head hurt too badly to do anything but deal with the immediate crisis.

The anger faded from MacDougal’s eyes and his face fell into professional lines. He opened his mouth to begin asking the usual series of questions for accident patients.

I warded off the words by holding up my hands. “I just spun out when someone forced me off the road. I’m fine. The truck’s fine. But the cop on the scene wouldn’t believe I didn’t hit my head.” I snorted and shook my head, which brought on a brief wave of nausea. “Doesn’t matter much now, since the check-in nurse cracked me with a brick.” I used gentle fingers to probe the growing lump. It hurt. A lot. But I wasn’t dizzy, or nauseous--- both good signs. “I’m probably fine. Really.”

MacDougal scowled at me. He crossed his arms over his chest and raised his brows. “*I’ll* let you know if you’re fine.” He grasped my chin in one strong hand, gazing carefully at my pupils. He let out a little snort of air that could’ve meant anything or nothing.

I heaved a sigh. I wanted out of here, and now. But I knew that tone of voice. I wouldn’t be going anywhere until the doctor got a good look at me. If I tried, he’d call reinforcements--- possibly in the form of my older brother.

He released my chin. “Come with me. We can take care of this in my office.” He gestured for me to follow and I fell into step beside him. I knew where the lab was.

I’m always amazed by Dr. MacDougal’s office. Researchers seem to run to two extremes. Some are so involved with their projects that everything else suffers. Unless they are fortunate enough to employ a competent assistant, their office, lab and life are in constant chaos. Dr. MacDougal is the other flip of the coin. His office is meticulously clean--- dirt is the enemy. His lab is a model of order and efficiency.

He left the light off, but sufficient sunlight found its way through the blinds.

As I performed a heel-to-toe, straight line walk that reminded me of a roadside DUI test, I asked, “Have you ever finished off that bottle of The Macallan?”

He shook his head. “Nope. I keep it in my desk for special occasions. It was eighteen years old when you gave it to me, and will probably make it another eighteen before I finish it. Every sip is bottled joy, so I refuse to waste it.” He motioned for me to stop walking and stepped

forward with a small penlight.

He flicked the light into my eyes as I stared straight ahead. “So, have you learned anything new about the Thrall that you can share?” I wasn’t surprised at the subject of conversation. Research into the effects of the Thrall parasite is both his job and his passion. I know he likes me as a person, but even that is overshadowed by his endless curiosity about my “link” to the creatures he spends his life studying.

“Nope. I’ve tried to avoid them.”

He stopped in mid-flick and stared at me very seriously. “That’s stupid, Kate. You should always know your enemy.”

Part of me knew MacDougal was right. I should have spent these years learning as much as I could about them. But the other part had wanted to pretend that if I ignored them, they’d go away. *Denial is more than de river in Egypt.*

I took a deep breath and thought about the call from Dylan and the look on Monica’s face. I shook my head. It hurt. A lot. Damn it.

“Okay, okay. So enlighten me with your wealth of knowledge.” The words sounded cranky, but MacDougal ignored the tone. He moved behind me and began to lecture as he checked the range of motion of my head.

“Well, as you know, the Thrall have existed since the dawn of time. They’ve evolved over the millennia from the equivalent of a tapeworm to become a highly intelligent parasitic species with a unique culture and language. Does this hurt?” he asked, pressing firmly on my abdomen where the seat belt had crossed me. I shook my head no so he continued. He knows Edna doesn’t have shoulder belts so he didn’t bother to check there.

“We’ve learned since last time we talked that they are extremely sensitive to damage to the Host. This is apparently because the primary ganglia actually *fuses* to the Host’s spinal cord.”

Hey, that *was* new. “So a gunshot or knife wound to the Host’s back will hurt the Thrall?”

Dr. MacDougal nodded. “And damage to the Thrall, such as an injury to a feeding tube in the mouth or a blow to the nesting site at the base of the skull will stun the Host into a comatose-like state.

I pursed my lips. “Is that why all the attempts to operate and remove the parasite have killed the Host?”

“Precisely. It’s the same with drugs. Anything sufficient to kill the Thrall will kill the Host. It’s only recently that we’ve learned that the Thrall’s body actually merges with and *replaces* human brain tissue. When the parasite grows too big, the hypothalamus is destroyed and the Host dies. The usual life span seems to be about 3 to 4 years. Your friend Monica is a notable exception.”

He reached up and ran cool fingers over my forehead, searching for lumps or swelling. His probing at the back of my head produced a quick flash of pain. He saw my reaction and then carefully moved to my jaw. I reached up and felt the sore spot. It wasn’t much of a lump, but it was certainly tender. There was a clicking sound as he moved the jaw back and forth.

“Make an appointment with your dentist,” he commented. “You’re a little out of alignment. Could give you headaches and change your bite pattern.”

“Anything else new on the research front?” I changed the subject away from a possible dental visit. Not my favorite place.

He ignored the question, stepped away and dug in his pocket for a moment. He withdrew a ring of keys and selected one. “I’ve got something here that will take care of the swelling and concussion.”

The key opened a cabinet on the wall and he removed a large white plastic bottle. “Take two now and one tonight *with food*, and again for the next two days. I’ll write up a prescription that you can fill at your normal pharmacy.”

I glanced at the pair of red and white capsules he dropped in my hand, and raised a leery brow. “They have drugs to get rid of a concussion now?”

He smiled and handed me a plastic bottle of water from the little refrigerator on the countertop and I popped the pills. “That’s the nice thing about the best minds in the world researching the effects of the Thrall. We’ve learned a lot about head injuries since you played ball.” My stomach took that moment to comment on the word “food”. He glanced down at the sharp rumble.

“And I *mean* with food, Kate. You don’t eat nearly as often as you should. Go to see your old chiropractor if he’s still practicing, too. This looks about the same as the knock you took in your last game, so your back’s probably out of place. I’ll file a report with the police. But I want you to take the usual precautions.”

He handed me a printed leaflet from the counter that discussed head injuries. While I read what I already knew, he scribbled on a pad. “If you experience any dizziness, increased thirst or if you still have a headache in 24 hours, give Joe a call.”

I sniffed in amusement. “Calling my brother *gives* me a headache.”

“And you him.” MacDougal chuckled for a moment, handed me the square of paper with an unreadable scrawl that I presumed would mean something to the pharmacist, and then changed the subject back to his personal obsession.

“You asked about my research. I think I’ve found out something very valuable that would be of interest to you. Someday it could help Bryan.”

That caught my attention. I moved to sit down on the couch.

“Just by accident, I’ve discovered that EKG patterns of drug zombies like Bryan are identical to those of Hosts.”

I gave him what must have been a quizzical look. “What does that mean? That the Thrall are somehow responsible for the zombies?”

“Not at all. But it *may* mean that improperly prepared Eden, which causes the zombie-like state in its junkies, is similar in composition to the yolk of the Thrall egg which enslaves the Hosts. It’s just a theory, but I’m putting together a grant application to study it.”

Interesting as the conversation was, my stomach took the opportunity to remind me, again, how hungry I was. The rumble was loud enough that MacDougal let out a low growl. I shrugged but blushed.

“Sorry. I haven’t eaten since lunch yesterday.”

He nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. “Like I said earlier, take the pills *with food*. Go--- eat.”

I grinned. “Yep. Food and then bed. That’s second on the short list.”

He shook his head and gave me a stern look. “Not with that head injury. You need to call someone to sit with you--- or at least set the alarm and wake up every hour until the medication kicks in.” I stepped out into the hallway through the door he held open for me. I immediately felt the familiar tickle and buzzing in my head. It was almost dawn. Normally the hive activity would be winding down. The fact that they weren’t meant something was going on. It was a forcible reminder that MacDougal had been right about more than the head injury.

Apparently, ignoring the Thrall was no longer an option.