

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
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WRITING A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT
OF ONE NON-WRITER'S JOURNEY.

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WRITING A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the experiences of a self-proclaimed non-writer as she seeks to understand and develop a style of writing. Research is included to support the ideas that teachers of writing should be writers themselves, writer's, often times, learn from each other, and young adult literature is, indeed, relevant to our society. By using the autobiographical method, the author investigates the significant events of her educational journey and describes the transformation that occurred while writing a young adult novel. The author discovers workable techniques and strategies by monitoring the planning, drafting, and revising stages of the traditional writing process. By telling her story, the author was able to construct meaning for herself, and in turn, provide the information necessary for others to be success during the writing process.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Before beginning the research portion of this writing experience, I found it important to take a look at my writing past in order to set a benchmark in which to compare my final progress. I was not lucky enough to be like Laurie Halse Anderson and have the knack for storytelling by the second grade. While Anderson never intended to be an author, she knew her stories could make her mother laugh and her sister scream (Macmillan).

Young adult authors Cassandra Clare and Neal Shusterman report writing as teens- even though they came to writing in different ways. Clare wrote stories in high school to amuse her friends. She used her love of Jane Austen to inspire her epic novel called “The Beautiful Cassandra” (Clare). Neal Shusterman, on the other hand, was inspired by his ninth-grade English teacher. After seeing his love of writing come out in class, she challenged him to write one story a month for extra credit. “Since I desperately needed extra credit in her class, I took her up on the challenge, and by the end of ninth grade, I really began to feel like a writer. That's when writing emerged above all my other interests as my driving passion” (Shusterman).

While not all authors have this kind of beginning, these are the ones that intimidate a “wannabe” writer - a.k.a. me.

Until the beginning of this project, I considered myself a non-writer. As a young person I found myself drawing, coloring, and reading instead of creating my own stories. Writing didn't enter my life until high school and even then it was a poor attempt at “poetry.” I make it a point to put poetry in quotation marks simply because

when I looked back at the writing from that time in my life, the poems seemed more like angry love notes instead of poetry. The poetry samples I kept from my time in high school range from 1986 to 1989. After rereading the poetry in chronological order I noticed that only one major thing changed. While they all focused on heartbreak and love lost it was obvious my tone changed over the years. In 1986, my writing could be categorized as sad and sappy. Below are two examples from my early poems:

“Untitled” circa 1986

Someone please tell me

what I’ve done wrong

We, together used to

laugh and sing.

It seems like so long

so long since you’ve

smiled in my direction

so long since I’ve looked

at you with my affection.

Now I seem lost

without any hope –

I have nothing to

dream of –

Without your smile

without your love

all the little moments

that we once shared
are gone with no reason
Yet, sometimes,
when I see your
smile
it takes me a while
to realize
the smile wasn't
meant for me.

“Bygone Days” circa 1986

It's been so long
since I've seen you,
to hear you softly whisper
my name in the moonlight.

It seems like forever
and a day
since I've held you
in my arms

So many times
I recall bygone days
and wish the past
weren't so far away.

As an adult, rereading those words makes me laugh. The word “drama” comes to mind. It is easy to see that the drama continued and escalated by 1989 as evidenced in the poems from that time period. Below are two examples:

“Untitled” circa 1989

I hate him

How many times have I said that?

I can't seem to make up my mind.

I've told myself before, *Don't get attached, go with it for fun.*

It's not that easy.

When you share something really special you can't just blow it off so easy. At least I can't.

Who knows about you. We're not the same right?

Just stop confusing me, okay!

Stop acting like you really want to spend time with me. I can't take it. Too much pressure.

Leave me alone if you don't intend to do anything about it!

“Untitled” circa 1989

I tell myself not to think about
you today. Maybe if I don't call or
see you for a few days you'll
start to miss me.

That's not the problem.

The problem is you –

You use people and when you've
squeezed all you can out of a person
you toss them aside and use someone else. Yes, I got pulled in
by your looks, charms, and style. God. How stupid.

Now I have to go back

and rebuild myself. Starting
from scratch. I feel so used.

But hey, that's understandable.

I've been used by the best.

Right?

Beyond the use of “poetry” to release my frustrations, writing never played a role in my life. After graduating from high school, I never wrote for personal pleasure again until 2002 when I enrolled in the Oklahoma Writing Project. In this month-long, intensive writing workshop, teachers get first-hand experience writing to a variety of

prompts, as well as, developing a research-based writing presentation. It was during this month that I discovered I enjoyed writing.

Poetry seemed to be the easiest thing for me to create during the summer. I enjoyed the freedom to do whatever I wanted – the lack of strict rules. I deviated from the norm only once in the form of a short story. In response to a mystery prompt, I started a story about a girl being chased by unknown pursuers through the streets of a busy city. While my intentions were good in terms of continuing the story, the busy life of a graduate student with a full-time job got in the way. I only tinkered with the story from time to time.

The summer of 2008 was a turning point in my writing life. During Dr. Michael Angelotti's Paint/Write class we were asked to create a QuickPaint and follow it with a QuickWrite. The QuickWrite was supposed to relate to the painting. When I looked at my creation, I saw a colorful flower garden covered by the smashed remains of tiny faeries. I immediately titled the painting *Death of the Faeries* and proceeded to write the beginning of a story about a faery named Millie who was running late to a secret meeting. The faeries in attendance were gathered to develop a plan to overthrow the evil Faery Queen. Because Millie was late, she was the only one involved in the coup to survive. During the Paint/Write class I wrote what I considered to be the Prologue to the story. In my mind, the main story would take place while Millie was in hiding in a large city. She would be forced to live among the humans until she figured out what to do about her life among the faeries.

Much like the first time I started a short story, I failed to work on it after the class was over. It remained in my mind, untouched, for a year.



Figure 1: *Death of the Faeries*

So, you may ask yourself, what led a non-writer like me to attempt to write a novel when all I'd been able to accomplish in my life were some random poems and two failed short stories? The answer is, my love of young adult literature. While there are many people who read more than I do every year, I consider myself well read in the field of young adult literature. I read 113 books in 2008, 114 books in 2009, and am well on my way to reaching those numbers for 2010. Not all of those books have been masterpieces. Like most "wanna-be" authors, I've had the occasional, "I could write better than this," moment.

Another factor in my decision is that my original topic, what causes teens to read for pleasure, had already been researched many times. My question would not be any different from the questions Gay Ivey, Karen Broaddus, and others have asked in their many studies about what motivates adolescents to read.

At the same time as this realization, the Advisory Committee meeting to determine the status of my doctoral program was fast approaching; time was running out to make a decision about my dissertation topic. The stress of writing started

creeping into my thoughts more and more as the days progressed. Thinking along those lines led me to consider my writing in general. I realized, even though I have experiences teaching students to write and have been an involved member in the Oklahoma Writing Project for several years, I can honestly say, a clear picture of what the writing process means to me, beyond the textbook definitions of the traditional five stages, eludes me. The first question that surfaced was, is it important for teachers of writing to be writers themselves? While researchers like Nancie Atwell (1998) and Donald Graves (1984, 1990, 1994), both highly respected in the educational community, have come to the conclusion that teachers must be confident writers in order to be effective teachers of writing, not everyone agrees (Gleeson & Prain, 1996). The next stage in my dissertation topic development was to extend writing beyond classroom instruction. As a librarian, the time I can spend and the lessons I can teach in the classroom are limited, but interacting with young adult literature and teens, on the other hand, is much more accessible. This dissertation, *Writing a Young Adult Novel: An Autobiographical Account of One Non-Writer's Journey*, is the melding of these two important aspects of education, writing and young adult literature, and led to the development of my research question – *Can a self-proclaimed non-writer be successful in writing a novel and how will the monitoring of the writing give better insight into the “author’s” personal writing process?*

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine and analyze my own writing in order to develop an understanding of my writing style. By placing a magnifying glass on my own process during the creation of a young adult novel, I will be able to delve deeper than ever and examine all the layers that are involved in writing. In addition to the creativity it takes to write a novel, I located related literature pertinent to this study, learned about autobiography as a method for research, and analyzed and reported data about my experiences throughout the process. I became a writer/researcher. As with any research, the goal is to add knowledge to the professional community; this study is no different. As a teacher/librarian one of my main goals is to make learning accessible to students. By gaining insight into my writing process, I am now more equipped to assist students with their writing. Like Nancie Atwell (1998) did, I wrote, looked at and described how I wrote, and thought about what my discoveries might mean for kids as writers (p.10). I plan to use what I learned when I work with students in the future. However, it is important to understand that this project does not include any interaction with students. Working with students and incorporating these techniques is another study in itself and can be explored at a later date.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was multifaceted. First, I gained important information about myself and improved my skills as a writer. Second, the lessons I learned during this self-discovery will translate into the lessons I can teach to students. Third, I wrote a young adult novel, thus contributing to the world of young adult literature.

Overview of the Procedures of the Study

My first step in this study was to explore the related literature on the various topics related to my study. This included research articles on: autobiography as a method for research, the writing process in general, young adult authors' writing processes, the relevance of young adult literature, teachers as writers, and finally, the use of a novel as a format for a dissertation.

As mentioned above, I used autobiography as the method for this research study. An autobiography is a life story written about oneself and according to Creswell, "This form seldom is found in graduate student research," (1998). Does that mean it shouldn't be? According to Clandinin & Connelly,

Deliberately storying and restorying one's life is a fundamental method of personal growth: it is a fundamental quality of education. Narrative method, in its simplest terms, is the description and restorying of the narrative structure of varieties of educational experience, (1989).

Working my way through the writing process would fall into the category of educational experience. Bullough & Pinnegar established guidelines for quality autobiographical research. One of the guidelines states, "Biographical and autobiographical self-studies in teacher education are about the problems and issues that make someone an educator," (2001). As a teacher/librarian, the writing process is an important part of my job. Not only do I teach students the proper way to conduct and report research, but also the importance of creative writing. By analyzing my own

writing process, I will be better able to teach students what to do when they are in the middle of their own writing projects.

Another guideline for quality autobiographical self-study is, “The autobiographical self-study researcher has an ineluctable obligation to seek to improve the learning situation not only for the self but for the other,” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). By sharing my data collection methods, reporting my successes and failures, and showing examples of my work, others will be able to utilize my tools, or adapt them to their own needs, in order to accomplish the same success I have.

Finally, autobiographical self-study should, “portray character development and include dramatic action: Something genuine is at stake in the story,” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). The study meets this guideline in the sense that I made a transformation by the end of the study. In the beginning, I considered myself a non-writer and by the end, I was an author. Not everyone can write a 250-page novel. As far as something genuine being at stake, I consider the fact that my writing is out there for everyone to read is a tremendous risk. Not only is my terrible, first draft included in this dissertation, but my data, as messy as some of it is, is also incorporated.

“Although not itself a principle or a theory, autobiography permits access to valid sources of information that facilitate the recovery and inspection of ideas of great relevance to education and to the field of curriculum in particular,” (Graham, 1991).

Throughout the course of my study I utilized several different data collection methods. First, before I even started planning the novel, I wrote a Pre-Freewrite. This writing turned out to be an explanation of my writing history. I mentioned how I didn’t

consider myself a writer, how I'm not like the many authors who claim they've been writing since they were young children, and why I wanted to write a young adult novel.

Second, I conducted a large-scale self-observation throughout the entire dissertation process. I started a daily journal in which I hoped to collect my thoughts, my feelings, and my actions. This method of data collection wasn't a good fit for me so instead I decided to use a 21st Century tool to collect my internal thoughts called Twitter. By instantly typing my questions, thoughts, and frustrations on Twitter, rather than in a reflective journal, I was able to capture, not only my writing memories, but also my think-alouds and the planning that went into the novel. I feel this is more beneficial than simply reflecting after my writing experiences, as seen in Robert Lee Wyatt's (1990) dissertation.

Next, I created an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of the dates I worked on the novel, the number of words I wrote each day, and my writing location. Being this was the first time I attempted to write anything of significant length, I wanted to look at the difference between writing at home and writing in public. Would there be a difference in productivity?

In the beginning of the process, I kept a small notebook with me and wrote questions I had or ideas I wanted to incorporate into the story as they came to me. This method only lasted about a month. I ended up writing directly on my outline so everything was in one place.

After I finished the first draft, I wrote a reflection (Post-Freewrite) over the process as a whole. I wanted to write down the important lessons I learned while writing. In the Post-Freewrite I wrote about what I would definitely do the next time I

write a novel, as well as, the problems I had with this one – hopefully I can avoid some of the mistakes I made in this novel when I try again.

Finally, following the reflection period, I analyzed the data collected during the research study. I searched for recurring topics, looked for themes, identified exceptional occurrences, and searched for connections. The results are included in the appropriate chapters. For instance, results from the drafting stage of the writing process will be found in the drafting chapter.

Related Literature

There are many different facets to this research study. As mentioned before, I looked at the research about the writing process, both in general and specifically in terms of different young adult literature author styles, information about teachers of writing actually writing themselves, and the relevance of young adult literature in our society.

The Writing Process

In the world of language arts education, the term “writing process” is commonly used to describe the writing experience students should be exposed to in the classroom. The most common writing process contains five stages: prewriting, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing. Even though we, as teachers, are aware of the stages, does it automatically mean we know what it means to work our way through them?

The amount of information available on the writing process is staggering. You can type “writing process” into Google and 3,200,000 results pop up (as of March 19, 2009). Are all of these websites reliable? Absolutely not, but it gives an idea of how popular the term “writing process” has become in the educational world.

What we know of today as the writing process hasn't always been used to teach writing. In the past, writers were generally given a topic or theme, given a model to imitate, and time to practice. Once the final product was turned in, the teacher would grade it by marking corrections in red pen (Hayes & Flower, 1986). The focus of their instruction was more on the product rather than the process used to create the composition. Researchers have known for years the harm "bleeding" all over student papers can cause. Past studies have revealed, instead of students taking the graded paper home and pouring over the teacher's suggestions, the student tries their best to hide their grade and most likely toss it into a waste paper basket (Fassler, 1978). More recent studies show that the problem is not the act of writing on the students' papers, but instead the pace at which the teacher moves through the classroom curriculum (Courtney-Smith, 2008).

Writing instruction began to shift from a product focus to a process method in the 1970's. Studies were conducted in the areas of composition processes and cognitive processes. Janet Emig and Donald Graves were among the first researchers to study students' writing processes. In her study, Emig (1971) interviewed her 12th grade students as they wrote and broke down the process in terms of time spent planning, reading, outlining, revising, and so on. Graves (1975) studied 7-year-olds and described a similar process of prewriting, composing, and postwriting. Both studies revealed different people successfully adopt individual approaches to the writing process (Emig, 1971; Graves, 1975).

The 1970's also brought about the realization of the writing process being recursive instead of linear (Hayes & Flower, 1986). The idea of a recursive writing

process is widely known and accepted, however the tradition of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing is rarely deviated from in the classroom. In order to avoid the idea that these steps cannot be flexible, Nancie Atwell (1998) is “careful never to talk about *the writing process*, because the phrase implies one series of steps through which everyone proceeds in creating a piece of writing” (p.157). Instead, Atwell (1998), “talks only in general ways about some of the things writers do” (p.157).

We’ve known about the processes involved in quality student writing for many years, so what does some of the more recent studies reveal about writing instruction? In a meta-analysis conducted by Graham and Perin (2007), studies revealed,

When teachers were involved in professional development to use the process writing approach, there was a moderate effect on the quality of students’ writing. In the absence of such training, process-writing instruction had a small effect on the writing of students in Grades 4 through 6, but did not enhance the writing of students in Grades 7 through 12 (p. 461).

Also, “explicitly teaching adolescents strategies for planning, revising, and/or editing had a strong impact on the quality of their writing” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 463).

These findings make it clear that teachers must be aware of the processes of writing and know different strategies to accomplish them. What better way for a teacher to learn about the writing process than to study his or her own writing?

Teachers as Writers

“Those who teach a craft ought to do the craft” (Romano, 2007, p.171). It is important for a teacher to know the answers to the following questions: “What worked

well? What didn't work? How did you solve writing problems? How long did it take you to get to the final draft? How many drafts were required? What was the focus of each draft?" (Murray, 2007, p.180)

The writing process, as mentioned earlier, isn't a linear, step-by-step process. Instead, the writer uses the process, in whatever order needed, to get the best results possible. When teachers of writing write, they develop insider knowledge. "They know the challenges, failures, and triumphs of composing with words" (Romano, 2007, p.171). A teacher may need to demonstrate how to create a good leading sentence, incorporate creative word choice, or add details to create a clear picture for the reader. "Teachers who write must pay attention to their craft. In fact, it may be much more important that they understand how writing works than how much they publish" (Murray, 2007, p.179).

A teacher must be willing to "put themselves out there" in front of the students. They may feel uncomfortable taking a risk in front of the students, but they need to understand that students feel the same way when sharing their writing with the teacher (Augsburger, 1998; Cremin, 2006). Teachers who write and share their work with their students know the emotional investment needed to create a good piece of writing. By participating in the writing process with students, teachers not only become "more empathetic to the experiences of their students, but are also 'humanized' in the eyes of their students" (Brooks, 2007, p.178).

Another important aspect of teaching writing is providing valuable feedback. By sharing your writing with others and asking for feedback you'll begin to learn what feedback is helpful and what is not. Your confidence as a writer will grow as you seek

and receive feedback. (Augsburger, 1998; Dobson, 2009) You'll learn to be able to "separate yourself from the writing and look at it through the eyes of a possible audience" (Augsburger, 1998, p.3).

Not everyone agrees with the notion that teachers of writing need to write themselves in order to provide quality instruction to their students. Gleeson and Prain (1996) studied seven Australian secondary teachers, four of those who write with their students and three of those who don't. They were looking to see if there were any differences in the teaching methods between the two groups. The researchers' assumptions were not supported. Whether the teachers were writers or not, there didn't appear to be any difference between their ability for teaching writing. The second assumption about teachers who write being more likely to empathize with student difficulties and offer more useful responses than non-writers wasn't supported by student responses or classroom observations (Gleeson & Prain, 1996). The researchers determined that this issue may be more complex and that an equally complex research question may be needed. Simply saying that teachers of writing should write themselves is too broad. What kind of writing does the teacher need to be involved in? Do emails count as writing? Do teachers need to be actively seeking places to publish their work? Does personal journal writing constitute writing? (Brooks, 2007) These are the questions that make it difficult to come to a conclusion.

The Relevance of Young Adult Literature

"It wasn't until the early 1930s that most publishers divided their offerings into adult and juvenile categories" (Donelson & Nilsen, 2005, p.3). In 1937, Dora V. Smith authored an article for the *English Journal* about American's youth and English

Education. It is here that she explains the importance of providing reading material other than the traditional classics in order to better prepare students for their futures. Smith (1937) stated, “It is fair neither to young people nor to their teachers to send out from colleges and universities men and women trained alone in Chaucer and Milton and Browning to compete with Zane Grey, Robert W. Chambers, and Ethel M. Dell” (p. 111). By today’s standards Zane Grey’s adventure novels, Chamber’s enjoyable non-fiction, and Dell’s “racy” stories of love and passion may not be considered literature for adolescents, however, the point is still the same. Adolescents need good books and it doesn’t have to be a classic in order to be a good book.

Robert Carlsen provided some specifics in terms of adolescent literature with the publication of *Books and the Teenage Reader* in 1967. Carlsen (1967) stated, “In adolescent novels, writers direct their stories to the 12- to 18-year-olds” (p. 56). In *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* by Kenneth Donelson and Alleen Nilsen (2005), the same age range is referred to for this type of literature (p.1). What has changed are the terms used to describe the books published for teen readers. Now, terms such as, teen fiction, YA, or young adult literature is used when dealing with these books. Some terms that have been used in the past such as, juvenile literature, junior novel, and juvie have been abandoned due to the negative connotations (Donelson & Nilsen, 2005). But, no matter the term, young adult literature is important in today’s society.

“Like well-written adult literature, young adult literature contains many universal themes including the eternal questions *Who am I?* and *Where do I fit in?*” (Herz & Gallo, 2005, p.14). Young adult literature is a valuable resource for students dealing with difficult problems in their lives. Topics such as divorce, suicide, sexual

identity, and drug use are frequently highlighted between the pages of popular young adult novels. These sensitive subjects aren't delivered to the readers in a didactic manner determined to deliver a moral message, but instead in true-to-life situations where there isn't always an easy solution to the characters' problems.

Gary Salvner offers several examples in his article "Time and Tradition: Transforming the Secondary English Class with Young Adult Novels" as to how young adult novels can be utilized in the classroom to study a variety of literary elements. Salvner (2000) poses the question, "Why, if we know and believe adolescents will read young adult novels and if we recognize that examples of such works can be found that have substantial literary merit and quality, do we not make greater use of them [in the classroom]?" (p. 86) It is suggested that time can be saved in the classroom by replacing works from the district-selected anthology and the classics with more accessible and appealing young adult novels, while still covering the necessary literary elements required by the state standards (Salvner, 2000).

In the words of Louise Rosenblatt (1995), "Literature fosters the kind of imagination needed in a democracy – the ability to participate in the needs and aspirations of other personalities and to envision the effect of our actions on their lives" (p. 212). Literature can guide adolescent readers through the turbulent times of their lives by offering a glimpse into the lives of characters that may be experiencing the same problems as the reader.

Young Adult Authors' Writing Processes

"One best practice for teaching writing is to heed the behaviors of professional writers (Romano, 2007, p.168). Romano's advice is valuable. When you are learning

to do something new, it is only natural to go to the experts for advice. When Nancie Atwell encountered students in her classroom with a desire to write fiction, she made a decision to study what fiction authors do when they write. She “made notes about different authors’ techniques for introducing main characters, using dialogue to reveal character, employing one narrative voice or another, embedding information, creating and resolving conflict, and establishing theme” (Atwell, 1998, p.395).

By sharing writers’ techniques with students, you begin to fill their toolboxes with strategies to use in their own writing. After seeing enough examples and reproducing some of the techniques, using them will become second nature. Referring to examples of effective writing can be a great help when creating your own composition.

Today, we aren’t forced to rely on the authors’ books to use as examples. Many authors maintain websites and provide advice to aspiring authors. Technology has made it possible for adolescents to locate their favorite authors and communicate with them about writing or their books in general. Young adult authors are usually very open about their work and gladly answer questions posed to them by their readers. Young adult authors maintain a close community. They not only support each other when their books are released, but they assist each other in the creation of the manuscripts. Some work in groups on writing retreats and critique each other’s work and some belong to writing groups that meet periodically. If authors themselves rely on the advice of their colleagues, why shouldn’t we, as non-published authors, rely on their advice?

The Use of a Novel as a Format for a Dissertation

Writing a novel as part of a dissertation was just a wild idea I had very close to the end of my coursework. It is not an option you see very often in English Education, so I decided to explore the literature about this option in order to provide validation to the idea. In my search I found that writing a novel is a common practice for the completion of a Masters degree or Ph. D. in the Fine Arts or English departments, but in the department of English Education it is less frequent. After searching dissertation abstracts using ProQuest from the University of Oklahoma website, I found only three original novels used for the fulfillment of a Ph.D. in the area of education.

Mary Decker (1976) wrote a novel titled, “Confessions of a Rectoress (Original Novel)” for her Ph.D. in Special Education at Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities in Ohio. “The UECU dedicated itself to recruiting non-traditional students for college. The UECU hoped to provide older and working students with new opportunities to acquire a college education or additional training, so that these students could advance in their respective careers” (Ohio History Central, 2009). Decker’s dissertation novel is exactly that – a novel. There isn’t a clear research question, literature review, or references.

Richard Abrahamson (1977) wrote, “‘Nowhere Runner’: A study in the creation of a novel for adolescents” as part of his Ph.D. requirements for the University of Iowa. Since Abrahamson’s dissertation isn’t published it is impossible to see what exactly was included in his dissertation.

Finally, Robert Wyatt (1990) wrote a dissertation titled, “The Role of the Writer in the Writing Process.” Wyatt completed his dissertation while at the University of

Oklahoma. The purpose of his study was to “determine if a writer of a long creative piece of writing used the writing process as it is traditionally set out in five stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing” (Wyatt, 1990, p.viii).

Recent discussions have brought into the forefront the need for providing alternatives to the traditional dissertation format for those seeking a Ph.D. in Education. Even though dissertations have been utilized in America since the mid-19th century, there are definite limitations to the genre (Duke & Beck, 1999). The intended audience for a dissertation is the professional community at large, but in actuality, usually only the writer’s committee reads the document. Duke & Beck (1999) state, “a more authentic rhetorical situation for the doctoral dissertation would allow it to be read and evaluated by a wider audience than its current limited distribution permits” (p. 32). A great example of one of the many different options a dissertation can take the form of is Danny Wade’s (2008) “The Viability of Fictional Research Writing in Academe: Explorations of Process and Product.”

Another limitation of the traditional dissertation is the lack of transferability. For the most part, people only write one dissertation in their life. By requiring a doctoral candidate to write a traditional five-chapter dissertation, the student is being trained in a structure they will rarely use in the future. “With an ungeneralizable genre comes a missed opportunity for a transfer of knowledge and skills that will actually be of benefit to students in the long term” (Duke & Beck, 1999, p.32). Elliot Eisner, in his famous debate with Howard Gardner, proposes the need for novels to be considered as an acceptable dissertation format. However, even Eisner “acknowledges that a novel is

not an appropriate vehicle for every kind of research problem imaginable” (in Saks, 1996, p.407).

My dissertation is unique. I combined the introduction and the literature review in order to focus on the stages of the writing process in separate chapters. I felt devoting a chapter to each of the stages I went through, i.e. planning, drafting, and revising, made more sense than using a traditional format. In addition to the academic portion of the dissertation, I also wrote a novel to include as the publishing chapter.

In summary, for the last several years, it has been a common practice to teach writing using the process model and follow the stages of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. While some researchers stand by the theory that writing teachers should be writers themselves (Atwell, 1998; Augsburger, 1998; Brooks, 2007; Cremin, 2006; Graves, 1984, 1990, 1994; Murray, 2007; Romano, 2007) others disagree (Gleeson & Prain, 1996). Young adult literature provides a wonderful avenue for teaching writing in the classroom and due to its sophisticated use of literary elements, is a genre deserving a place all its own. Young adult authors provide useful examples for students when they are writing. Following the advice of experts is a valuable use of time when learning how to improve your craft. Finally, writing a novel for a dissertation is something being explored by some educational institutes. This method isn't appropriate for every study, but a traditional dissertation doesn't fit every research problem either (Duke & Beck, 1999; in Saks, 1996).

Summary

In summary, the purpose of my study was to take the mystery out of my own writing process by writing a young adult novel. I accomplished this by conducting a

search of the literature in the areas related to my study, both print and digital. I used a variety of methods for data collection, I maintained an accurate record of the novel's progress by keeping track of dates and word counts, and focused on the entire process through reflection after the novel is finished. I looked for patterns that showed up in my Twitter posts, writing strategies that did and didn't work, and implications for my future writing projects. When the time came to analyze data, I utilized some of the typical methods for analysis such as looking for recurring topics and themes.

CHAPTER TWO

PLANNING THE NOVEL

“Prewriting has been the most neglected aspect of the writing process, but it is as crucial to writers as a warm-up is to athletes,” (Tompkins as cited in Dahl, 1992, p. 139). Tompkins goes on to say, “Researchers recommend that writers spend as much as 75 percent of their total writing time involved in prewriting activities,” (as cited in Dahl, 1992, p. 139). As an educator, I have heard this same percentage, but didn’t force myself to stick to a certain amount of time when it came to planning my novel.

The first decision I had to make, as a writer, was how to go about planning the novel. I could brainstorm a list of major plot points and fill in the rest as I went along, use a series of clusters to graphically represent each chapter, create a storyboard, or simply use a traditional outline. The outline seemed like the most useful tool for my purposes. In 1988, Ronald Kellogg conducted a study to determine whether or not outlining (written or mental) prior to writing resulted in better text quality and increased time-on-task. His findings showed that outlining prior to drafting, “resulted in essays of significantly better quality than the no-outline condition,” (as cited in Hayes & Nash, 1996, p. 52). Not only were their essays better, but also the students who outlined wrote for longer periods of time and research shows the longer students spend on their writing, the better their writing will be.

Even though I was excited about getting started on the novel, I knew I needed a plan. Before I even started on the outline, I had to choose the point of view I would use for the novel. I knew my main character was a faerie named Millie, but I didn’t know if

I wanted to tell her story in First Person or Third Person. Eventually, I decided Third Person would grant me more freedom than a First Person point of view.

Next, I had to decide what form of Third Person I would use so I could remain consistent throughout the novel. My choices were: Third Person Omniscient, Third Person Limited, or Third Person Objective. Using Third Person Objective would only allow me to write about the character's actions and not his or her thoughts. Third Person Omniscient is a method where the narrator knows the thoughts and feelings of all the characters in the story and since I only wanted to convey the thoughts and feelings of one character at a time, I was forced to use Third Person Limited.

On June 16, 2009, I started creating the skeleton for my story. I originally planned to tell the story using only my main character, Millie's, point of view. However, after two days of work I changed my mind. On June 17th, 2009 at 11:20 P.M. I posted the following statement on Twitter: *Decided to alternate chapters between the two main characters. I'll get more info that way.* The next morning at 11:30 A.M. I posted: *Working on my novel outline. Going to insert another character's pov in between what I already have. Hmm. Also might try some music.* By reading the second post it is clear that I started writing the outline from Millie's perspective only to be forced to go back and insert my second main character, Slade's, perspective.

What caused me to make this change so early in the planning process? Third Person Limited does exactly what it says. It limits the narrator's ability to tell the story to only what the character can actually see, think, and feel. If I had kept the story as I originally started, I would never have been able to show what Slade saw, thought, and felt. By allowing both characters to have a point of view, I created many new

possibilities for story lines and plot twists. Without the expansion to two character points of view, the reader would never have experienced Slade's life because if Millie didn't see him, technically, she couldn't know what was happening to him. Alternating chapters between the two main characters allowed me to extend the story beyond what I could have written if I'd left it the way I originally planned.

On June 23, 2009 at 6:49 P.M. I finished the outline for the novel – it was 21 pages long. *Finished with outline. Backing everything up on a flashdrive. Working away from home was definitely productive.* This post was the first mention of writing somewhere other than my house. You can see in the Twitter chart on page 30 the category abbreviation for this was AWF (Away From Home). There were only two posts in this category during the planning stage because I was just getting started in the process and hadn't yet determined how I worked best.

With the outline in place I had a good idea of where the story was going to go, but I still needed to nail down specific details about the characters. I would need to describe their physical characteristics and have an idea of what their lives were like before the story began in order to know how to create their personalities. I created a character chart, which included information as simple as hairstyle, eye color, and name. It also contained things like the character's greatest weakness, flaws, and dark secrets.



One word the CHARACTER would use to describe him/herself	Inventive	Strong
Immediate goals	Staying alive and avoiding the Queen Get rid of the Queen's law of indentured servitude for 16-year-olds.	Capturing Charles Stalling and getting his money.
Long range goals		Survival He calming approaches a crisis. He is very practical and willing to die for someone he cares about. (usually because they deserve to live more than her does)
How does the character react to crisis?	At first she is struck with fear, but eventually her bravery surfaces. She is willing to sacrifice herself for others.	
How does the character react to change?	She is able to adapt to change. She is interested in learning new things and seeing how things work.	Doesn't like change at all. He is comfortable with his routine.
Favorite clothing	Lose fitting tops. Shorts or lose pants. Neutral or bright colors.	Dark clothing. Usually jeans and black t-shirts. He wears a peacoat in the cool/cold months.
Least favorite clothing	Anything tight or dark.	Anything that would make him stand out.
jewelry	 She wears a necklace on a silver chain with a silver flower charm.	 Cuff watch

Figure 2: Character Chart Example

I started work on the character chart on June 26, 2009. It took me one day to complete.

I utilized the small journal I kept with me the most when I was in this stage of the writing process. Below is an entry I wrote on the day I started the character chart when I was contemplating the age my character, Slade, should be. It was more difficult than simply picking an age because Slade's character is a vampire. I had to take into account how old he was when he was turned, what year he was turned, and then subtract it from the year the story was going to take place.

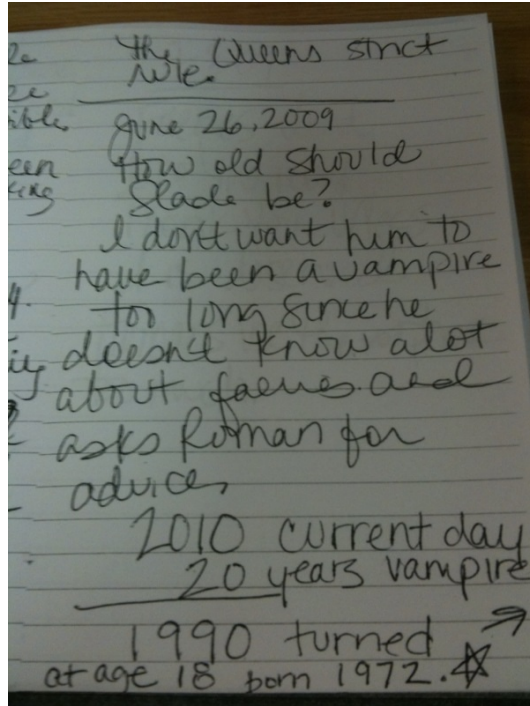


Figure 3: Journal Entry About Slade's Age

You can see how this entry made it to the official character chart in the picture below:

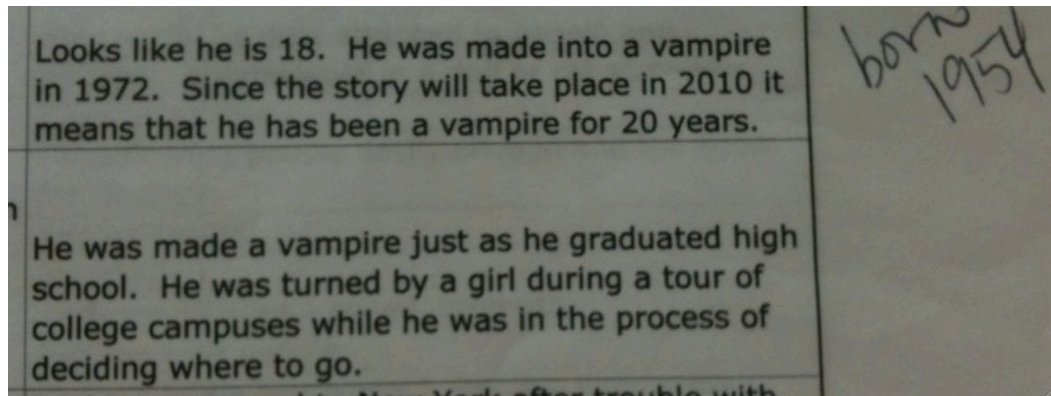


Figure 4: Character Chart Excerpt

As mentioned above, Twitter was the primary way I kept track of my internal thoughts as I was working during the entire novel. There were two areas where Twitter was used more during the planning stage of the story than during the writing of the novel.

Category	Abbr.	# of Twitter Posts During Planning	Total Twitter Posts During Entire Project	% of Posts During Planning
Writing Group	WG	0	4	0.00
Need Motivation	NM	1	20	0.05
Celebration	C	4	14	0.29
Word Count	WC	2	44	0.05
Music	M	2	14	0.14
Goal	G	2	19	0.11
Fail	F	3	6	0.50
Away From Home	AFH	2	15	0.13
Author Response	AR	0	5	0.00
Distraction	D	2	17	0.12
Advice	A	8	14	0.57
Eating	E	1	11	0.09
Plot/Structure	P/S	7	10	0.70
Miscellaneous	Misc	2	9	0.22

Figure 5: Twitter Post Breakdown During Planning Stage

The yellow highlighted rows illustrate the number of times I posted a comment/question on Twitter regarding Plot/Structure or asking for Advice about something in particular. For example, on June 18, 2009 at 12:17 P.M. I posted the following question: *What in the world would a vampire do all day besides stay out of direct sunlight if they never had to sleep?* At this stage of the outline I was trying to figure out what Slade, the vampire, was going to do during the day to occupy his time. Another issue closely related to this was, how did Slade make his money? Apparently, I had to give him an occupation of some sort. In Figure 6 you can see I even considered turning him into a knitter.

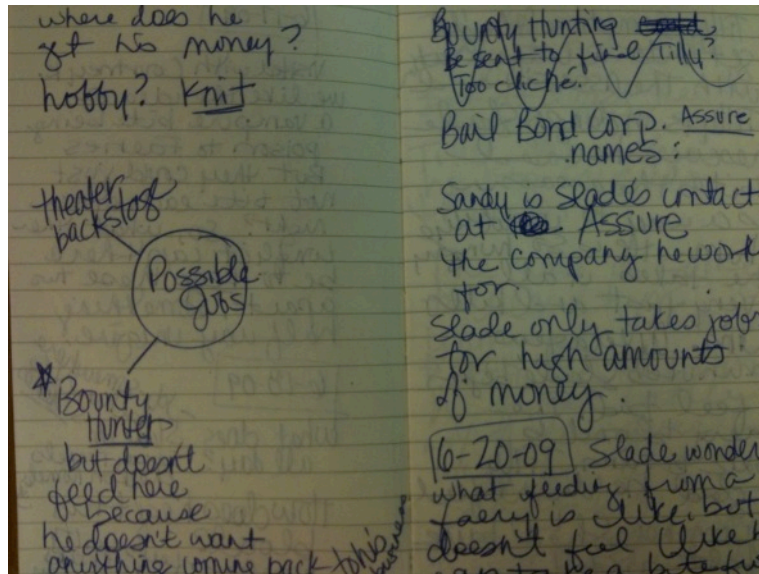


Figure 6: Notebook Entry - Brainstorming Character Occupation

Plot/Structure was the other category with a high percentage of posts during the planning stage of the project. On June 20, 2009 at 2:59 P.M. I posted the following question related to the structure of the novel. *Do you prefer long chapters or short chapters in the books that you read?* When I posted this question I was not even writing the actual chapter yet. I was simply creating the outline and could see I had fewer plot points in some chapters than others.

When I categorized the Twitter posts, I didn't have any preconceived ideas of what patterns would appear. When I saw Advice and Plot/Structure as the only two categories over 50% it made total sense. During the planning stage of the writing process I had more questions about my characters and the story than I did during the drafting stage.

In the end, it took me 13 days to create my outline and character chart. This translates to 7% of my total time devoted to prewriting/planning – far less than the 75% researchers suggest.

CHAPTER THREE
DRAFTING THE NOVEL

On June 29, 2009 at 7:39 A.M. I posted the following statement on Twitter:
Leaving the house so I can get some work done. 1000 words is my goal today. Trying Panera first. Also have a dr appt and a mtg 2day. Being a non-writer, I didn't have a concrete idea of how much time it took to generate 1000 words. A little over an hour after beginning for the day I posted this: *I'm packing up for my dr. appt now. 442 words so far. Maybe 1000 words isn't enough of a goal.* This early in the process and I'd already learned my first lesson.

During the drafting stage of the writing process I developed another tool for data collection. I created an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of my daily word count, total word count, and writing location. As you can see in Figure 7, I wrote consistently for the first seven days at an average of 1,507 words per day.

Date	Words/Day	Total Words	Writing Location
6/29/09	1,200	4,391	Hastings
6/30/09	1,500	5,591	Hastings
7/1/09	1,500	7,091	Hastings
7/2/09	2,091	8,591	Hastings
7/3/09	2,026	10,617	Althea's Vault
7/4/09	200	10,817	Home
7/5/09	2,035	12,852	Home

Figure 7: Novel Word Count Chart

In addition to word count, I also wanted to keep track of my writing locations. I wanted to determine where I would get the most work done. I have seen reports from young adult authors about how they don't like to write at home and need to be with other people when they work. For instance, John Green, the author of *Looking for*

Alaska and *Paper Towns*, talked about this exact thing in one of his videos to his brother, Hank, during the Brotherhood 2.0 Project.

The Brotherhood 2.0 was a yearlong project in 2007 where two brothers, John and Hank Green, vowed to communicate via YouTube video for an entire year. No other form of communication could take place. They alternated days and could only respond to each other in their own video on the following day. The brothers gained a cult following and a large fan base that is still very active today.

On Wednesday, April 4, 2007, John Green's video for the day consisted of him sharing a "Day in the Life of a Writer." He explained how many times he and a group of friends (Maureen Johnson, Scott Westerfeld, Justine Larbalestier, and Lauren McLaughlin) often times rent a room in a hotel and write together for the day. The video shows footage of the group sitting together at a table sometimes talking about writing ideas and sometimes working silently on their own projects.



Figure 8: Screenshot of John Green's Brotherhood 2.0 Video

Sarah Rees Brennan, author of *The Demon's Lexicon* and *The Demon's Covenant* also prefers writing with friends, but while John Green's group atmosphere

appeared to be peaceful and quiet, Sarah Rees Brennan prefers a lot of activity around her when she writes. Brennan stated, “I listen to loud loud music. (Country music, often, she admits shamelessly.) And I like writing with my friends as they watch TV, and in busy cafes. I like writing with life going on all around me” (2009).

Not all authors can work in a busy atmosphere. Maggie Stiefvater, author of *Lament* and *Shiver*, when asked how she preferred to write, stated,

Oh, definitely alone, and always with music playing. I am very easily distracted (ooh, I should make sweet tea! I should do laundry! I should google myself!)(actually, you don't want to know how long it took me to do this interview) and music helps ground me. Before I even start writing a new novel, I create a long playlist that fits the theme of the book. When that music is playing, I am instantly whisked away to that world. It's amusing to go back months later and play the playlists again, because it's like I never left (2009).

Being my first writing experience of this magnitude, I thought I should develop my own preference. The Novel Word Count Chart started on June 29, 2009 and ended on December 13, 2009 and contained 52 writing events. Out of the 52 writing events, I was surprised to see only 19 (37%) were Away From Home. I felt more productive Away From Home so I decided to look at word count, thinking, possibly, I wrote more words Away From Home even though I worked at home more often. I wrote 34,440 words Away from Home, which translates to 41% of my word count. This is compared to the 48,743 (59%) words I wrote while at home. The numbers appear as though I was

more productive at home, even though I don't think it is a true representation of actual events.

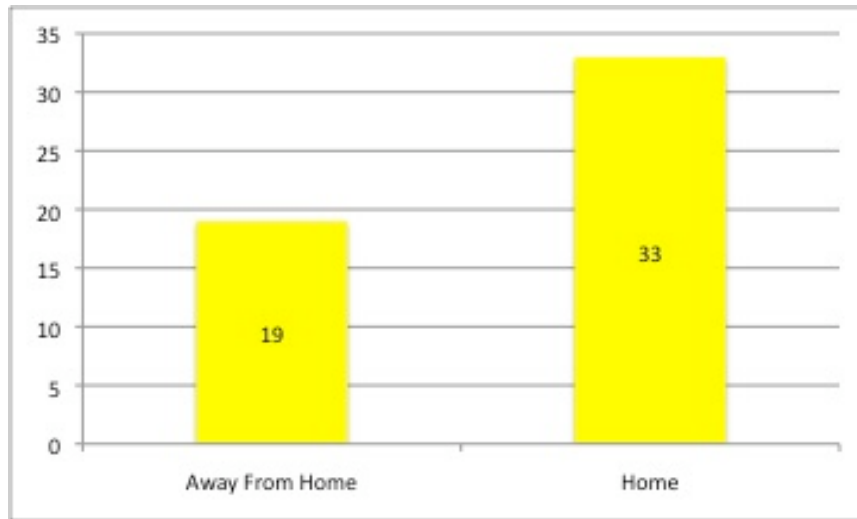


Figure 9: Away From Home v. Home Graph

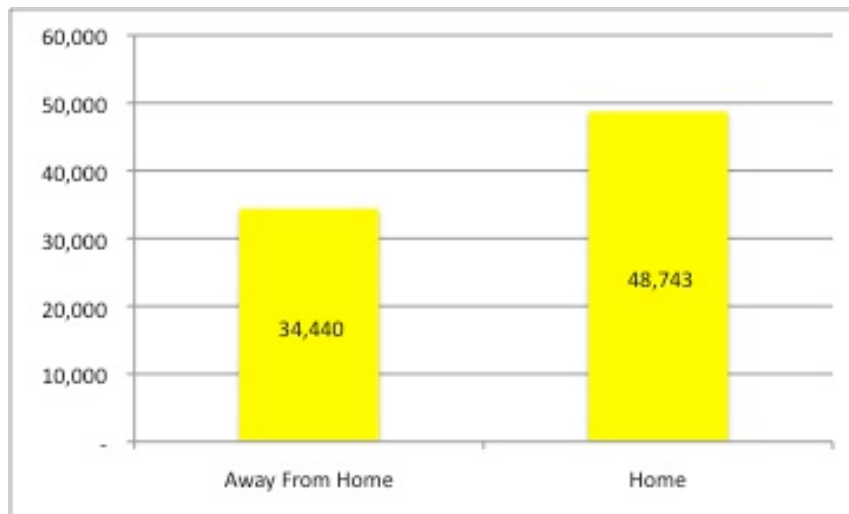


Figure 10: Away From Home v. Home Word Count Graph

With all of the data collection methods in place, I dove into the drafting stage of the writing. Drafting is the process of putting words on paper. However, since the writing process is recursive and flows back and forth between the different stages as needed, I found myself encountering aspects of the story I needed to change (Hayes &

Flower, 1986). I had a clean copy of an outline in front of me when I started on June 29, 2009, but by the time I finished the first draft of the novel, it was marked up and messy. The majority of the changes made were additions, but there were also times I needed to move scenes or entire chapters around to make the story flow. There were even a few instances of deleting scenes due to earlier changes making them irrelevant or inconsistent. I found myself “planning” everyday. Out of the outline’s 21 pages, only four weren’t marked on by the end of the novel.

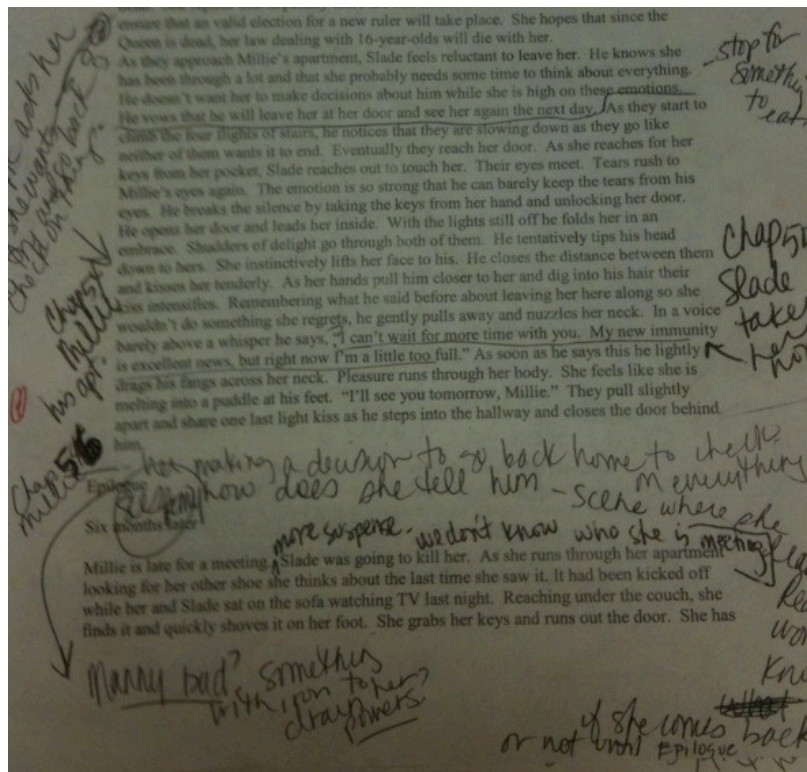


Figure 11: Additions To Outline

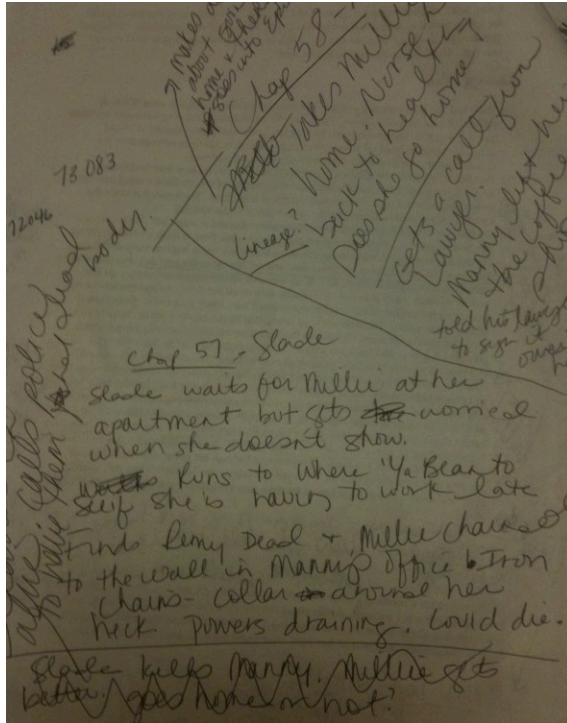


Figure 12: Two Chapters Added To Outline During Drafting

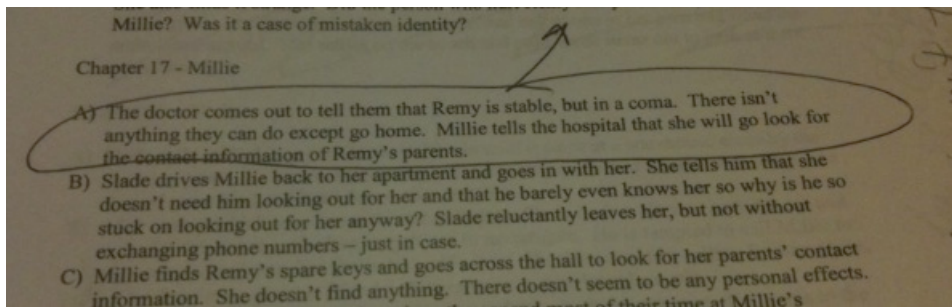


Figure 13: Moving A Scene To Another Chapter During Drafting

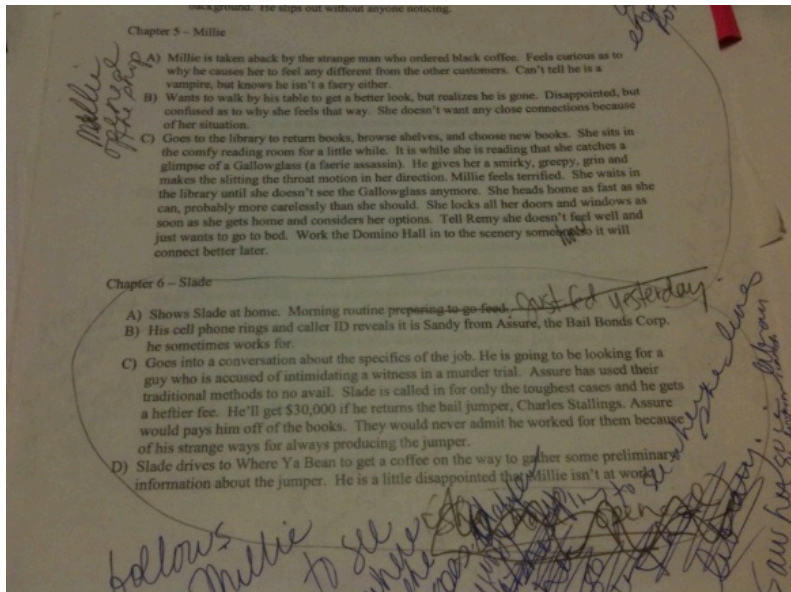


Figure 14: Moving An Entire Chapter During Drafting

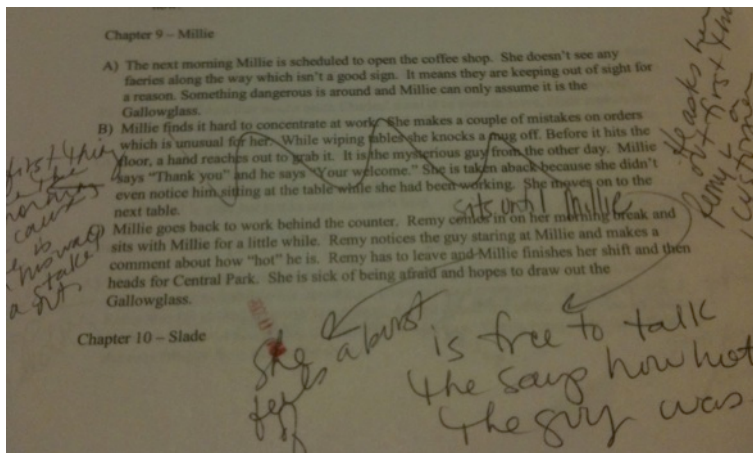


Figure 15: Deleting A Scene During Drafting

Very early in the drafting stage I discovered my writing weakness. On Day One of the draft, June 29, 2009 at 1:27 P.M., I posted this statement on Twitter: *UGH! I am terrible when it comes to keeping the same tense all the way through.* These kinds of statements were frequent while I worked. When looking at the Twitter posts over the span of the entire project, three categories appeared to be mentioned more than the others.

Category	Abbr.	Total Twitter Posts During Entire Project	% of Posts During Project
Writing Group	WG	4	2%
Need Motivation	NM	20	10%
Celebration	C	14	7%
Word Count	WC	44	22%
Music	M	14	7%
Goal	G	19	9%
Fail	F	6	3%
Away From Home	AFH	15	7%
Author Response	AR	5	2%
Distraction	D	17	8%
Advice	A	14	7%
Eating	E	11	5%
Plot/Structure	P/S	10	5%
Miscellaneous	Misc	9	4%

Figure 16: Twitter Category Percentages

There were 202 Twitter posts during the course of this research project. As you can see in Figure 16, the three categories most used were Goal (9%), Need Motivation (10%), and Word Count (22%). The posts from the Goal category were statements announcing what I planned to do during a particular sitting. An example is, on July 2, 2009 at 1:34 P.M. I posted: *Back from lunch and ready to work again. I have about 2 ½ - 3 hours to work. Let's see how much I can get done.* In looking back, I believe the reason I posted statements like this was so there would be some type of accountability – even if I were only accountable to myself. Also, I knew friends and family monitored my progress. It was always possible they would ask me if I accomplished a particular goal.

So many times during the drafting process I was bombarded with a variety of distractions. Some of the distractions came from other people, like on July 14, 2009 at 10:19 A.M. when I posted: *Husband now inside. Already asked for three things. ACK!!!* Others distractions were an issue because I chose to work at home. July 2, 2009 at 8:22 A.M. I posted: *Transferring my iTunes library from one computer to another...Don't look at me like that. I can multi-task.* Luckily, a friend saw the post and 10 minutes later she called to make plans to meet so we could work together.

These distractions are what made it necessary to call for motivation. The Need Motivation category is self-explanatory. Either I didn't feel the inspiration to create the storyline or I couldn't keep focused on the task at hand. A good example of this is a post from December 6, 2009 at 1:51 P.M. *Sitting at computer. At least this is a step in the right direction. Right?*

Related to motivation is the highest Twitter category – Word Count. It turned out that 22% of my Twitter posts involved my daily word count. In retrospect, I believe I did this in order to motivate myself. By seeing, with my own eyes, the word count increase, I received the boost I needed to make it to the next level.

One of the lowest reported categories was Author Response. Even though those responses only accounted for 2% of the total posts, they were extremely beneficial. A Twitter post where I asked advice about the best way to keep a current work-in-progress saved in multiple places prompted one such response. The author Katie Alender, author of *Bad Girls Don't Die*, responded to my post by telling me about a free file storage service she used. I made sure to thank her for her response and went to investigate. I immediately signed up for an account and used the service throughout the entire project.

The other Author Response was from one of my favorite authors. Carrie Ryan, author of *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* and its companion novel *The Dead-Tossed Waves*, saw my question about editing. Even though I wasn't finished with my draft, I was close enough and could see light at the end of the tunnel. On October 19, 2009, Carrie Ryan posted a picture of the revised *The Dead-Tossed Waves* manuscript.

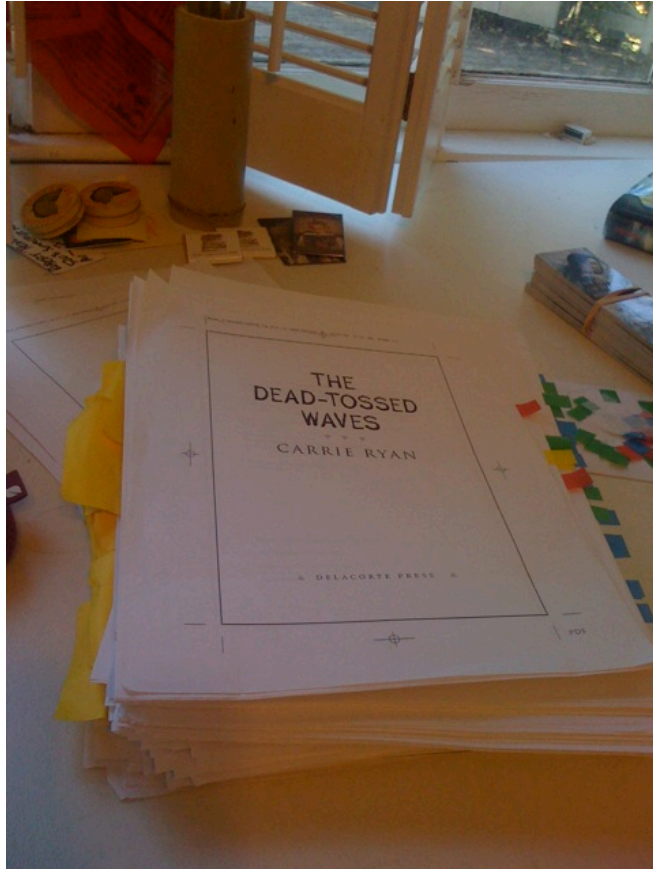


Figure 17: Carrie Ryan's Manuscript (Revising/Editing Stage)

Interested in seeing other pictures of manuscripts in the revising/editing stage, I posted a question on December 6, 2009 at 3:29 P.M. *I've seen @carrieryan and @teralynnchilds post pics of their manuscripts during editing. Anyone else have pics? I'm almost editing.* Less than an hour later Carrie Ryan Direct Messaged me on Twitter and offered to send me more pictures of her manuscript at different stages.

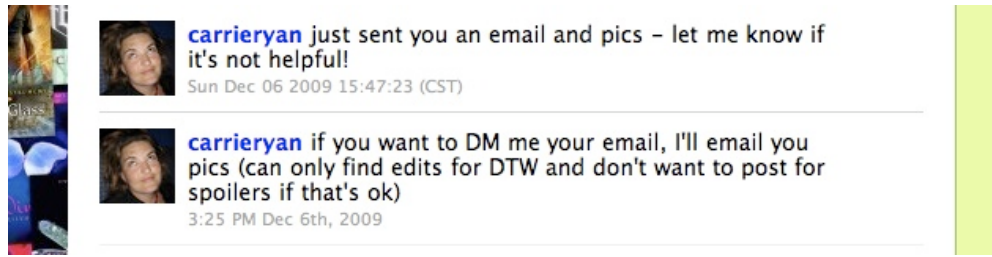


Figure 18: Carrie Ryan's Twitter Direct Messages

Carrie Ryan's willingness to share information was an unexpected surprise and wouldn't have been possible without Twitter.

On December 13, 2009 at 9:52 P.M. I posted the following comment on Twitter: *85483 = finished rough draft!* The following day I printed my draft so I could see what I had accomplished.

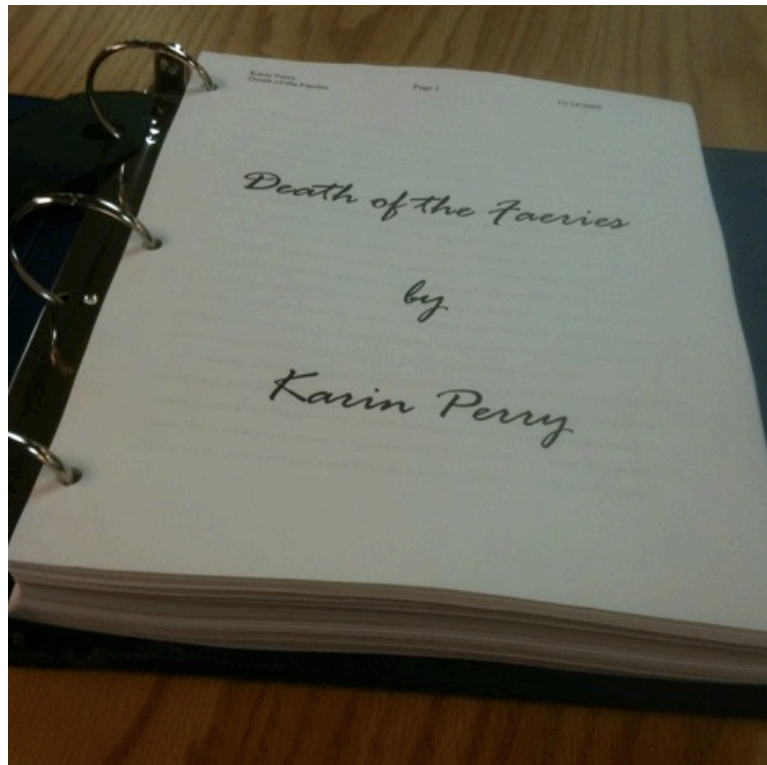


Figure 19: Rough Draft

The drafting stage of my writing process was completed.

CHAPTER FOUR

REVISING THE NOVEL

When I started this research project in June 2009, I never intended to discuss the revision process. I didn't think I would have time to get into the complicated process of reworking the novel and while that was partly true, I was able to get a good start.

Naturally, some level of revision took place during the drafting process when I would reread a sentence or paragraph I had just written and make changes immediately. What this chapter will discuss is the type of revision that must occur when the draft is complete. At this stage I have an opportunity for re-vision – a chance gain a new view of the novel by seeing it through different eyes (Murray, 1982).

Traditionally, four things can be done during revision. First, additions can be made. “These changes occur most often if the text is not clear or if a more detailed explanation or additional examples are needed,” (Feathers, 1992). Additions can be made at all levels of a manuscript – word, sentence, paragraph, and chapter.

Second, information can be deleted from a draft. Many times an author includes unnecessary information in the first draft, not realizing it will slow the pace of the story when read from beginning to end. Deletion can also take care of redundancy issues. Take, for example, this line from my draft: *The aroma of meat, cheese, and grease wafted up to her nose and triggered the saliva glands in her mouth.* My writing group was gracious enough to point out that saliva glands are only located in the mouth so there was no need to include that in the sentence. The group also unanimously agreed that the word grease should be removed – thinking it added a gross factor I didn't

intend. So, after revision, the sentence will, most likely, end up like this: *The aroma of meat and cheese wafted up to her nose and triggered her saliva glands.*

The third technique used during revision is substitution. “New word, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs are substituted for those that are not effective,” (Feathers, 1992). When using my own manuscript as an example, the first issue that comes to mind is my overuse of certain words. For instance, in one section where I was describing Slade’s apartment I used the word “area” six times in a span of two paragraphs. Leaving it as is would be a distraction to the reader.

Finally, in revision, a writer can rearrange. “This is usually done to strengthen the focus or provide a more logical flow of information,” (Feathers, 1992). In my novel, Slade and Millie don’t become seriously romantic until the very end of the book. This is a problem as far as my writing group is concerned. I already have a lot of information written – it’s just that it isn’t in the right place. I’ll need to sprinkle some of the romantic scenes more evenly throughout the story in order to prevent reader frustration.

In the above paragraphs I’ve mentioned my writing group several times. The main reason I am able to include revision as part of this project is because I joined a writing critique group in February 2010. By chance, during a meeting with colleagues, a friend mentioned she was involved in a writing group and was in the process of completing her submission for the month. Naturally, I asked questions and received an invitation by the end of the day. This was the best decision I made when it comes to writing.

There are five regular members – including myself. Writers submit their work to the group members by email by a certain date each month. As a group member, it is our responsibility to read the submission and write comments/suggestions. The writing group meets the second Friday of every month and lasts approximately five hours.

The author sits silently and listens to the group members’ feedback one at a time – meaning we go through the entire submission four times. Once everyone has given their comments, the author is allowed to make statements or ask clarifying questions. The most beneficial thing, in my opinion, is when one of the members makes a comment that triggers the memory of someone else in the group. When this happens alternate story paths or solutions to problems really get tossed around.

At the end of the evening I leave with everyone’s copy of my submission along with all of their comments.

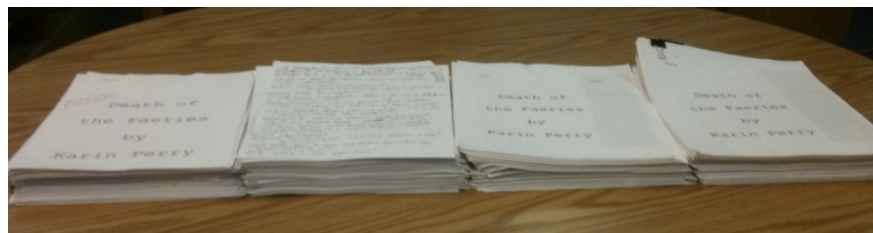


Figure 20: Comments From My Four Writing Group Members

It is my responsibility to take the suggestions and consider which ones I will incorporate into the second draft and which ones don’t fit my plan for the novel. Being a member of the writing group doesn’t obligate me to use their suggestions.

After experiencing a writing critique group and realizing how beneficial it could be, I started to wonder what published authors thought. In May 2010 I attended Book Expo America in New York City. While I was there I ran into Matt de la Pena, author of *Ball Don’t Lie*, *Mexican WhiteBoy*, and *We Were Here*. I had already established a

rapport with him from the time we visited at the National Council of Teacher's of English annual conference in November 2009 and knew he would be willing to answer writing questions. After visiting for about an hour he had to leave to meet his writing group. I immediately wanted to launch into questions about his writing group experiences, but knew he was pressed for time. Instead, I emailed him after I came home from the Book Expo.

Matt de la Pena's writing group consists of six members and runs the same way mine does. He says, "This feedback is seriously invaluable. You can't see the back of your own head when it comes to the book you're currently writing. You need to hear what is exciting people and what's boring the hell out of them," (2010).

In terms of what he does with the suggestions he says, "I take in all the feedback during my turn, then I go home and process. I usually end up listening to about 18% of what has been offered up, but it's so great to consider all the notes. Makes you think about the book in new ways. I really love my group," (de la Pena, 2010).

When I realized I was putting a lot of faith in my writing group's ability to assist me through the process of revising my novel, I decided to look at the research about peer review to see what has been discovered about the process of using peer feedback to improve writing. Peer review has been found to be effective methods for developing critical thinking, communication, lifelong learning, and collaborative skills (Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans, 1999). However, peer review isn't without its problems. The benefit greatly depends on the quality of the feedback. It comes down to three things: "the intrusion of emotions into the evaluative process, the ignorance of professional

expectations and standards for various types of work, and laziness in studying the work and/or in writing up the feedback,” (Nilson, 2003).

When I originally said my writing group consisted of five regular members, including myself, I purposely left out the sixth member of our group. The sixth member doesn't attend our meetings consistently and when he does, the feedback he provides isn't useful since he only provides sparse comments involving simple grammatical errors. If my entire writing group consisted of members like him, the peer review I received wouldn't be beneficial in the least.

I stumbled upon another research article with information I had never considered. Kristi Lundstrom and Wendy Baker of Brigham Young University conducted a study to examine the benefit the “reviewer” gains during the feedback process. The study divided students into two groups, “givers” and “receivers”, over the course of a semester. The “givers” provided feedback to others while receiving nothing regarding their own writing. The “receivers” were just the opposite. They never commented on other students' work and instead only received feedback on their papers.

An analysis in the gains in writing ability measured from writing samples collected at the beginning and end of the semester indicated that the givers, who focused solely on reviewing peers' writing, made more significant gains in their own writing over the course of the semester than did the receivers, who focused solely on how to use peer feedback, (Lundstrom & Baker, 2003).

After giving these findings some thought, it made sense. By providing feedback to others I am using what I know as a writer to make suggestions, which will later transfer to my own writing.

My Post-Freewrite consisted of a list of issues consistently commented about during the course of my involvement with the writing group. First and foremost, I have a problem keeping my tense consistent when I write. As mentioned earlier, I noticed the problem on my first day of writing and posted a comment on Twitter in a moment of frustration. All of my group members are good about catching my mistakes, but one in particular, a high school English teacher, loves nothing more than correcting my errors – in red pen, no less.

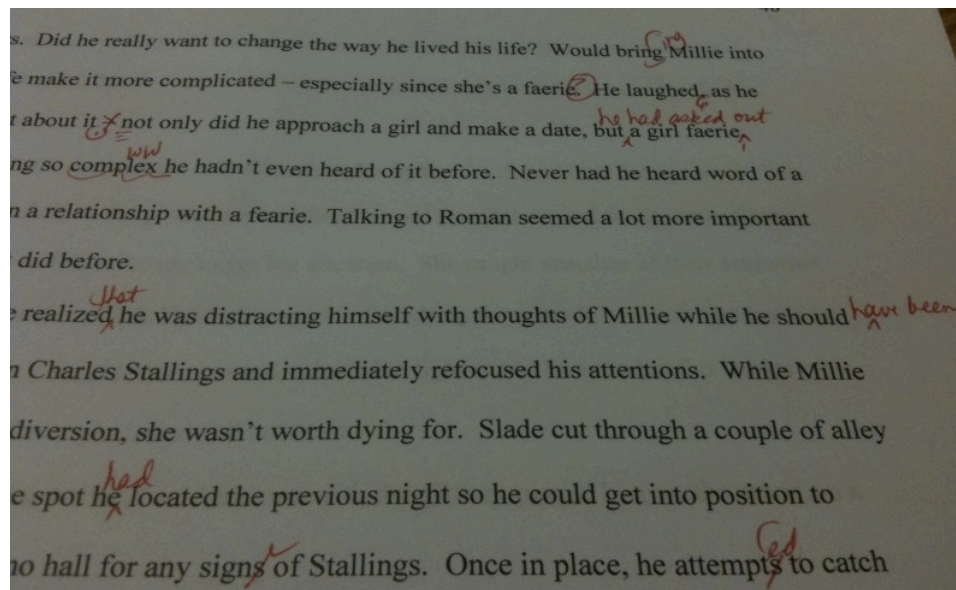


Figure 21: Tense Corrections From Writing Group Member

As you can see in Figure 21 above, there are four mistakes related to tense. I'm thankful for all of the markings because I already foresee the editing of grammatical errors being a chore.

Another problem in my novel is the lack of fantastical elements in the story. Clearly, since my main characters are a vampire and a faerie, the novel will definitely be considered fantasy. However, I rarely show my characters utilizing the special abilities known to their species.

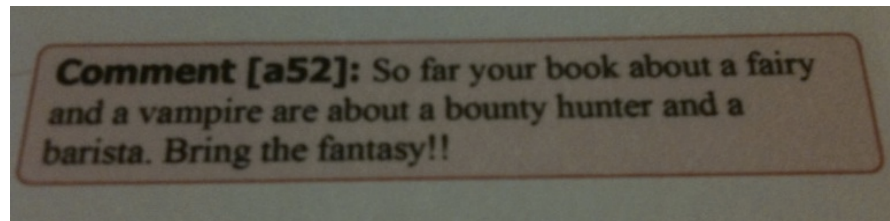


Figure 22: Fantasy Element Critique From Writing Group Member

The above comment is from the first fifty pages of the novel. Already my group members could see a problem. Thankfully, they had advice to help me fix this issue. My group suggested I go back to the planning stage and construct my character's worlds. Meaning, actually describe the Faery Realm where Millie lived before hiding out in the city. I need to know all of her abilities and whether or not she can use them while in human form. The same process would go for Slade, the vampire, as well.

The next complaint from my writing group has led to several bouts of raucous laughter during the course of critiquing the novel. My heroine, Millie, is weak. Most of the time, she runs away instead of confronting her problems and solving them herself. My group members feel she depends too much on Slade to save the day.

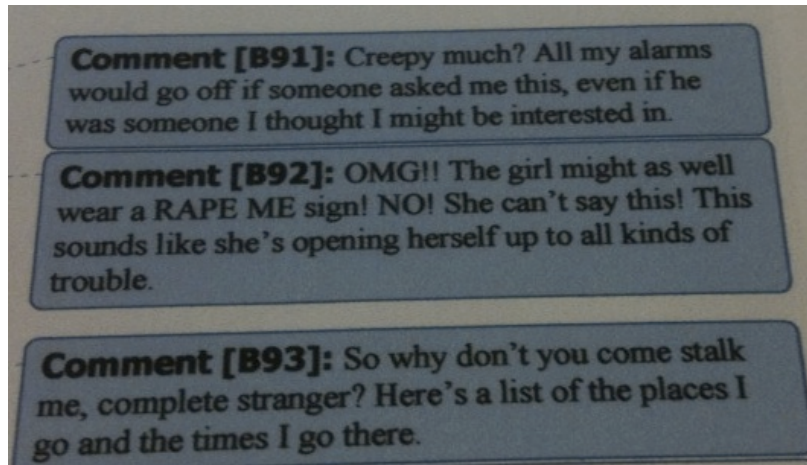


Figure 23: Millie's Weakness Critique From Group Member #1

This comment was in response to a scene when Slade was asking Millie about her work schedule. Apparently, Millie was giving him too much information and it would be considered a dangerous thing to do in a real-life situation.

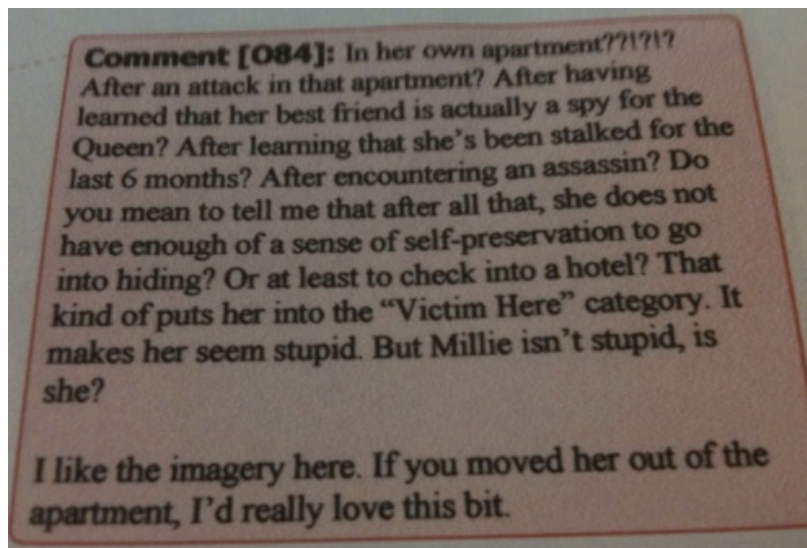


Figure 24: Millie's Weakness Critique From Group Member #2

The above comment is one of my favorites. Millie is taking a bath in this particular scene. My group members felt she would be stupid to remain in her own apartment since the assassins that just attacked her knows where she lives.

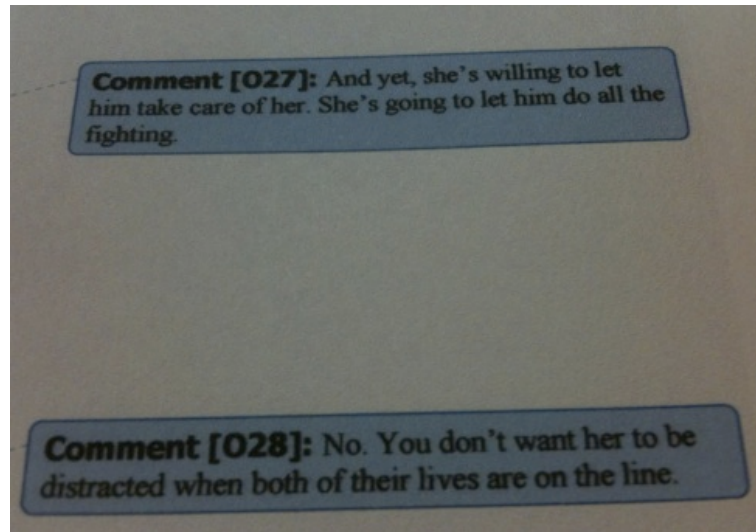


Figure 25: Millie's Weakness Critique From Group Member #3

The above picture is a good example how Millie shows her weakness by allowing Slade to fight for her and getting distracted during critical life and death moments.

Revising is going to be a long process. Now that the writing group has critiqued the rough draft I will be expected to rework the novel and submit it again with revisions. The author, David Michael Kaplan describes the process in his book *Revision: A Creative Approach to Writing and Rewriting Fiction*.

Revision is hard work, after all, lots of muck and toil. Looking at our words and sentences until they no longer seem like English. Realizing that our characters belong in four different stories, and none of them this one. Fearing that this story, which was going to make us immortal, is only a rehash of a dippy, long-canceled TV sitcom. Thinking and rethinking, typing and retyping. Drinking too much coffee, and wanting desperately to be distracted by anything – the phone, the mailman, a book or a bagel, (1997).

After a description like that, who wouldn't want to tackle revision?

Honestly, the thought of revising is daunting, but Carrie Ryan gave me great information about how she begins and I intend to take her advice. Ryan states, Basically, when I do a first round of edits I go through and mark up the manuscript, just writing in the margins what I want to change and also making a list on paper for the big things. I also put on the list themes and lines that I want to remember to carry through. Oh, and often I'll highlight repetitive words and go back and fix those later as well. Sometimes I'll write notes like "is this too boring?" or "AWK" for awkward. It's a really rough edit the first time through but mostly because I tend to write really rough first drafts.

Below are pictures she included in her email so I could see exactly what she was talking about.

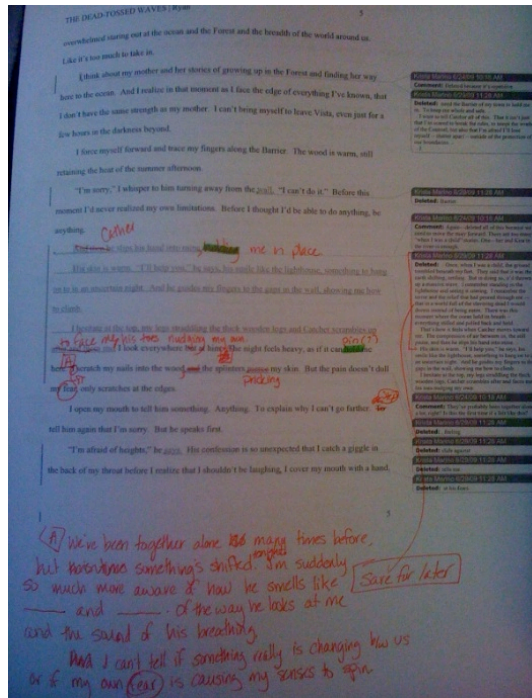


Figure 26: Carrie Ryan's Marked Up Manuscript

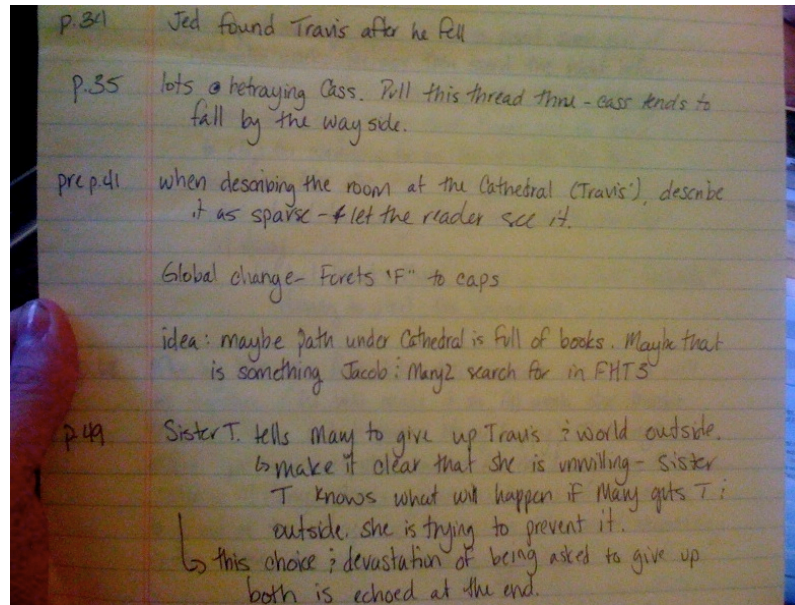


Figure 27: Carrie Ryan's List Of Big Things To Fix

After Ryan makes changes on the hard copy of her manuscript and constructs her list of important items to fix or make sure to continue through the story, she begins the process of inserting her changes into the electronic copy of her manuscript. "Then I go back through and input all those changes (which takes FOREVER typing it all back into the manuscript, but I work better editing on the hard copy)," (Ryan, 2009).

Other advice she offered involved her process for saving her drafts and backing up her work. She even mentioned a program she uses called Scrivener, "where you can really pull a manuscript apart and put it back together. With the way that's set up I can take a snapshot of a draft and then make changes and then compare (which can get complicated)," (Ryan, 2009).

While I didn't complete the revision process during this research project, I feel I have a good idea of where to start and a good support system to rely on throughout the task.

REFLECTION

It has been a year since I started this dissertation process. When I look back at what I've accomplished I feel good – even proud. It took me a little less than six months to produce a first draft of a novel and no matter how bad that first draft is; it is at least, a start. As Anne Lamott states in her book *Bird by Bird*,

In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really, shitty first drafts. The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later, (1995).

While I didn't have the luxury of keeping my first draft hidden from the public, in a way, it doesn't matter. The feeling of accomplishment outweighed any embarrassment I might have felt. Lamott goes on to say, "Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it," (1995). Well, now I've done it and even though I'm not a professional, I feel like I could do it again – and plan to after this novel is revised.

At the beginning of this process I considered myself a non-writer. It wasn't that I couldn't write or was a reluctant writer; I simply never took the time to write, but once I began, my concept of a writer changed.

Prior to this dissertation, I considered a writer to be someone accomplished in the field – published. I didn't feel like a person, such as myself, who dabbled in the art of fiction, could legitimately align myself with those fortunate enough to be deemed worthy of publication. To announce myself as a writer would label me as a poser, an imposter, a fraud.

Once I started work on the novel, it didn't take long for me to feel like a writer. I thought about my characters, I discussed possible scenarios with friends, I worked in public places like I imaged my favorite authors did. It didn't take long for me to understand that what I did was exactly what the "real" authors did and while being published is a great accomplishment, it isn't necessary.

Developing the feeling of a writer was the most important transformation I experienced during the dissertation process. If I hadn't developed the feeling of a writer I wouldn't have had the confidence, motivation, or optimism to complete the rough draft of the novel.

The first thing needed to become a writer is an idea. Ideas can come from anywhere – daily life, personal memories, or pure imagination. The initial idea isn't the hardest part though. Where do writers get the scenarios to get their character from Point A to Point B and eventually Point Z? Even though I created a piece of fiction, it was important to embed a certain amount of realism in the story. I had to give the reader something to identify with in order to provide the reader a reason to care about my characters. For example, Millie, even though a faerie, takes part in typical activities like considering what to watch on television, exploring the shelves in the library, and dealing with the feelings of new love. While Millie isn't based on me in any way, the knowledge I have of those common experiences allowed me to provide authenticity to those particular scenes.

While imagination and life experience play big roles in this stage of the process, another important source for ideas is reading. By reading, a writer can learn the ins and outs of a particular genre. Reading provides the writer a way to learn what scenarios

have already been done and where a hole might be in the market. For instance, I am a big fan of young adult literature so, naturally, I was drawn to writing in that genre. There are many books already published about vampires, werewolves, and faeries so another one would, most likely, be lost in the publishing world. What I haven't read is a book that involves a vampire and a faerie that work together to fight a common enemy and eventually fall in love. As a writer, it was my job to think about what I have read in the past in order to decide what literary conventions to implement in my own story. I needed to decide which common vampire/faerie lore I wanted to utilize, determine what was unique to a particular author that I didn't want to include (For example, I couldn't make my vampires sparkle without infringing on another author's idea), and, somehow, create unique characteristics of my own. Reading the works of others in my genre was research.

After the idea was formed I had to decide what planning style would work best for me. While some authors might choose characters and a situation and begin writing to see where the story goes, I knew that wouldn't work for me. I started my story from the Oklahoma Writing Project Summer Institute in 2002 like that and didn't even reach one hundred pages before I lost motivation. In looking back and being able to compare the two experiences, I am confident the outline allowed me to successfully complete the rough draft of this novel.

Admittedly, there were times when I wanted to stop planning and jump into story. My outline ended up being twenty-one pages long and very detailed. For each chapter, I planned out possible scenes. For instance, Chapter 1 included information about how much time had passed since the massacre in the Prologue, what Millie was

doing to keep hidden among the humans, information about where she works, and what she does during her day. Chapter 1 also includes Millie and Slade's first encounter. Even though I started to feel impatient the more I worked on the outline, I know I wouldn't have been able to write the novel without it. The impatience came from my excitement because I wanted to get to the meat of the story, not because I didn't think it was important. Even though I made changes along the way, having a base story prevented me from floundering during the drafting stage.

Another aspect of writing I discovered during this project was the amount of planning that occurred during the drafting stage. I knew the writing process was recursive (meaning it doesn't progress in a linear path, but instead flows back and forth between all the stages as needed), but by experiencing the changes I made to the outline throughout the entire process, it became clear how important it was to be willing to deviate from the original plan. At the completion of the rough draft, every page of the outline had been altered. For example, the second page included a rearrangement of chapters and as mentioned in the dissertation, I also had to make additions, deletions, and substitutions in order for the story to flow.

As a writer with a full-time job, time was my biggest enemy. I was smart when I decided to begin the planning and drafting during the summer. As a public school librarian I had summers off and could devote time to the novel. I started the novel in June 2009 and wrote consistently until the end of July 2009 when I had to report back to work. Unfortunately, I couldn't finish the rough draft during the summer months and was forced to continue into the fall semester of the school year. According to my Novel Word Count Chart it took me a while to get back into writing. The chart shows I only

wrote 3,056 words in the entire month of August and then didn't write again until October 15, 2009. Thankfully, from mid-October on I wrote consistently until I completed the rough draft. Finding time to write after a long workday wasn't easy and I found that I did most of the writing on the weekends. It is difficult to visualize a successful author with a day job - one that only works on their current project on the weekends, but many writers do until they can support themselves with their work.

Another important thing I learned during the writing of the novel was to limit the amount of revising I did during the drafting stage. If I had constantly gone back to reread what I'd written the previous day and made changes and adjustments to the story, I would have spent all my time revising instead of carrying the story forward. During the drafting stage it was important for me to put my ideas down on paper and not worry about how it was all coming together.

As I mentioned in the dissertation, at the time I was working on the novel I had no intention of getting to the revision stage, but was lucky enough to stumble upon a writing critique group a couple of months after I finished the rough draft. It was during this experience when I learned the value of looking back at my writing when it was cold (after I hadn't looked at it for a while). It was interesting to see how little things (and some big things) needed to be changed. At the time I was writing, certain scenes may have sounded perfectly fine, but after reading the entire novel straight through it was easier to see where I needed to be clearer and the inconsistencies I needed to fix.

One of the small changes my writing group suggested was to adjust the ages of my characters. They felt by making Millie fifteen it would be unrealistic not to include school or other aspects of a young teen's life. Adjusting Millie's age would force me to

change Slade's age as well in order to prevent the age difference from being too great. On the other end of the spectrum, the group gave me suggestions for major changes too. For instance, something the writing group thought my story lacked was sufficient description of the faerie realm and explanations of both Millie and Slade's abilities. In order to remedy this problem it will take a considerable amount of time. I will need to go back to the beginning and start planning all over again. I'll need to create detailed descriptions of the worlds, and at the urging of the writing group, even draw some pictures to help create the picture in my mind.

One of my funniest writing group moments was when a completely insignificant detail (which will probably be deleted in the revision anyway) generated so much debate and discussion. On June 20, 2009 at 2:59 P.M., during the planning stage of the novel, I posted this question on Twitter: *Are there pay phones anywhere around Central Park? Anyone?????* I didn't get any response, other than my mother, so just continued with the outline assuming my characters would have the use of a pay phone in the story. Months later, this tiny detail became a topic of discussion in the monthly meeting.

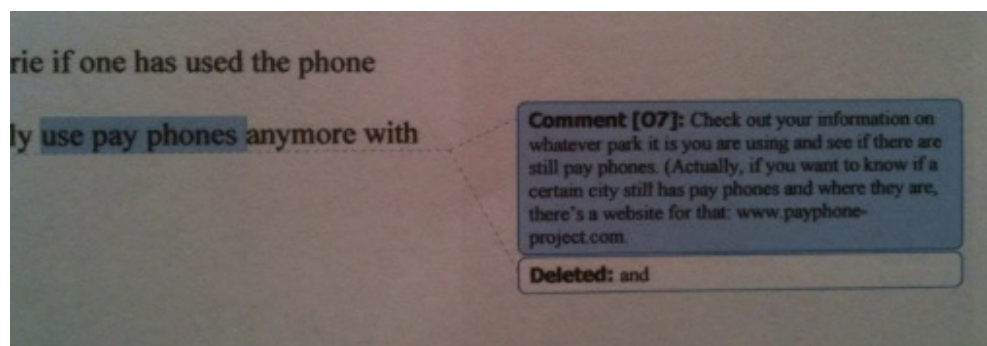


Figure 28: Pay Phone Comment From Writing Group Member

Belinda, the particular group member who made the comment, didn't think there would be payphones readily available in New York City. She felt if I left it in the story it

wouldn't seem realistic. In May 2010 when I was in New York City for Book Expo America, look what I found. Belinda wasn't convinced and maintained it wouldn't ring true if the payphone remained in the novel. She felt in the day and age of cell phones there wouldn't be a need for my characters to use a pay phone. After giving it some thought, I've decided Belinda was right and that, combined with the fact that the pay phone doesn't add anything to the story, will cause me to cut it from the novel.



Figure 29: Pay Phone In New York City

On a final note, I feel obligated to say, the scariest moment during this entire process was attending my first writing group meeting. Walking in the room and knowing only one person was intimidating in itself, but knowing they had read the opening pages of a novel I wrote and were planning to tell me what they thought about it, was terrifying. One of the things I have told myself from the beginning is evidenced in the Twitter post from June 23, 2009 at 6:12 P.M., the day I finished my outline. *I just*

want it to make sense and for people not to roll their eyes and say, “WOW, how stupid was that?” In the end, even a year later, that is still my biggest hope.

With the dissertation complete I can honestly say that I am a writer. I am confident enough to share my writing and ideas with others and motivated enough to continue even though the project is over. I’m aware that writing is a process of trial and error and the words aren’t going to land on the page perfectly the first time. For my next stage, the revision process, I plan to set up a writing schedule and stick to it. Part of my revision process will include experimenting with different schedules. I plan to try writing in the morning and writing in the evening. I’ll keep track of when I write, in addition to where and how much. I won’t always have the luxury of starting a project during the summer so I need to learn to work my writing into my “real” life.

Another thing I’m interested in experimenting with is how I take my next project to my writing critique group. When I joined the group this time I had already completed the entire rough draft. The good thing about method was that the group was able to critique the entire novel in six months. So, the entire process of writing and critiquing the rough draft took one year. I have no way of knowing how long it would have taken if I had taken the novel to the writing group as I was writing. It makes me wonder how beneficial an in-process writing group would be. I might have to try it with my next project.

CHAPTER FIVE
PUBLISHING THE NOVEL

Death of the Faeries

Prologue

“Drat, I’m going to be late again,” Millie cried as she frantically searched for her other shoe. *Izzy is going to kill me. I haven’t been on time to any meeting this month,* she thought as she finally made her way to the front door. Millie unfolded her wings and pumped them twice to give them a good stretch. She didn’t want to stop along the way to rest as late as she already was.

Once in the air, Millie couldn’t help but take in the beauty of her world. Bright flowers bloomed all around her, friendly insects, busy at work, buzzed their hellos, and the light breeze tasted sweet on her tongue as she flew toward the garden in the center of town.

As beautiful as her surroundings were, thoughts of the meeting crept into her mind. This one would be long and serious and business would have to be decided before they adjourned. The Queen had been tightening her grip on the fey community for quite some time, but recently it had become unbearable. She’d always expected the faeries to be at her beck and call and do her bidding no matter the task, but now, to make matters worse, the Queen established a new law stating every faerie, at the age of

sixteen, would be required to serve The Court for one year's time in whatever capacity the Queen chose. Refusal to serve would mean death.

A group of faeries decided something had to be done to put a stop to the Queen. Millie's friend, Izzy, is the ringleader and expects Millie to play her part in the rebellion. Since she is sixteen-years-old and Maggie doesn't want to leave her house to live in the castle with the Queen, she is willing to do whatever it takes to help. Excitement buzzes in her body as she approaches the garden and gets a step closer to more excitement than she has ever known.

As she slows her wing speed and prepares for her landing, Millie realizes something doesn't seem quite right. The insects that are usually hovering around are nowhere to be seen. She doesn't see anyone else preparing to arrive either. She must be really late. Prepared for another lecture on responsibility, Millie hovers above the spot she is going to land.

Once her wings are tucked in, she takes a look around. The sounds of busy conversation that she expects to hear aren't there. All she sees is death and destruction. All of her friends are dead - smashed almost beyond recognition. As she frantically flutters from flower to flower searching for any sign of life until she comes across Izzy. Beautiful Izzy – she'll never have the opportunity to lecture Millie again and she realizes how much she'll miss it.

Who could have done this? Millie asked herself and once she caught her breath and gave it a little thought her mind landed on just one possible answer. The Queen. The Queen killed her friends. She must have found out about the meetings and wanted to squash the insurrection before it got out of hand. Alone, Millie tried to think of what

to do. She wasn't the one with the plan. She didn't know how to start a rebellion.

What in the world could she do?

Chapter 1 - Millie

6 Moon Cycles Later

“Can I get a large iced caramel latte?”

“Sure,” Millie answered as she entered the order into the register. She has been working at Where Ya Bean for the last couple of months and the complicated coffee creations are now automatic. Press the beans, heat the milk, pour the shots. Like a robot she can complete the tasks. Millie just has to remember to put on her smile when she hands over the order to the customer. “Here you go. Be sure to tell your friends “Where Ya Bean.”

Only twenty more minutes and she can clock out and head home. Home – that’s funny. Her small apartment with its sparse furnishings and dull gray walls is nothing like her home. Millie is becoming more depressed as the days go by. Even walking around the park isn’t helping anymore. Her clan didn’t spend much time alone. They always felt better when they were around others and since she has been in hiding, Millie has been afraid to get close to anyone.

On autopilot, Millie finishes her shift and walks down the four blocks to the park. Finding her favorite spot, Millie takes a seat on a bench and takes her book out of her bag. As she begins to get lost in the story, Millie catches slight movements out of the corner of her eye. She can’t help looking over at the small flower garden where she knows what she’ll see. Several faeries, frolicking from flower to flower and leaf to leaf, looked to be having a wonderful time in the bright sunshine. She didn’t recognize any of them, she was too far away from her home, but she could definitely tell they were from the Seelie Court by the way they enjoyed each others company and didn’t attempt

to taunt and play tricks on the humans that were passing by. If Millie listened closely enough she could make out the slight tinkling of their laughter floating on the breeze. Jealousy shot through her. She felt sick with it. Before she ran away from home, Millie was never jealous of others. She didn't know how to handle the ugly feelings crawling under her skin. Millie couldn't even enjoy her book or sitting in the warmth of the sunshine. Eventually, she just gave up, returned her book to her bag, and started for her apartment.

Once safely inside, Millie went to the kitchen for a snack. She pulled out a loaf of bread, the peanut butter, and honey. After making a sandwich she poured a cold glass of milk and went to sit in front of the TV. She was thankful for TV. It helped her through many lonely nights. The bright colors and fast moving pictures were a wonder to see. The fact that there is something on every hour of the day is great too. Even when she couldn't sleep there was something in the apartment to keep her company. Evening turned to night as she sat alone in her apartment feeling angry with herself for not being brave enough to return to her home.

Millie lay staring at her alarm clock. All night she watched as the minutes passed, praying for morning to come. She didn't get a wink of sleep and as soon as the buzzer filled her bedroom she rolled out of bed and trudged to the shower, hoping the hot water would make her feel a little refreshed. Her eight-hour shift coming up at Where Ya Bean was going to feel more like a hundred if she didn't become more alert. Working the early shift meant she was going to have to deal with the morning and lunch

rush. But, at least work would keep her busy and give her less time to feel the loneliness that kept creeping in her heart more and more each day.

After clocking in, Millie put her hair back and tied her apron and prepared to take her station at the counter. Just like every other morning, as soon as the doors were unlocked, customers jockeyed for their position in line to place their order of their daily caffeine. Everyone was in a hurry. There was no happy chitchat between customers. People just wanted to be on their way. It seemed isolation didn't bother them. They seemed to do everything they could to make sure no one bothered them by keeping occupied with their cell phones, newspapers, and computers. It just made it more clear to Millie how different she was from the humans around her.

It was about two hours into her shift when a customer brought her out of her dazed, robotic motions. After passing over a fairly complicated drink order to the customer she just finished with, Millie prepared to greet the next person in line. Something struck her immediately as odd about him. For one, he wouldn't make eye contact. He appeared slightly hunched and curled in on himself like he didn't want to be seen by anyone. Second, he was a little too bundled up for the brisk, but comfortable morning. He wore a black stocking cap along with a black Peacoat. If she were wearing something like that, she would be burning up, yet he didn't seem to be uncomfortable at all. Even though he seemed out of place, the look was good on him. Tufts of dark hair were peaking out from under the stocking cap, curling up around his ears.

“What can I get for you this morning,” Millie finally asked, her rhythm completely thrown off. It seemed to take her forever to force out her question.

“Just a large black coffee will do,” her strange customer replied. After what Millie had been making all morning, this was an extremely simple order. All she had to do was grab a cup, pour the coffee, slap on a lid, and pass it over to him. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion though. She couldn’t seem to take her eyes off of him. By moving slowly, she was able to keep him at the counter longer. Hopefully, he’d lift his head and she would see his eyes.

When she couldn’t delay any longer, she passed the coffee to him and completed the transaction by returning his change to him. She watched as he went to a corner table by the window and sat down. He didn’t have a computer, a newspaper, or anything at all to occupy his time, but simply sat and stared out into the bright sunshine. She wondered why he wasn’t in school. He looked like he should be in college and yet he didn’t seem to be in a hurry to get anywhere as he just sat, eyes never moving from the window.

After she pulled her eyes away from him and continued on to the next customer, she was able to get back the rhythm she lost. Soon her thoughts were filled with new drink orders and pastries so she didn’t have time to wonder about the strange young man. About midway through her shift she took her break. She took the opportunity to walk out into the seating area to see if he would look up as she walked by, but as soon as she looked at the table he was sitting at she noticed that he had already left. A young couple was sitting there instead, leaning close together and staring into each other’s eyes. Millie was disappointed and, at the same time, embarrassed. Why should she feel disappointed for not seeing someone she didn’t even know? She felt her cheeks get warm and she knew she was red. *How stupid! Why do you even care who he is? He*

didn't even look at you. Are you that lonely that you are inventing feelings to keep you occupied now? Millie cut her break short and went back to work hoping get to the end of the workday as fast as she could.

Chapter Two – Slade

Slade felt shaken. He'd only come into contact with faeries a few times in the past and never as close as today. The girl behind the counter of the coffee shop was striking, with her caramel-colored skin that seemed to glow like it stored up sunshine. A smattering of delicate freckles decorated her, otherwise, blemish-free face. Her shaggy brown hair was ornamented with thin stripes of pink, blue, and purple, which gave her an air of whimsy and her eyes were lavender in color and had a slight almond shape. Never before had he seen eyes that color. The most amazing thing about her though was her scent. It was intoxicating and like nothing he had ever smelled before.

Slade sat at a table by the window and sipped his coffee. Looking into the sunlight could be uncomfortable at times, but sunglasses usually could take away the sting. Today though, he wanted the sting. It would take his mind off of his hunger. It had been too long since he'd had a decent meal. Slade's thoughts drifted back to the girl and he allowed it since it provided a great diversion. He studied her movements as she made the elaborate coffee creations for the customers that had too much on their minds to notice much of what was going on around them. They would be amazed to know that a faery and a vampire were in their midst. It would be amusing to witness their reaction if they became aware of the supernatural beings that surrounded them everyday.

After chuckling a little to himself, Slade slipped out of his chair and headed for the door. He was tempted to take a route that would lead him by the counter, but opted instead for the quickest route to the door. No need in focusing on something that wasn't possible. Better to stick to his routine where it is safe. Slade makes his way through the darkness of the alleys and cuts through buildings to make his way to the subway.

Hunger gnaws at his stomach, especially after the enjoyable perfume coming from the faery's blood. Slade feels a mix of emotions as he makes his way to a food source. Excitement runs through his body at the thought of drinking blood from his victim. Guilt also creeps into his thoughts because of the helplessness of his victims. While technically he doesn't harm them, he knows they aren't getting a choice in the matter either. Finally, there is also disgust at the thought of where he is going for his meal. The homeless that made their home under the Grand Central Terminal were filthy and, often times, sick. Their blood tasted awful and like the dirt and grime that covered their bodies, but it contained the nutritional requirements he needed to survive and drew far less attention than the people he passed on the streets everyday. He could get in his car and drive miles away from home to feed, but that required far more time than he was willing to give to feeding. Slade's occasional job as Bond Enforcement Agent gave him the opportunity to feed from more palatable sources, but since he is called in on only the most difficult cases, they don't provide a regular feeding option. Slade hasn't been busy the last couple of months and even though it wasn't the most pleasant experience coming into contact with people on the fringes of society, it was good money.

Slade slips unseen into the tunnels under the Grand Central Terminal and begins to make his way through the darkness, anticipating the feel of his fangs sinking into the flesh of his next victim. He wonders who it will be today. Elizabeth provided his sustenance last time so he would be sure to steer clear of her, if she is even still there. So many times the homeless people he sees one week aren't there the next. Many wander off and disappear, hopefully to a life above ground, but most likely to die. He has wondered if it wouldn't be more humane of him to just drain them when he feeds.

Do the people under the subway really have a life? But, even when he toys with this barbaric way of thinking, he can't bring himself to kill. Not since the tragedy with Rebecca has he taken a human life.

Slade, having exceptional eyesight even in total darkness, is mindful of where he steps. What might look like a lump of rags sometimes end up to be a person huddled in fear of whatever is approaching. He spots Elizabeth in the same place as last week and continues to make his way down the tunnel. He remembers the sadness he senses in Elizabeth when he fed from her last time. She felt fear for only a moment until his fangs pierced the tender skin of her neck. As the warm blood rushed into his mouth he took with it her thoughts and feelings. Feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Thoughts of better times when she lived with her family. His heart broke for her as she curled into him as he drank deep. He made sure not to take too much. With her poor nutritional habits it isn't like she could afford to donate a large quantity.

Today there was a new face among the lost and alone. He seemed too young to be in a place like the tunnels and Slade's curiosity made his decision for him. The boy would serve as today's meal. As he quietly approached the boy, Slade could see his eyes were two saucers frantically glancing around the darkness, attempting to locate the source of the approaching sound. Slade took his time, even though the need to feed was building inside of him. He simultaneously touched the boy's shoulder and covered his mouth to prevent his screaming from carrying too far. Slade very quickly started the feeding process and plunging his fangs into the carotid artery was swift. Soon, blood was flowing down his throat and he began to feel relief. The boy's thoughts and feelings started flowing along with the blood. Mark had only been in the tunnels two

days. Confusion swirled in his mind along with his feelings of fear of what his life was becoming. Slade's bite wasn't even able to take away the feelings of fear – it could only take away any pain. Fear was all he had in his life. Fear of going home to the abusive family he left behind. Fear of being killed in the tunnels. Fear of being alone. It was endless. Instead of feeling sated, Slade felt miserable. What boy of sixteen should have to live a life like this?

Leaving Mark asleep on the side of the tunnel, Slade quickly made his way to the exit. Emerging from the tunnels into the Grand Central Terminal was surreal. The hustle and bustle of the day-to-day life of the passersby was such a dramatic change from the underground activities of the homeless. Slade didn't feel the normal rush of the new blood coursing through his system. The only thought he had was of home. As he made his way through the alleys of the city to the safety of his basement apartment, the girl from the coffee shop crept into his mind. Slade welcomed her there. Anything was better than the darkness he was feeling.

Chapter Three - Millie

Thankful her workday was over, Millie went to the back office to gather her personal belongings. She noticed Manny sitting at his desk surrounded by the mountain of papers that normally cluttered his desk. “Manny, is that you back there?”

“Yep, how is it going Millie?”

“Everything is great except for the fact that I’m afraid I’m going to come in here one day and find you buried under an avalanche of paper and covered in paper cuts,” Millie teased.

“Ehhh, don’t you worry your pretty little head young lady. I’m too big to be lost for long. You’d trip over me eventually,” he replied.

Millie let out a little chuckle as she walked over to the shift schedule to make sure she knew when she was supposed to come in to work the next day. “It looks like I’m opening the shop again in the morning,” Millie stated.

“You don’t mind do you? You seem to be the only one that doesn’t mind the early shift,” Manny asked uncertainly.

“Oh, I don’t mind. I like the morning and I definitely prefer it to the night shift,” Millie replied. “See you tomorrow Manny. Have a nice day.”

“You too young lady. Go enjoy the rest of your day,” Manny said as he went back to shifting the ever present mound of papers on his desk.

Millie loved the feel of the wind blowing against her face as she briskly walked toward her apartment. The sunlight felt like it was feeding her skin and improved her mood the longer she was outside in its rays. Millie looked forward to the walk home. It seemed she never grew tired of watching the people going from place to place. They

always seemed to be in a rush, which made her feel a little sad. She knew they were missing so much of the beauty around them when they focused so much on the next place they need to be instead of just taking a look around once in a while.

As she walked along the sidewalk, Millie was careful to stay out of everybody's way. At times it was so crowded that it was difficult not to brush up against someone and she felt like she was going to explode. It took all her will power to remain in human form and visible. It would be so easy to put up a glamour and run away from the crowds, but she didn't want to draw undue attention to herself. She always worried about who the Queen had working for her and didn't want to give herself away over something silly like too many people on the sidewalk. For the most part, Millie loved living among the humans. They had so many wonderful opportunities available to them, so many delicious foods to eat, and many exciting places to visit. Unfortunately, she usually wasn't brave enough to enjoy these sites herself, but she knew they were there and in a big city like this something was always open just in case she got up the nerve to explore.

The crowds thinned out as she closer to home. She passed a deli or two, the bodega she normally did her shopping, and a domino hall. She loved walking by the hole in the wall where the old men hung out to play dominos. The men's weathered faces are so intent on the tiles in front of them that it makes them appear to be solving problems of the world instead of engaging in a friendly neighborhood game. The domino hall was one of the places she used a glamour. Women usually didn't go inside the hall. It was as if there was an invisible "No Girls Allowed" sign posted to the door. Millie slipped into the alley beside the domino hall to put her glamour in place. Once

she is invisible to the naked eye, Millie slipped into the front door of the hall and makes her way to the corner next to two men that she has been following for a couple of days. Their games seemed to be the most laid back, which she really enjoyed. The back and forth banter between Johnny and Sid was entertaining and allowed her to forget about her own problems for a while.

“That’s twenty points for me,” Johnny yelled as he slammed down his domino.

“I tell you what, I don’t think I’m going to keep score anymore. I can’t get a point to save my life. I think you jinxed me by putting it on me this time,” Sid complained.

“Oh, shut up and throw your domino while I still care about this game,” Johnny replied.

As Sid put his domino in place, she noticed the smirk on both of the men’s faces. Even though they grumbled, Millie knew they would choose each other as an opponent over anyone else in the hall for a face off.

After the current game ended, Millie took advantage of the men shuffling around to slip out the door and head back to the alley to shed her glamour. The sun had sunk a little lower in the sky casting more shadows than when she left work. Even though the alleyways could seem a little menacing during this time a day, it still cast a nice golden color on most of the street. Millie picked up her pace as got closer to her apartment. Once inside she climbed the four flights of stairs and unlocked her door. She immediately went to her bedroom to change out of her uniform and wash off some of the grime from the workday. Soon she was in the kitchen with her hair pulled back

from her face with clips, and wearing shorts and a tank top. Her bare feet on the cool tiled floor felt refreshing as she pulled items from the refrigerator to make dinner.

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door as Remy burst in the apartment. It seemed Remy had an inner sense as to when Millie got home and started to make dinner. “Do you want a salad Remy?” Millie asked, without even looking up from her preparation.

“I’d love one, thanks.” Remy replied.

Millie turned around and pulled another bowl from the cabinet and began the process of splitting the ingredients evenly between her and Remy’s bowls. Millie watched as Remy went to the cabinet and pulled out two glasses and started preparing their drinks. It felt like a dance – both of them sharing the same space in the small kitchen. Millie went right to grab the forks while Remy went left to retrieve the iced tea from the refrigerator. Without words, they met at the couch in front of the TV and sat down to enjoy a nice meal.

“So, what will it be tonight?” Remy asked. “Reality TV or crime drama?”

“Let’s do reality tonight,” Millie decided.

“Reality it is. So, how was your day? Spill anything? Mess up any orders?”

“Of course not. You know I’m perfect when it comes to creating my coffee masterpieces.”

“I’m so glad I don’t work in the food service industry. I’d hate to deal with picky people who have to have their food a specific way or else they freak out,” Remy admitted.

“Well not all of us can be lucky enough to get paid to read and watch TV with a nice little old lady twice a week,” Millie snapped.

“I know and I’m sorry Millie. I’m just grateful that I don’t have to stand on my feet all day waiting on people who couldn’t care less about me,” Remy said. “I see how hard you work and am amazed you can still be so nice all the time. You even wait on me when I come over after you’ve been at work all day. I am glad we’re friends”

“Me too,” said Millie as she picked up the remote and turned the TV to the reality show of the evening. She and Remy spent the night critiquing the contestants’ performances during the episodes immunity challenges. Millie shook her head in amazement thinking about what people would do for a chance at a little money.

Chapter Four – Slade

When sunlight started to pour into the front window of Slade's apartment, he took it as a sign to take what he was doing into the back. It took several moves to find a great living space like this. The basement location allowed him to have a safe place to stay whether it was day or night. The entrance to his apartment was practically hidden by the stairs that lead to the apartment above him and the one window that graced his living room was blocked by the green foliage that decorated the outside of his entire building. If he had a particularly bad day and couldn't handle the sunlight at all, there was always the back of his apartment, including a bedroom, office, and bathroom that could be made completely dark due to the fact there were no windows.

His office was where he spent most of his time. The computer was a wonderful tool and one he used often. Not only did he use it for his business, but also enjoyed a great many things it could offer in the way of entertainment. He found he could do just about everything over the Internet and never had to leave the apartment. Slade could order anything he needed and have it delivered to his door. Technically, the only thing he needed to leave the apartment for was to feed. *Too bad there isn't a way I could get blood delivered to my door as well,* he thought.

As soon as he sat down at his computer and nudged it to life by touching the mouse, his cell phone let out its obnoxious ring. Whatever ring tone he chose, it always seemed to grate on his nerves. He was considering going strictly to vibrate to avoid throwing it against the wall someday in a fit of irrational rage. The cell phone's display showed that Assure Bail Bonds Corp was calling. "This is Slade," he said as he answered the phone.

“Hi Slade, how have you been? It’s been a long time since I’ve talked to you,” Sandy, the secretary, cooed.

“It has been a long time. How is Barry treating you?” Slade asked.

“Oh, you know Barry. He pretty much lets me do what I want as long as he has his coffee in the morning and I keep candy in his jar,” she giggled.

“What can I do for you today?” Slade inquired.

“Barry asked me to call you about a troublesome jumper. We haven’t been able to find neither head nor hair of him since he was bailed out. Louis and Marty have already given it a try with no luck,” Sandy explained.

“What’s the guy wanted for?” he asked.

“Intimidating a witness in a murder trial,” Sandy said.

“And my payment?” Slade hinted.

“Well, Barry said to offer you \$20,000, but you know how he works Slade,” Sandy said eluding to the fact that her boss usually starts low, but is willing to go higher in order to get Slade to accept the job.

“You’re a doll, Sandy,” Slade praised. “All right then, go tell Barry I won’t take the job unless he bumps my fee up to \$30,000,” he declared.

“You got it, be right back,” she said as she put down the phone.

Slade could hear the clip clop of Sandy’s heels as she walked toward Barry’s office. Slade could picture her casually walking into her boss’ office, leaning against his desk, and proclaiming that he will need to up his offer if he intended Slade to take the job. He laughed to himself as he heard he approaching the phone after only being gone for a minute.

“Slade, he said you could have \$30,000. Can I tell him you’ll accept?” Sandy asked.

“Sure, Sandy. I’ll come by after closing to pick up the file. Can you put it in the usual place for me?”

“Of course, Slade. It was so nice talking to you. Good luck,” she offered.

“Thanks,” he replied as he ended the call. It had been a while since Assure had called him in on a case. Working as a freelance bail enforcement agent worked out great for him. Slade was only called for the worst cases, which meant he received a heftier payment than a normal agent would receive. The last know address, aliases, phone numbers, and frequent hangouts for the jumper were included in the file he’d pick up from the office later today so a lot of the work was already done for him and since shadowing someone at night was something he had quite a bit of practice with, it usually didn’t take long to apprehend his subject.

It was still early when he finished his phone call with Sandy and since he was a little stir crazy from being in the apartment all night he decided to venture out for a while and get a cup of coffee. Slade grabbed his laptop and charger and put them in his satchel. He hefted it over his shoulder as he grabbed his keys off the kitchen bar and headed for the door. Even though yesterday’s feeding wasn’t a pleasant experience emotionally, it still provided him sustenance. The longer he went without feeding, the harder it was to be around the sunlight. Since he just fed yesterday, it would be all right to stay within most of the shadows surrounding the buildings. As long as he didn’t subject himself to direct sunlight he would be okay and in the off chance people weren’t around when he was traveling around he could utilize his vampire speed. His speed was

difficult to turn on and off in a big city though. There were hardly any places or times when there weren't people around.

By cutting through the alleys and taking advantages of a few businesses with front and rear exits, it didn't take long to get to Where Ya Bean. Slade hoped the faery was working. He wanted a chance to observe her again. He wanted to know why she was working in a coffee shop since it seemed so strange and unusual. It frustrated him that he didn't have more knowledge about faeries and made a mental note to email Roman. Slade was sure that if anyone knew about faeries, Roman would. It had been a long time since they'd talked anyway and this would be a great excuse to make contact.

When Slade walked into the shop, he immediately noticed the faery standing at the counter with her usual look of concentration etched into her face. He took enjoyment in observing her while she prepared the orders of her customers and anticipated her reaction when they finally came face-to-face. Slade didn't know if it was excitement or nervousness he felt when he thought of her, but too soon, he stood in front of her ordering. "Hello, large black coffee please," he barely whispered.

Chapter Five - Millie

Millie's head jerked up as if she had been jolted by electricity as soon as the deep timber of his voice hit her ears. More a rumble than regular speech, it left her rattled for a moment. *Why does he do this to me?* Millie shook her head and straightened her shoulders while she forced herself to paste on her usual smile. "Did you say you wanted a black coffee?" she asked. She didn't want him to think she heard his order perfectly. He didn't speak loud enough for a human to make out what his rumbles meant.

"Yes, black coffee," he answered.

"Can I get you a bagel or pastry to go with that coffee?"

"No thank you. The coffee will do it," he said.

"Okay, coming right up." Millie pulled one of the Where Ya Bean insulated cups from the stack next to her and filled it with the coffee shop's signature blend of liquid caffeine. She slapped a lid on top and handed it over the counter to the captivatingly strange guy.

"Thank you," he said as he made his way to a table by the window just like before.

Millie decided she would get a better look at him this time. When the rush at the counter was over she took the opportunity to walk around the shop under the guise of cleaning tables. With rag in hand she quickly wiped down tables, threw away trash, and straightened chairs. She casually worked her way toward his table. Millie continually glanced in his direction to get a look at what he was doing even though she tried so hard not to look like she was interested. She felt so obvious – like everyone in the coffee

shop knew exactly what she was trying to do. *Why does it matter to me what he is doing? It's none of my business.* Millie noticed that he at least had something to occupy him instead of just staring out the window. His computer was open in front of him and he seemed to be busy checking email. *Apparently he communicates with someone.* Millie felt jealous at the thought of him communicating with someone and realized she craved social contact. Deep down her hope was that this strange and mysterious person could fill the void she felt more and more as she continued to isolate herself. Remy provided a nice distraction, but she needed more than just a companionship that Remy couldn't provide.

Millie walked closer to his table, determined to say something to him before she left the opportunity pass by. *What if he doesn't come in again and I never get a chance to say anything?* After a deep breath, Millie turned around and marched over to his table, but realized too late that he was standing in the aisle as he packed his satchel to leave. She was moving too fast to stop and couldn't prevent the collision. He automatically put his arm around her to prevent her from crashing to the ground. Millie, mortified and pulled against his body, could only stammer as she apologized. "I'm so sorry," she squealed.

"No harm done. Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Oh no, of course not. I'm not that easily damaged," Maggie retorted.

"I didn't mean to imply..."

"I know. I'm sorry that I bumped into you. I should have been looking where I was going. I should be apologizing to you," Millie confessed.

“Well, I can assure you I am completely all right,” he said as he let her go to turn and gather his satchel. Before she could open her mouth to say anything else, he was out the door and down the sidewalk where she couldn’t see him anymore. Millie was humiliated. The entire exchange only lasted a few minutes, but she felt sure everyone in the coffee shop witnessed her bumbling around like a dimwit. Even worse, what did he think about her. Her first interaction with him, other than a coffee sale, consisted of her almost knocking him down. She was naturally graceful, but something about him just put her on edge. Maybe the anxiety about inviting someone else into her world put her on edge.

Millie shook off the embarrassment of the debacle and went back to the counter, hoping for a customer to come in and request an incredibly difficult drink. Her eyes gravitated toward the clock. *Only one more hour and I can go outside and enjoy the rest of my day.* A young woman with two small children approached the counter. *This will be perfect, she thought, I’ll have several drinks to make and cute children to watch until I get to leave.*

Glad to be off the clock, Millie entered the bright sunlight and took several deep breaths. The more she thought about her encounter with the curious man from the coffee shop, the less it bothered her. She was sure there were worse things she could have done like fall down in front of him or spill coffee all over him. She started chuckling to herself as she continued down the sidewalk. The accidental meeting might turn out to be a blessing. Now that they’ve already met it might not be so hard to talk to him next time she sees him - *If I see him again, she reminded herself, There is no*

guarantee he'll even come back. That didn't stop her for hoping he'd come back. He seemed interesting and as lonely and isolated as she has been, she needed something more interesting than her weekly library visit in her life.

As the automatic doors swooshed open in front of her, Millie felt the cold air-conditioned air hit her face. The library was a place she always enjoyed going; the quiet there didn't seem so out of place. People were supposed to be quiet in libraries so it didn't seem strange that she didn't talk to anyone. After dropping the books she was finished with into the return slot she headed to the New Arrivals shelf. Millie felt comfortable with her routine. After checking the New Arrivals, she'd walk up and down the aisles starting in the Mysteries section and work her way through the other collections until she'd seen everything. Then, and only then, if she didn't find something that looked interesting from her browsing would she sit at the computer terminal to search the online catalog. Using the catalog just took the fun out of a library visit. The catalog made everything go to fast.

When she was satisfied with her books, she went to the Reading Room and sat down in her favorite comfortable chair with its matching ottoman. Snuggling into the cushions with a new book was heavenly. Being comfortable for the first time all day, Millie found it hard not to fall asleep right there. Her eyelids were growing heavy as she attempted to read the first pages of her book, but when she caught some movement out of the corner of her eye she sat up at full attention. Behind one of the bookshelves she could see a faerie. Hidden to the humans' eyes, he weaved his way between the bookshelves never taking his eyes off of Millie. His eerie grin and wild red hair unsettled her enough, but when he turned so she could see his chest the blood froze in

her veins. He proudly wore the crest of the Queen and carried the traditional ring-pommel sword of an assassin.

It was always rumored that the Queen had a small army of these mercenaries, but Millie had never seen one before. Of course, Millie had lived her entire life as a Little before running away and spent her days fluttering from one friend's house to another and basically frolicking her life away. It wasn't until talk of rebellion against the Queen that her life became the least bit complicated. Pulling herself together, Millie made eye contact with the Gallowglass. It was apparent that he already knew she could see him, which made her one of the fey herself, but there was no reason to panic. That didn't automatically mean he knew she was a part of the rebellion. Acting fearlessly, Millie looked into his eyes and gave the slightest nod and acknowledged the assassin. In return, he maintained his strange grin and slowly ran one finger along the front of his throat. *Well, that answers that. Now, I guess panicking is okay.*

Millie's mind ran through several options. 1) She could stay in the library until the assassin left and then try and get home without being followed. Who knows, maybe they didn't know where she lives yet. 2) She could leave immediately and attempt to lose the assassin in the hustle and bustle of the busy streets. Neither option sounded good to her. The fact that The Queen might know where she was hiding was enough to put her in a fetal position. *Maybe he hasn't reported back yet.* Millie thought of a third and even less appealing option – she could confront the assassin and see what happens. Maybe she could bribe him into keeping her location a secret. What did she have that would be of use to an assassin? Absolutely nothing. Tired of thinking about the possible outcomes of her decision, Millie left the safety of the Reading Room and

walked, head held high, toward the exit of the library. She kept a watchful eye on her surroundings, hoping to see an attack if one was coming her way.

Once on the street, Millie used her glamour to create the illusion of invisibility. She wanted to move fast, but didn't want to catch the eye of the humans around her. Normally, she takes the time to look at the scenery around her, but today she has only one purpose in mind – getting to her apartment without incident. Millie catches a glimpse or two of other faeries wrapped up in their own activities. One was causing mischief to a passerby while another was looking in the windows of a clothing shop. More were hanging around the food vendors on the street corners hoping for a dropped morsel. None of them seemed to give her a second glance, which was just how she wanted it.

Once at her apartment building Millie still had to face the four flights of stairs leading to her door where danger could be lurking around any corner. All she can do is move as fast as she could. She didn't have time to make the transformation to a little and fly up the stairwell so she took a deep breath and started the climb with as much speed as she could muster, remaining invisible all the way. She just hoped one of her neighbors didn't pop out of the door too fast. A collision would be bad news.

Millie entered her apartment without hesitation and immediately locked the door behind her – even the door chain. She rushed around the apartment and made sure every window she had was locked as well. In the six months she'd lived among the humans, this was the first time she felt seriously threatened. Millie was a limp rag on the floor in front of the door to her apartment. She didn't think anything could get her to move. If

danger was headed her way she wouldn't be able to fight because she was spent. The nerves running through her body left her feeling numb all over.

Millie was pulled out of her stupor when the door hit her in the head. "Ouch!" she cried.

"What is going on Millie? You never have the chain on the door," Remy asked.

"Sorry Remy. I just don't feel good this evening. I think I'm going straight to bed."

"Are you sure a little company wouldn't make you feel better? Come on, let me in Millie," Remy begged.

"Not tonight. Really, I want to be alone," Millie said as she closed the door again and relocked the deadbolt. Millie eased herself up and trudged to her bedroom. Her bed, an oasis waiting to take her away from the troubles of her day, called to her. Without even undressing, Millie climbed in between the sheets and piled the covers on top of her until she felt completely hidden. She wasn't safe by any means, but at this point even a false sense of security is better than none.

Chapter Six – Slade

Slade was positive that waiting for the girl to get off work and then following her was a big mistake, but he couldn't force himself to leave the alley beside the coffee shop. When she finally appeared, she looked so vibrant in the sunlight that he had to force himself from jumping out and touching her again. The feel of her body against his was unbelievable and letting her go was extremely difficult to do. Getting out of the coffee shop fast was imperative in order to prevent a scene. He could only picture two outcomes: kiss her until she lost all capacity for speech or sank his fangs deep into her neck and drink until he was satisfied. Neither choice would have been smart in a building full of people.

He followed her along the sidewalk as long as he could stay out of the sunlight. Several places she walked required him to detour and catch up with her further down the path. It seemed she found the brightest sunlight available and didn't want to leave. Every time Slade lost sight of her he hoped he would be able to find her again. Not knowing where she was going meant she could duck into a building anywhere along the way leaving him to decide if he would resort to tracking her by scent or if that would be a little too creepy.

Slade decided she was going to the public library. He noticed she was carrying books in the tote bag she had slung over her shoulder and chastised himself for not being more observant right from the start. A café sat across the street from the library and provided shaded seating for their customers who preferred to dine outside. Slade took a seat facing the library and started to wait for her to conduct her business and be

on her way again. Slade wasn't sure how he could justify this blatant act of stalking, but couldn't seem to put an end to the stake out.

"What can I get you to drink," the waitress asked as she slid a menu across the table toward him.

"Just a coffee will be fine," Slade answered, passing the menu back to her. "I just need to get a some work done before a meeting this afternoon," he continued while digging into his satchel for his computer.

"I'll have it right out," the waitress purred.

Slade felt her hand brush against his as she took the menu from him and saw that her eyes lingered a little longer than normal on his face. Eager to get her out of the way, he broke eye contact and booted up his computer. He was hoping for a reply email from Roman. Roman, his only close friend, has had time to forget more things than Slade would ever know. Roman was made vampire during the Colonial Period of Early American History. He tangled with the government on more than one occasion and lived to tell about it and in doing so, learned more about the supernatural world than Slade even thought was possible. Slade hated to admit his naiveté when it came to life, but technically he was still a baby with only twenty years of being a vampire under his belt. Being turned at eighteen-years-old didn't help in the least. In fact, it left him with a simplistic view of the world. Slade didn't possess the knowledge needed for survival when he was abandoned by his maker and attributed meeting Roman, soon after, to good fortune.

Slade was disappointed there wasn't an email from Roman and sat staring at the computer screen wishing he had stopped by Assure to pick up the jumpers file before he

went to the coffee shop today. He would be able to start a little background work on the computer while he waited for his girl to make her appearance again. After Slade couldn't bring himself to play another game of solitaire, he decided to call Sandy at Assure to get the name of the person he needed to locate. Slade fished his phone out of his jeans pocket and unlocked the keypad. He noticed right away how much time had passed since he sat down across from the library. Slade realized he was going to be forced to give up his vigil if she didn't make an appearance soon. Disappointment flooded through him as he realized he wasn't going to see her again before he had to go about his business. She either realized she was being followed and left a different way than she entered, which would be bad for him the next time he went to the coffee shop or she slipped out without him noticing which just frustrated him more than anything. In a sullen mood, Slade packed up his computer and made his way to the Bail Bonds Corporation. Work would take his mind off of her – he was sure of it.

Chapter Seven – Millie

Millie could only stare at the ceiling for so long and decided to crawl out of bed. She didn't have a plan for the day, but was thankful it was her day off. Normally, Millie would go to the park and read or people watch. Sometimes she would do weekly grocery shopping down the street after sneaking into the domino hall for a little while. Today, she didn't feel like doing any of that. Instead, she simply sat on the couch in front of the dark TV and tried to sort out the swirling thoughts going through her head.

Tired of sitting still, Millie got up from the couch, pulled her hair back from her face, and started straightening the kitchen. While she wiped the kitchen counters, she considered her few options. The one that would require the least amount of work would be to simply do nothing. She would continue to go to and from work in the same way she has for the last six months. She would be mindful of possible dangers around her, but other than that, she would wait until the assassin made it impossible to ignore him.

As she moved on to taking stock of her refrigerator and making a list of things she needed, Millie considered a second option. Just in case the Queen and her people know where she lives, Millie could change apartments. She didn't have much to move since she rented a fully furnished apartment. The things that made it look like her were the little accents like window treatments, pillows, of course the piles of paperback littering surfaces around the apartment. If she had to, she could leave everything behind. Her clothes and toiletries would fit in a large duffel bag that she bought at thrift store and she'd already read most of the books so she could always leave them for the next person who called this apartment home. The kitchen would be the only hassle

to move. Millie had slowly built up a fun collection of funky plates and glasses and convenient gadgets she didn't want to lose, but if she had a choice between her life and her kitchen utensils, she'd choose her life.

Finally, she considered her final option - one that would require more courage than she has and would definitely be the most dangerous. It would require her to abandon her life with the humans, return to her former life as a Little, and face whatever the Queen had in mind, but on her own terms. She liked the idea of returning on her own volition instead of being tracked down like a criminal or, worse, an animal. But, she would miss living here so much and desperately wanted to find out what it was like to live this life without the sword of Damocles hanging over her head.

Millie felt better after moving around and knew she wouldn't make a decision right away. Something as important as the rest of her life required more thought than her panicked ramblings of the morning. She had just started back toward her stackable washer and dryer to fold the load of laundry from yesterday when she heard a knock at the door. Millie's froze as she waited for another knock. Instead she heard Remy ask, "Millie, are you there? Come on Millie open up. I know something is wrong."

Millie considered pretending she wasn't home, but knew Remy would keep coming over until she finally relented and let her inside. "I'm coming," Millie said as she considered the lie she was going to tell Remy about what was wrong.

"It's about time," Remy blurted as she burst through Millie's door. "I was so bored last night without you for entertainment. How dare you lock me out," Remy teased.

“I’m sorry, Remy,” Millie sighed. “I just needed to be alone and think about some things,” Millie admitted hoping it would be enough to satisfy Remy’s curiosity.

“What kind of things? You know talking about things help a lot. I’ll even provide my expertise to you for free because I love you so much,” Remy giggled.

“Thanks, I appreciate your offer, but right now let’s just find something to watch on TV,” Millie said as she put the remote in Remy’s hand. “Do you want some lunch? I still have some vegetables in the refrigerator we could use on a pizza. How does that sound?”

“That sounds just perfect. You know I love love love your homemade pizza,” Remy cried as jumped at Millie and pulled her into a bear hug. Remy let go and plopped down on the couch to start flipping through channels while Millie went to the kitchen to mix the dough for the pizza crust. “So, what happened yesterday to freak you out so much?” Remy nonchalantly asked without looking at Millie.

“I just saw someone that I’d rather avoid,” Millie admitted.

“Who, an old boyfriend, a family member? Who Who Who? You never tell me anything about your life Millie,” Remy begged.

“That’s probably because I don’t like to talk about those things Remy,” she noted.

“You’re no fun Millie,” Remy pouted.

“I know. So, why do you keep coming over here again?” Millie teased.

“Sometimes I don’t know why I come over here. I think my gift for gab and love of gossip is totally wasted on you.”

“Probably so,” replied Millie as she continued to spread the dough on the pizza pan. “What do you want on your pizza today? I’ve got onions, green pepper, and black olives,” Millie offered.

“No mushrooms?” Remy asked.

“We used the last of them a couple of days ago,” she said.

“I don’t think I want black olives today so just onions and green peppers for me,” Remy told her.

Millie loaded the pizza with the toppings careful to only put black olives on her half and slid it into the oven. Before sitting on the couch with Remy, she went to the dryer and took out the load of towels so she could fold them while she watched TV. Sitting on the couch with the pile of towels between her and Remy it didn’t seem possible that this part of her life might be over in a few days. “So, what did you find on TV?” she asked.

“Well, one channel is showing an 80’s movie marathon and another is showing nothing but Jean Claude Van Damme movies. Which is it going to be?”

“80’s movies please,” cried Millie.

Soon all the laundry was folded, the pizza was ready, and Millie and Remy were sitting in front of a silly movie and cracking up at how crazy the fashion and special effects were compared to current day. It turned out to be a blessing having Remy over for the day - she barely even thought about her problems once during their impromptu movie marathon. After the fourth movie, Millie locked the door behind Remy and relished the quiet of the apartment. After a quick shower, she climbed back into bed and cuddled up with one of the new books from the library and read until she felt her

eyes get heavy. The escape she felt when reading about the fictional characters was priceless. Before she knew it, she couldn't keep her eyes open and decided to put her book away and turn in for the night. The only thought she had as she turned out the light was how different she felt from the night before. She wasn't going to do anything radical. She'd just go with the flow and see what happened tomorrow when she went to work. She'd need to leave early since she was scheduled to open the coffee shop and was happy because working the early shift wouldn't allow her to hide in her apartment and dwell on her problems. Millie turned over on her side and closed her eyes with only a tinge of anxiety about the next day.

Chapter Eight – Slade

Slade sat outside of Charles Stallings house waiting to see if he'd see any activity inside. So far there hasn't been any movement and no one has come or gone in the four hours he's been observing the residence. Feeling he'd allowed enough time for someone to make an appearance, he eased open his car door and got out to walk across the street and head to the back of the house. Charles Stalling was on the run and no one had reported seeing him in two weeks since he bailed out of jail. Approaching the back door, Slade pulled out his lock picks and prepared to enter. He assumed there would be a security system in place and readied himself to disarm the alarm – having only seconds to stop the system from reporting an intrusion to the security company which, in turn, would alert the police department. Slade could do what he needed to do quickly, but would prefer to take his time so he could take in as much information about Stallings as possible.

The stale air of the house assaulted Slade as he entered through the back door. The lack of recent activity was obvious if not by the musty smell of a closed up house, then by the thin layer of dust that covered every visible surface. Slade was relieved he didn't have to be cautious as he moved through the house looking for information as to Stallings whereabouts. The first place he went was the bedroom. Slade walked over to the bed and pulled back the covers to sniff the pillows and even though Stallings hadn't slept in the bed for a couple of weeks, it still held his scent. Next, Slade went in the bathroom hoping to find a comb containing stray hairs. He was confident he would be able to recognize Stallings' scent when the time came to identify him, but just in case, having a piece of hair for comparison was always a good idea. There was a comb by

the sink with a few hairs in it that Slade grabbed and stuffed into a plastic baggie for safekeeping. Finally, Slade went looking for evidence of where he might be hiding. He went into the office to look through the filing cabinets, papers out on the desk, and mail. Slade saw that the computer was on and decided to see what Stallings was doing before he left his home. He moved the mouse in order to bring the computer out of sleep mode and was happy to see that several programs were open at the bottom of the status bar. Either Stallings left in a hurry and didn't have time to close down his programs or he left thinking he'd be returning soon. Either way, it was good luck for Slade because the email program was active.

With the file from Assure in his hand, Slade started the process of sorting through Charles Stallings' email. Many of the messages in the Inbox weren't relevant, but by comparing the names of Stallings' known associates to the names of the email senders, Slade was able to pick out the messages he needed to read. He found out that Charles Stallings preferred to have his meetings in public places during business hours. A small diner called Maria's was a particular favorite of his. There were also mentions of a domino hall in many of the messages. It took Slade almost an hour of reading to locate the name of the domino hall. Most of the time it was simply referred to as "the hall", so when he finally came across a sentence linking domino games to the name Rattle Them Bones he felt relieved. He jotted down the name in his folder and got up from the desk. With the discovery of the diner and the domino hall and Stallings' deli shop, Slade had three locations to stake out. To save time he would visit all three locations tonight to determine if Stallings' scent was stronger in any one particular

place – meaning he had been there recently and possibly spent more time there than the others.

Slade exited the house the same way he entered and casually sauntered to his waiting car. His inky, Detroit-made beauty was one of his favorite material possessions. It had the ability to go from 0 – 60 mph in 5 seconds. The power he felt when driving was like nothing he'd ever felt before and compared to the rush he got from feeding – the car provided him with total joy whereas many times he came away from feeding consumed with feelings of guilt. He accelerated at a respectable speed while in the crowded neighborhood, but once he was on the open highway, he opened her up and rolled the windows down. The air beating against his face and whipping his hair made it seem like he was flying.

Much too soon the exit he needed was looming up ahead. He started to reduce his speed in preparation for the turn and signaled to change lanes. The first place he planned to visit was Maria's, the restaurant Stallings spent a lot of his time eating and meeting. They were still open for business so he would get a chance to walk around inside. He found a place to park several blocks down the street and went on foot the rest of the way to the restaurant.

One of the perks of being a vampire is the ability to use the power of persuasion on humans. As long as Slade could maintain eye contact while he told them what he wanted, the human wouldn't give him any trouble and the memory of the encounter would be erased and be as if nothing had happened. Slade counted on this ability to get him inside the restaurant and passed the maître d' in order to be able to investigate the restaurant, even the portions in the back where customers generally didn't have access.

If Stallings was holding meetings here, it didn't mean they were necessarily held while he was eating. He could be using offices or storerooms to conduct business just as easily.

Slade entered the building and approached the reservation stand with an air of authority. If it appeared he belonged there it would take less concentration to bend the restaurant's gatekeeper to his will. Unfortunately, there were several people in line, also waiting to speak to the maître d', which would cause more disturbance than would be helpful. He decided he needed a cover story in order to keep the other potential diners from crying shenanigans. Slade strode through the middle of the crowd of customers and casually leaned on the reservation stand. He waited patiently for the maître d' to stop what he was doing and look him in the eye.

"Can I help you sir?" the maître d' inquired.

"Yes, you can. I have an appointment with the owner of this fine establishment. What is his name again?" Slade asked.

"Mr. Mendoza owns Maria's," the gatekeeper replied.

"Yes, that's right. I am supposed to meet with Mr. Mendoza. Can you tell me where his office is located?" Slade continued.

"It is in the back of the restaurant through the red double doors, second door on the right."

"Thank you and have a pleasant night," Slade said as he bid the maître d' farewell. Throughout the entire conversation, Slade was sure to plant the suggestion that no one had actually been in the restaurant that night looking for the owner and he never had a conversation with someone about a meeting at all. As far as the maître d'

was concerned, the exchange he just participated in with Slade never happened.

Smiling with satisfaction, Slade made his way to the red double doors. He didn't intend to spend a lot of time here; just enough to gain the sense of how long it has been since Stallings had been here.

Once through the doors, Slade started checking the doors along the hallway. As expected, there wasn't much to see. A restroom, a storeroom for cleaning supplies and another one for cooking supplies were unlocked and contained absolutely nothing of interest. On the other side of the hallway were two doors. One was the door the maître d' informed him was the owner's office and it and the door next to it was locked. Slade felt slightly irritated as he took his lock picking tools out of his pocket for a second time that night.

Slade extended his senses through the door to make sure no one was inside before unlocked the door and entered the office. He didn't have much time by the looks of things in the room. The computer was awake, all the lights were on, and papers were stacked on the desk with a pen wedged in the pile as if holding a place after the reader was interrupted in the middle of reading. Slade tuned his attention to the hallway so he'd hear anyone approaching and went about looking around the room. Unfortunately, he found nothing involving Stallings in the owner's office. Slade saw there was a second door in the office. It appeared to lead into the room that belonged to the other locked door in the hallway and fortunately, from the owner's office, it was unlocked.

Slade entered the dark room and found the light switch. He didn't have an idea of what to expect and what he found truly surprised him. The room was relatively bare compared to the office next door. The back of the room contained a large desk, a

cushioned desk chair, and a fluffy couch, but what shocked Slade was the other chair in the room. Very unlike the comfortable-looking desk chair, this chair was a simple, wooden straight-backed chair. It sat in the middle of the room facing the desk, but the most disturbing part of the entire scene were the straps and ropes attached to the chair. It was clearly meant to keep someone trapped and for what purpose, Slade could only imagine. Fear prickled Slade's skin as he stared at the torture device. He attempted to block out the memories of the time he found himself in a situation such as this, where he was tortured under the guise of testing in front of an audience sick with curiosity. Slade gave a silent thanks to Roman for his part in saving him before anything worse than poking, prodding, sunlight exposure, and starving could be done.

Slade wasn't surprised to find Stallings' scent in the torture room. However, the scent wasn't overpowering, which meant he was staying away from places that could link him to criminal activity. Feeling no sympathy for Stallings, Slade left the frightening room and made his way back to owner's office and eventually to the hallway. After being sure the door locked behind him, he exited the restaurant through the kitchen entrance at the back of the building. Slade was thankful to be in the night area once again and started the walk to his car thinking about his next and final stop of the night.

Slade's last chance of coming across Stallings would be the domino hall he read about in the emails on Stallings' computer. The hall was located not far away from the coffee shop he went to practically everyday and the thought of passing Stallings on the street and not knowing it was irksome. Slade drove through the dark streets with U2's "Sunday Bloody Sunday" pouring from the speakers at an ear spitting level. Even

though most of his life was spent in the dark, he still found it amazing how different everything looked in the glow of moonlight. The streets, the people, the scenery – everything oozed with seduction, mystery, invitation, secrecy, danger, and freedom. While the world needed sunlight to live, it needed moonlight to be beautiful.

Slade parked his car a couple of blocks away from the domino hall and casually strolled the rest of the way, blending into the background with the other people enjoying a late night walk through the neighborhood. The music from small sidewalk cafes blended together to form a chaotic, yet pleasant tune. Slade hated to ruin the light mood it instilled in him with dark business of hunting his prey, but a job is a job and the faster he located Stallings the faster he could get back to enjoying the little things life.

The domino hall was a simple looking building on the corner of a block. It appeared to have a side entrance that led to an alley, an excellent development from a stake out point of view. Next to the domino hall was a ladies hair salon, which, Slade thought, probably provided the men endless entertainment while playing dominoes. Slade turned around after passing the salon and went back to the domino hall. For a moment he just stood inside the doorway taking in the sight. The only expectation he had when he entered the building was that it would contain old men sitting at tables, hunched over various games of dominoes. For the most part, he was right – there were several weathered old men sitting around, drinking coffee and guffawing at each other's unfortunate domino strategies. It was a scene Slade could have observed for hours, but knowing that would probably draw attention to him, he casually walked toward the back of the building as if looking for something. He was half way curious to find out if anyone would ask him if he needed help or if he would simply be ignored. He was

surprised to realize he wanted one of the old men to talk to him and he wished he felt comfortable enough with a group of people to laugh and joke with whole-heartedly.

Slade pulled himself out of his thoughts and focused on the task at hand.

Reaching into his mind to recall Stallings' scent, he worked his way to the back of the hall and caught the smell in the air almost immediately. The domino hall contained the strongest scent out of all the places he had searched today, but without even going into the back room, he could tell Stallings wasn't on the premises. Slade decided to leave for the night and return the next day for an official stake out. He'd spotted an area in the alleyway, close to the domino hall's side entrance that would provide enough shade to keep him in relative safety during the day while keeping an eye out for Stallings.

Slade decided to go home for the evening with a stop along the way to feed. If he were going to be out during the day tomorrow he'd need to be at his strongest. Not wanting to go to the subway tunnels, Slade decided to find a crowded nightspot under the guise of looking for some company. After setting his sights on an acceptable donor, he used his power of persuasion to feed from the unsuspecting girl without her feeling any pain or remembering what happened. When he gently let her go, she made her way back to her friends, thinking she'd left to go to the bathroom and nothing else.

Satisfied with the events of the day, Slade found it easy to relax once he got home. He checked his email again, hoping to find a reply from Roman. When he saw that Roman still hadn't replied, feelings of worry started to tug at him. This was a bad time for Roman to be in trouble since he couldn't get away to assist him. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, found Roman's number in his address book, and hit send.

Slade wasn't surprised when the call went over to voice mail. He left a message for Roman to call him back as soon as possible and ended the call.

Slade went over to his favorite leather chair and propped his feet up on the matching ottoman. He picked up the novel he was in the middle of and was quickly immersed in the story. By the time he turned the last page of his book, several hours had passed and dawn was fast approaching. Even though Slade didn't need to sleep, resting still felt good. He decided to go back to his bedroom and lay down until it was time to leave for the domino hall. Slade planned to leave his apartment just before the sun started to rise and since he'd be driving his car, he didn't need to leave early to search for a route that would keep in out of the sunlight. In bed, he closed his eyes and thought about the coffee shop. It opened at 6 am, so he planned to stop in for a cup of black coffee before getting settled into his shady location for the day. Thinking about the coffee shop naturally led to thinking about his faerie. He hoped she'd be there when he stopped in because seeing her first thing in the morning would be a bright spot in the long day he had coming up. Slade tried to come up with ways to talk to her. The only thing he thought would work was the direct approach. He needed to walk right up to her and start a conversation. Maybe even ask her to go for a walk after work one evening. With this goal in mind, Slade set his alarm for 5 am and closed his eyes to rest.

Chapter Nine – Millie

The screeching alarm was an unpleasant welcome to the morning. After hitting the snooze button, Millie rolled over and pulled the pillow over her head. The snooze button wasn't something she generally took advantage of since it only delayed the inevitable and guaranteed that just as she was about to drop off to sleep again, the annoying screeching would blare in her ears again. If there was a way to delay a day, today would be the one. The first day outside since the appearance of the Queen's assassin with no way of knowing what she would be walking into once she stepped outside the apartment. The unknown was definitely something to be afraid of in her opinion.

After the second alarm blast, Millie crawled out of bed and straightened her covers. She trudged her way into the bathroom and turned on the spigot in the shower. Hoping she'd feel better after standing under the hot water, she jumped in and took her time washing her hair. There were so many things she loved about living amongst the humans that they took for granted. Shampoos, conditioners, and lotions were such a luxury and she loved making her skin smells just as good as her hair. Once she couldn't stand under the water anymore, Millie got out, dried off, and began the process of slathering her skin with her various creams. She used styling gel in her hair and applied a smidge of makeup. Finally, she went to the closet to choose a clean work uniform and slowly got dressed. Having done everything she could to put off leaving the apartment, Millie finally gathered her tote bag and keys and headed out the door.

Millie's first step outside the apartment building was a tentative one. As she progressed down the sidewalk with no apparent danger, she felt her self start to relax. It

took her a little while to realize something was different about her morning walk. Most everyday she was out, she witnessed a variety of faeries fluttering around and mingling unseen around the humans. A lot of times they were causing mischief like pinching and poking the people around them, tripping humans walking by, or steal small items leaving the human confused as to where their belonging could have gone. Today, Millie didn't see even one faerie. Their absence could only mean danger was close by and most likely in the form of the assassin. It took everything Millie had to continue her walk to work.

Soon, Where Ya Bean came into view and Millie's pace quickened as if once inside the building she would be safe. She walked to the back entrance and used her key to let herself in and begin the morning routine of getting the shop ready for customers. First, she put a batch of bagels in the oven to bake and after setting the timer for 25 minutes, went about brewing coffee and stocking the pastries. With only a few minutes left before the bagels were ready and it was time to unlock the front doors, Millie gave a glance in the refrigerators to make sure everything they needed for the morning rush was stocked last night at closing.

Millie unlocked the door just as the oven buzzed. Luckily, people weren't waiting outside the door waiting to get in, so Millie was able to get back to the oven to retrieve the bagels before they got a little too brown. The bell on the door jingled just as she was putting the last bagel in the warmer under the counter. As she wiped her hands on her apron and leaned up to greet the first customer of the day, she knocked the baking sheet she'd used for the bagels onto the floor making a horrible clanging sound. Red faced, she looked up at the customer prepared to offer an apology and take the

order, until she saw who it was. Her mysterious customer stared back at her with a slight smile that added to his good looks. Even more embarrassed about the fact she couldn't seem to form words, she simply stood staring at him thankful no one was in line behind him.

“Good morning, I hope they don't let you around the dishes in the back if that is the way you feel about them,” he chuckled.

“Ha, very funny. I'm just a bit clumsy today I guess. Will it be your usual today - plain black coffee? You don't like adventure I guess,” Millie volleyed back.

“You call watering down coffee with milks and creams adventure? I call it being a wimp and a wimp is something I am most definitely not,” he answered.

“Okay then, large, black coffee coming right up,” Millie said as she pulled a cup from the stack next to her and started pouring. “You're out awfully early this morning,” she added.

“Yes, it is early, but I have several things to take care of today and was forced to start my day earlier than usual. What about you? How often are you required to open the coffee shop alone like this?” he asked.

“Oh, it depends, but usually about three times a week but I prefer doing this than closing. Walking home in the dark is so depressing compared to having my whole afternoon free when I get off at 2:00 pm,” she explained.

“Of course, so you enjoy the outdoors?”

“Yes, I spend all the time I can outside, especially the park. Are you an outside person?”

“It seems we are complete opposites. When I do enjoy a nice walk outside it is generally at night. Everything just has a different look about it when it is covered in darkness – mysterious and romantic,” he said.

“I’ve never given it that much thought I guess. It has always seemed a little dangerous walking around by myself at night,” Mille responded.

The bell above the door sounded as more customers walked into the coffee shop, the first one being Remy. In a way, she was disappointed her conversation, even as mundane as it was, had to come to an end. She saw him turn and look behind him and was sure she saw frustration cross his face too. Millie could see he was trying to come up with something to say and was about to put him out of his misery by telling him she’d see him later when he stood a little straighter and practically spit out, “Would you like to go for a walk with me some night so you can see the park when it is the most beautiful?”

Millie was shocked. His request came out of left field – she didn’t know him at all, not even his name. “Well, I don’t know,” she wavered.

“I promise to be a perfect gentleman,” he assured her.

“I don’t even know your name,” she stated.

“Slade. My name is Slade. What’s yours?”

“Millie,” she answered, glancing at Remy, whose eyes were boring a hole through Millie’s head.

Remy was standing directly behind Slade along with three other customers, all of them looking a bit impatient except for Remy who looked like she was going to explode or was having some sort of epileptic fit by the way she was motioning at Slade

behind his back. Millie felt her face turning red all over again seeing as she was the object of everyone's attention in the coffee shop since Remy wasn't making easy to ignore what was going on.

Becky, the other girl scheduled to work today, wasn't due to come in for another 30 minutes so she didn't have time to stand around and chat. Millie felt the pressure to give him answer, so either she accepted and might have a good time or she turned him down, which would mean he'd probably never ask her again. "Okay, I'd like to go for a walk with you sometime, but right now I need to get to work," she explained as she started looking busy behind the counter.

"Excellent. Do you work tomorrow?" Slade asked.

"Yes, I work from 2 – 9 pm tomorrow," she answered.

"Great, I'll meet you in front of the coffee shop when you get off and we can go for our walk then," he stated with a confident smile.

"Fine. See you then," Millie said as she dismissed him in order to wait on Remy.

Millie watched Slade walk gracefully out the front door with his large black coffee lost in a daze until Remy screamed, "Who was that guy? You haven't told me about dating anyone. I can't believe you are holding out on me."

"I'm not, Remy. That is the first time he's talked to me," Millie defended herself. "What do you want today Remy? And, what in the world are you doing awake this early?"

"I'm going to the old lady's house today. I have to be there by 8:00 this morning, isn't that awful?" Remy whined.

“I know. Working for a living is tough, even if you only have to do it a couple times a week,” Millie said sarcastically. “Now, what do you want? Customers are getting angry behind you.”

“Fine, I want a large Caramel Latte.”

“No problem, coming right up,” Millie said as she was already making the drink. Remy took her coffee from Millie but not without another ear full.

“Millie, I expect to hear everything about this guy tonight. Promise me, Millie,” Remy begged.

“It will be a short story, Remy. I’m telling you I don’t know anything about the guy. He’s just been coming into the coffee shop for a couple of days or so,” Millie explained.

“Well, whatever! I want it all,” Remy said as she walked out swishing her hips and hair with more enthusiasm than was required for this early in the morning.

Millie worked the rest of her shift without any variations to her normal day. Eventually, it was time for her to leave the coffee shop, which meant it was time to decide what she wanted to do about her situation. Ever since this morning when Slade asked her to go for a walk, she’d had a feeling of confidence coursing through her. It was the first time anyone had asked her on a date and the possibilities were exhilarating. She definitely felt drawn to him, even before he asked her out and she could only imagine how she’d feel when they weren’t the focus of attention in the middle of a coffee shop. With her confidence running high, Millie felt a burst of bravery and decided to take a walk to the park and see if the assassin made an appearance when she was, more or less, alone.

Millie decided to travel light and only gathered her keys from her tote and left the rest in her cubby at the back of the coffee shop. Saying good-bye to Becky and Manny, Millie made her way to the park, feeling surprisingly free.

Chapter Ten – Slade

Slade left the coffee shop feeling a mix of emotions. First, he was proud of himself for getting up the nerve to talk to Millie and asking her to go on a walk. He felt a walk would be a safe activity since it didn't involve food and he wouldn't be forced to answer tough questions. The last few days, as he'd watched Millie, he couldn't help but notice the loneliness that seemed to always cloud her face. The only time she ever seemed to be animated was when she pasted a smile on for the customers. The loneliness he felt seemed to be mirrored in her and it made him want to find a way to connect with her. But, on the other hand, connecting to people has been something he's avoided for years. Did he really want to change the way he lived his life? Would bring Millie into his life make it more complicated – especially since she's a faerie. He laughed, as he thought about it – not only did he approach a girl and make a date, but a girl faerie. Something so complex he hadn't even heard of it before. Never had he heard word of a vampire in a relationship with a faerie. Talking to Roman seemed a lot more important now than it did before.

Slade realized he was distracting himself with thoughts of Millie while he should be focusing on Charles Stallings and immediately refocused his attentions. While Millie was a pleasant diversion, she wasn't worth dying for. Slade cut through a couple of alley ways to get to the spot he located the previous night so he could get into position to observe the domino hall for any signs of Stallings. Once in place, he attempts to catch the scent of Stallings inside the building. Today it was much stronger and Slade could tell he was inside the building. The strong scent lead into the building,

but didn't lead away. Satisfied this was the place to start, Slade settled in for a long day of waiting.

Chapter Eleven – Millie

Millie finds her usual place by the beautifully bloomed garden and settled in for a long afternoon of waiting. She felt at home around all the fragrant flowers and regretted not bring her book along. In hindsight it seemed silly just sitting here waiting for something to happen without at least something to keep her occupied. Without the distraction of her book, her mind drifted to Slade and their date tomorrow. She could tell he wasn't human, but couldn't decide what type of creature he was – just that he wasn't faerie. Vampire came to mind since he didn't have a lot of color to him, but Slade was out in the daylight all the time. He did mention he preferred the night to the day, but many humans probably felt the same way. It was all very confusing and she found herself hoping that he wasn't working for the Queen, sent to watch her and leading her into a trap.

Millie was brought out of her thoughts by the tinkling of little faerie voices. She looked carefully at the garden surrounding her and saw that several faeries were flying from flower to flower trying to get her attention. She caught snatches of their sentences as they flew past her with lightening speed. Watching them made her wish she could be little again, but it would leave her too vulnerable right now. Soon, what the faeries were said sank in and brought her to full attention.

“Be careful, Millie,” said the one with the glittery purple hair as she stood on a fluffy mum.

“Watch out, Millie,” said a larger faerie with green tinted skin that hung from the branch of a leafy bush.

A tiny hummingbird-sized faerie with flowing golden hair said, “The Queen wants you back, Millie,” as she fluttered in front of Millie’s face.

Each warning was a little more specific leading Millie to believe in the authenticity of their counsel. When she heard the plump, apple-shaped faerie say, “You’re almost sixteen Millie. It’s time you go back,” it took all she had to stay on the bench and not take off running.

“Why, after six months of no sign of trouble is everything happening at once? If they know where I am, why not just come after me?” Millie said to no one in particular.

“They are giving you a chance to come to your senses, Millicent,” answered the apple-shaped faerie.

The fact that a faerie she’d never met before called her Millicent wasn’t a good sign and fear ran through her at the thought of the Queen spreading the word of her true name around the faerie realm. Anyone who knew your true name could force you to do his or her will and that was one of the reasons for the fight against the Queen in the first place. She didn’t want to serve the Queen and be forced to do her bidding no matter the task.

Millie watched the faeries flitter and fly around for a while longer just to make sure they didn’t have anything else especially useful to say, then made sure her keys were still in her pocket and started the walk home while it was still light outside. Eyes always on alert, Millie walked as fast as she could without calling attention to herself. Once she reached her apartment building she took the steps two at a time with her key in hand, ready to unlock the door. Millie came to an abrupt halt when she saw her apartment door was already open. Confusion swirled through her head. It could just be

Remy who let herself in to get something, but it could be someone with a more sinister purpose as well.

Millie tip toed to the door, attempting to be quiet, even though she hadn't been paying attention to the amount of noise she made while she was running up the stairs just a moment before. She reached the door and peeked inside, but couldn't see much of anything. Forced to push the door open wider, Millie put her hand against the doorknob and pushed at the same time she jumped back out of sight. When no sound came from the apartment, Millie crept forward and looked inside. Her eyes went wide with fear when she saw Remy laying face down on the floor surrounded by a pool of blood. It took everything Millie had to stop the scream in her throat from spilling from her lips and calling attention to the problem laying on her apartment floor. She stood frozen not knowing what to do.

Chapter Twelve – Slade

Slade had been in the alley for hours, having move a couple of times to avoid the sunlight and unfortunately, Stalling hadn't moved at all. He was beginning to regret taking this job and decided to walk to the end of the alley to get a different perspective of the domino hall just to break up the monotony of the day.

The scent of flowers drifted on the air toward him and he couldn't help searching for the source. It didn't take long to locate Millie walking purposely down the sidewalk, presumably in the direction of her apartment. Slade felt excited at the thought of Millie living so close and he considered the possibility of following her, the curiosity driving him mad. Slade decided seeing her the next day wasn't good enough and he took off after her at full speed.

The thought of Stallings tickled the back of his mind as he was ducking into the different shaded areas along the way to catch Millie. He knew he was acting completely unprofessional, but at this point in time he didn't care. He knew he'd be able to catch Stallings' scent if he left now that it was getting dark; he'd have no trouble following behind. He was willing to accept the consequences.

Slade was surprised to realize her apartment building was only a block away from the domino hall. He was there in a flash and as soon as he hit the door to the building, he could tell something was wrong. The scent of blood permeated the air around him, threatening to awaken his hunger, but thoughts of Millie walking into a dangerous situation overpowered his desire to feed as he bolted up the stairs to follow her.

The minute Slade hit the fourth floor he saw a door standing open and assumed it was Millie's. The scene inside was surreal. Millie, on her knees, frantically hunched over a bloody body, so different from her normal demeanor – it was difficult to accept the sight before him. Millie's hands, covered in blood, attempted to staunch the bleeding head wound, without much success. Slade could hear her say something to the girl on the floor and could tell she didn't know he was standing behind her.

“Remy, come on. Wake up,” Millie cried. “Oh please let this work,” she said as she lowered both of her hands to the girl's wound and started chanting, “Power of the petals, soul of the soil, Let the energy of the sun around you coil.” As soon as Millie's last word was uttered, a brilliant light burst from her skin, traveled down her arms, and seemed to soak into the limp girl's body. From where he stood, Slade could tell the wound had closed and could see that the girl's breathing seemed to be steadier. Millie, apparently drained from the experience, practically slumped over the girl's body as she reached for the cell phone on the floor beside her. Healing the injured girl must have taken a lot out of her because exhaustion was etched in her face. Her strained expression caused his chest to tighten and forced him to step inside the apartment. Millie heard him at once because before his second step inside the room, she whorled around the face him, keeping her body between him and the girl on the floor, a savage snarl distorting her beautiful face. Surprising as it was to see her so feral-looking, he couldn't help but chuckle at her fighting stance, seeing as her weapon of choice was a cell phone held in front of her as if it were a grenade about to explode.

Chapter Thirteen – Millie

“What are you doing here?” Millie spat.

“I’m hoping to help,” Slade said.

“Have you been following me?”

“Calm down. I only saw you walk by a few minutes ago and thought I’d catch up and talk to you and then I walked into this freak show. Weren’t you going to call 911?” Slade reminded her.

Millie stared down at the cell phone in her hand like she had forgotten it was there. She felt tears pool in her eyes and her breathing became more labored like all of a sudden the horror of the situation started to sink in. Slade approached her slowly, as if she were a skittish animal ready to bolt if he got too close. He reached out and took the cell phone from her hand and punched in 9-1-1 and hit send.

“911 what is your emergency?” the operator said on the line.

“A girl was attacked in my friend’s apartment at 598 N. 63rd Street, Apartment 4A. She is unconscious and has lost a lot of blood,” Slade reported.

“An ambulance is on the way.”

“Thank you,” Slade said as he ended the call and turned his attention back to Millie.

With the ambulance called, it seemed some of the adrenaline had seeped out of the room, leaving nothing but feelings of discomfort and fear. Thoughts of Remy lying on the floor caused many thoughts to swirl through her head. What was Remy doing in her apartment? Who attacked her and more importantly, was Millie the intended target? Millie is relieved when Slade doesn’t try to talk to her, but at the same time a little

concerned that he is just standing there staring at Remy's body with a look of deep concentration causing his facial features to seem extremely intense. He was so intent it seemed like he forgot she was in the room with him, which was fine with her.

It didn't take long for the emergency sirens to fill the air. Millie walked to the hallway to direct the EMTs to her apartment. Once inside they immediately started to check her vital signs and prepared to strap her to the stretcher for the long walk down the apartment stairs. All of a sudden it seemed ridiculous not to have an elevator in the building. How much precious time is being wasted walking up and down these infernal stairs? Millie tapped Slade lightly on the shoulder to pull him out of his thoughts. "They are taking her to the hospital now. I'm going with her so you need to get out of my apartment."

"Of course, may I drive you?" he asked.

"No thank you, I'll ride in the ambulance with her."

"Um, ma'am, I'm afraid that won't be possible. Regulations state only family members can ride along in the ambulance," one of the EMTs informed her.

"You've got to be kidding? She'd like a sister to me. She lives right across the hall. Please let me go with you," Millie begged.

"No can do. It seems this nice man is willing to give you a ride though so I'd take it if I were you," the EMT said.

Millie fumed. First of all, she didn't really want to let Remy out of her sight and second, she didn't know if she trusted Slade or not. It was strange he happened to show up when he did and how he seemed to know where she lived. It seemed, though, her only choices were accept his offer, take a taxi, walk, or take the subway. Walking and

finding the correct subway stops would take too long. Cars, the only human advancement she hasn't been able to get used to, generally cause her to panic. The thought of a taxi ride made her feel sick to her stomach. Not knowing what kind of driver you'd get when you hailed one on the street was always stressful for her. She'd managed to avoid taxis for the most part, but sometimes Remy would force her to take one if they went somewhere together. It seemed the only option left to her was Slade and his car. "Slade, I'll understand if you don't have time to drive me to the hospital. You probably have something you need to be doing," Millie said, hoping he'd revoke his invitation.

"I have time. Would you like me to get the car and pull up outside your building or do you want to walk the two blocks with me?" he asked.

"I'll walk with you. Let's go," Millie said.

"Sir, what hospital will you be taking our friend to?" Slade asked.

"We'll be going to St. Margaret's," replied the EMT.

"We'll be right behind you," Slade informed him.

Millie didn't know how she felt about Slade taking charge of things, but she was still a little numb and decided it was probably best. She felt like she was on the verge of tears. She found her keys on the floor next to the blood-soaked spot on the carpet and picked them up so she could lock the door behind them as they left to go to Slade's car. In silence, they walked down the stairs and she followed him as he turned and walked down the sidewalk, taking the opposite route from what she just walked when coming home.

After walking two blocks, Slade led her to a sleek, black car and walked to the passenger side to unlock her door and eased her into the seat. He unlocked his own door and slid gracefully into the driver's seat and turned the key in the ignition. As the engine came to life and purred in a low rumble, Millie tried to occupy her mind with anything other than riding in the car. Her thoughts turned to the attack on Remy. Millie felt sure it was the doing of the Queen and in no way could be a coincidence. With the sighting of the assassin and the faerie warnings from earlier today she was sure the attack was meant for her. Just thinking about what could have happened if she hadn't gone to the park and try to draw out the assassin. But how could Remy have ever been mistaken for Millie? They didn't share any physical characteristics – where Millie had her short haircut, Remy's was long and flowing. Millie has a slim and dainty build where Remy has curves most girls would kill for. Remy was also much taller than Millie looking more like a woman than a young girl. It was all very confusing and she almost wished the assassin had made an appearance at the park so everything would be over. She almost wished it, because if she were really truthful with herself, she'd have to admit that living is something she really wanted to do for as long as she could.

Chapter Fourteen – Slade

Slade found it very difficult to sit in the confined space of the car this close to Millie after the desire to feed was awakened in her apartment. The amount of concentration he had to put forth to keep him from taking the injured girl in his arms and drink from the head wound was something he couldn't even put into words. Someone not experienced with deprivation wouldn't be able to understand the level of desire he felt. The only humans he'd come into contact with who could possibly relate would be serious drug addicts and even then, it wasn't exactly the same. Slade not only had to deal with the desire to drink, but also hold himself back from the desire to kill. Maybe if he'd fed yesterday it would have been easier to hold it together.

Slade was extremely relieved Millie didn't want to carry on a conversation. He didn't think he would be able produce intelligent speech for a little while. Going to a hospital wasn't the best place for him to be going in this state, but there wasn't away out of it. He wanted to be with Millie and if that meant suffering through a hospital visit with the bright lights that disturbed his vision, sick, defenseless patients, and the smell of blood covered by the scent of antiseptic, then he'd do it. Slade felt Millie was worth it and even if nothing ever developed between them, he'd still feel the satisfaction from helping her when not many other people could.

It has been a long time since he'd risked friendship with a female, but he'd learned a lot since his time with Rebecca and felt he wouldn't make the same mistakes as he did then. Plus, Millie was supernatural and not as frail as a typical human. If there was someone worth risking the time it took to get to know someone, it was Millie.

Their drive continued in silence until they pulled into the parking lot next to the Emergency Room entrance at the hospital.

“You’re kind for driving me to the hospital. I don’t think I could have handled a cab,” Millie said.

“You don’t have to thank me; it was my pleasure,” Slade said.

“I didn’t thank you,” Millie snapped, “I simply told said you were kind.”

Slade kept his mouth shut, hoping that the stress of the evening was what caused Millie to be so short with him. Silence once again a curtain between them; they walked into the hospital.

Chapter Fifteen - Millie

Millie made a beeline to the nurses' desk. After tapping impatiently on the countertop, she finally got the nurses attention. "We're here for Remington Porter. She was brought in here by ambulance just recently," Millie told the nurse.

"Well let's just see where she is," said the nurse so lackadaisically Millie thought she was going to come unglued. The nurse shifted some papers around on her cluttered desk and finally turned her attention to the computer. A frown flitted over her face as she squinted her eyes at the monitor. "This thing has been moving slow all day," she offered as an excuse for her turtle-like speed.

"Can't you just tell me where she is," Millie pleaded. "I mean she was just brought in."

"Hon, you're going to have to wait. I can't just give out information off the top of my head. Do you have any idea how many people come through the Emergency Room everyday?"

Millie was sorry she said anything. She'd just delayed the nurse even more by taking her attention away from the computer.

"Porter. Here it is. Remington Porter was brought in about ten minutes ago. She is now Exam Room B. Are you family, because if you aren't you aren't allowed back there," the nurse said with a little too much pleasure.

"No, I'm her best friend and I found her. Shouldn't I talk to the doctor or something?" Millie asked trying to persuade the nurse to let her see Remy.

“All I can tell you is Remington is stable and the doctor will come out when he has more information. You’ll just have to stay in the waiting area until then,” replied the nurse.

Feeling deflated, Millie walked over to the sterile-looking room the hospital called the waiting area. It occurred to her odd the hospital would provide such a stark looking place for families of injured people to wait. Soothing colors and at least some decorative touches would make it a lot easier to sit there. “You don’t have to wait with me,” she told Slade.

“I know, but I don’t mind. How else will you get back home?” he asked.

“I don’t know if I’ll be going home anytime soon. You don’t even know Remy, why should you stay?”

“I’d like to be of some help to you, that’s all,” Slade said.

Millie figured she wasn’t going to get rid of him anytime soon and was surprised to realize she was relieved to have someone with her in the dreary waiting room. She figured as long as they were going to be together for a while and didn’t seem to be going anywhere, she might as well take the opportunity to ask him some questions. “How did you just happen to see me walking down the street on my way home?” she blurted out.

“Wow, that was abrupt. I was working on your street just a block away. You walked right by me,” Slade answered.

“Working? What do you do?” she asked.

“I’m a Bond Recovery Agent,” he said.

“A Bounty Hunter? Ha, like that guy on TV?” she laughed.

“No, not like the guy on TV. I’m much less flashy.”

“I hope so,” Millie said as she continued to snicker.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?” Slade asked.

“Alright,” Millie said after a slight hesitation. She looked him directly in the eyes and saw that he was staring at her too.

“Why are you living among the humans?”

Millie’s eyes went wide as they darted side-to-side looking for a possible attack?

“Whoa, whoa whoa. It’s okay. I didn’t mean to scare you,” Slade said.

“Who are you?” Millie whispered.

“I’m Slade Maxwell.”

“Are you working for the Queen?” she asked.

“I don’t know any Queens, so I guess the answer is no,” Slade answered.

“What do you think I am if not human?” Millie challenged.

“You’re a faerie and I can tell because of your scent. Everywhere you go, the smell of flowers and earth and sunshine go with you. It is quite intoxicating to me,” Slade admitted.

“Okay then, what are you? Apparently you don’t consider yourself a human and I can tell you aren’t fey,” Millie said.

“I am a vampire,” Slade said.

Millie felt the urge to scoot away from him, but forced herself to stay where she was. She didn’t want to show any more weakness than she already has. “I thought vampires slept during the day and couldn’t be out in the sunshine? You’re at the coffee shop during the day. How is that possible?”

“Those are just two of the myths surrounding my kind. In actuality, I don’t ever sleep. However, I do choose to lie down and rest occasionally. I don’t know if it is psychological or not, but I do feel refreshed after I rest, but I am never truly asleep. As far as the sunlight, it is true that direct exposure to the sun can badly burn a vampire and even kill them if left too long, but if the vampire is well fed, he can sustain small amounts of sunlight and stick to the shadows with no problems at all. The longer a vampire goes without feeding, the less resistant to the light he is,” Slade explained.

Millie didn’t know what to say. It seemed unreal to be having this conversation. She’d suspected he was a vampire, but never thought it could be true. “How do you manage to maintain a job like you do?” she asked.

“I do most of my surveillance at night. Today I was able to stay in a shadowed alley with only some slight discomfort.”

“Did you already catch the guy?”

“No,” he replied.

“Shouldn’t you get back to work then?”

“He’s been in the same place all day. I’m sure he’ll still be there when I get back,” Slade said hoping he was right. “Now it’s your turn to answer my questions. Why are you living among the humans and does it have anything to do with why you thought I was working for a Queen?”

Millie ran through several different lies she could tell Slade so she wouldn’t have to admit the truth. She could say, *I decided to take a vacation. We are each allowed a certain amount of time every year to mingle among the humans. Or, I’m working undercover for my Flitter in order to learn more about humans so we can*

interact with them better. And of course she could fall back on, *I ran away from home.*

She opened her mouth to fill the air with her fabrications, but when she opened her mouth the words got stuck in her throat. She couldn't seem to spit them out.

Sometimes she hated the fact faeries couldn't lie. Instead she said something that was definitely not a lie, but not the whole truth either. "I'm hiding from someone."

"I'm assuming you're hiding from a Queen. Is it a faerie Queen?" Slade said.

"Yes," Millie simply said. If Slade wanted to know more, he was going to have to pull it out of her.

"So, what did you do?" he prodded.

"I didn't do anything. Why would you assume I was the one in the wrong? Do I look like one of the criminals you chase?"

"No, of course not. I'm sorry. I just assumed if you were on the run, you did something to put yourself in danger," Slade explained.

Millie felt her resolve crumble as words started pouring out of her mouth. "Our Queen instituted a rule years ago that every faerie must give one year of service to her when they turn sixteen-years-old. So, on your sixteenth birthday you are expected to report to the Queens Court and present yourself. From then on, for the next year, you are required to do whatever she commands. The command could be to serve as her maid, her cook, her jester, or even her assassin. Many times faeries aren't the same when they return from their year of servitude." Millie took a deep breath and sat quietly and gathered her thoughts before she continued. "My best friend, Izzy, decided she'd had enough. Her sixteenth birthday was only a few months away and she didn't want to do her duty to the Queen. She formed a group of people who felt the same way she did

and proceeded to outline way to stop the Queen. She even went so far as to suggest overthrowing the Queen and putting someone new on the throne with a more compassionate nature. On my last day living among the fey, I was on my way to a group meeting at a secret location Izzy had located. I was late because I couldn't find my shoes. I knew Izzy was going to be mad at me because I was never on time for her meetings. I rushed as soon as I got my shoes on and flew as fast as I could to the meeting place. When I got there all I found were my friends – dead. Izzy was in the worst shape. She was off to the side, at the edge of the flower garden where the meeting was being held, her limbs twisted at unnatural angles, almost recognizable because she was smashed so badly. It was hard to identify anyone, but Izzy was wearing the necklace I gave her that day and I could see it on her corpse. I figured the Queen caught wind of the rebellion and sent her henchmen to put a stop it by killing the ringleaders. All I kept thinking was, if I had been on time, I would have been killed too. The only thing I could think to do was to run. I had no way to know if they Queen knew who was involved in the rebellion or not so rather than take a chance I used my faerie magic to change my appearance so I could fit in with the humans and started to live among them. That was six months ago.” Millie sat quietly, afraid to meet Slade’s eyes, not knowing what she’d see if she did.

“Have you been safe here?” he asked.

“I haven’t had any problems living here. In fact, I’ve enjoyed it probably too much,” Millie admitted.

“Then why did you automatically assume I worked for the Queen?”

“Up until a couple of days ago I hadn’t seen any faeries except for the usual ones who frolic among the humans without a care in the world. But, the other day at the library, one of the Queen’s assassins made himself known to me and made a threatening gesture,” she said as she recreated the throat-slitting move the assassin did. “I panicked and waiting until he was gone and made my way home as fast as I could. I haven’t seen him since, but now the Little’s have started giving me warnings that the Queen wants me back and that I’m in danger,” Millie finished. She looked at Slade not knowing what to expect.

Slade was sitting in the chair next to her staring straight ahead seeming to be lost in thought. Millie, finished spilling her guts, decided to sit quietly too.

Chapter Sixteen – Slade

Slade was shocked. He knew there must be some reason Millie was living among the humans, but he had no idea it was going to be so complicated. He chuckled to himself thinking how funny it was that the first time in years he has tried to make contact with someone this is what he finds. Millie wasn't simply in trouble; she was in mortal danger from the Queen of her people. She was involved in a plan to overthrow the current political system of the Fey.

Slade tried to picture Millie as a little faerie fluttering around with her wings. He wondered if she looked exactly like she did now, just smaller. Slade was tempted to ask, but decided now wasn't the time. There were more important things to talk about instead of her appearance. Plus, was something like that was too personal to ask? He couldn't get the picture of her out of his mind. Flying around his head, landing on his shoulder, whispering in his ear.

Slade knew he should say something to Millie about everything she just divulged, but he couldn't find the right words just yet. The hospital lights were starting to cause his eyes to hurt and he couldn't think of the right thing to say. He'd really prefer to leave the hospital, but, now more than ever, he couldn't leave Millie alone. Knowing nothing about faeries didn't help him either. It was like he was flying blind and could only help her by providing brute strength. Serving as a bodyguard didn't seem like a lot of help in his opinion, but until he could figure something else out it would have to do. In the short time he'd spent with Millie, he didn't know if she'd admit she needed his help though. All of a sudden, Slade's life became a lot more complicated than he was used to.

“How do you think Remy’s attack fits into the situation?” Slade asked Millie.

“I’ve been thinking about the exact same thing. Either it was a coincidence or whoever busted in my apartment assumed Remy was me. I don’t like either of those choices though. Remy looks nothing like me and with the assassin around, a coincidence is very unlikely,” she said.

“I agree about it probably not being a coincidence so, we can at least assume the Queen and her people know where you are living,” Slade thought out loud.

Just as Slade was going to ask Millie where she planned to stay now that she wasn’t safe at home, a doctor walked into the waiting room and headed toward them.

“Are you the friends of Remington Porter?” the doctor asked.

Millie jumped out of her chair and met the doctor halfway across the room.

“Yes, how is she doing? Can I see her yet?”

“Remington suffered a severe blow to the head and has slipped into a coma. It is impossible to predict when she might regain consciousness. You can go in to see her, but only for a short time. We’ll be moving her to Intensive Care as soon as a bed becomes available and then visitation regulations are more strict so I suggest you go now and then go home for a while. There is nothing you can do at this point except help us find her family. She didn’t come in with any identification except for a simple ID card with her name and address. Do you know how to get in touch with her parents or any siblings she might have?”

“No,” Millie whispered as tears started to well in her eyes again. “I do have a copy of her apartment key though and can go and look for something and let you know,” she said a little more brightly.

“That would be fine. Thank you. Now go back and see your friend. Feel free to talk to her, she might be able to hear you. Remington is in the second room on the right,” the doctor said.

Slade and Millie walked through the double doors leading to the examination rooms. They tentatively entered Room B and walked up to Remy’s side. Millie took Remy’s hand and squeezed.

“I’m so sorry, Remy,” Millie cried as she leaned over and hugged Remy the best she could with all the wires attached to her body.

Slade felt the need to do something besides stand there staring at the emotional scene in front of him, but didn’t know what to do. He wanted to pull Millie into his arms and comfort her, but didn’t feel like he knew her well enough to be so forward. Instead, he settled for putting his hand on Millie’s back and rubbing softly to let her know he was there for her.

“Remy, I’m going to find out who did this to you, don’t worry. I have to leave for a little while, though, to see if I can find phone numbers for your family so they’ll know what happened,” Millie whispered to Remy.

Slade watched as Millie dried her eyes and straightened her shoulders. When she turned to look at Slade he was stunned by how beautiful she looked. Her lavender eyes were so intense and vibrant he found it hard to look away. He stepped out of Millie’s way as she started walking toward the door to leave. He kept his hand lightly on the small of her back and guided her down the hallway and to the exit of the Emergency Room. After unlocking the passenger-side door, Slade opened it for her and helped her sit down. He quickly unlocked his side of the car and took his place beside

her. Slade felt so much better after getting out of the hospital and couldn't help but feel some happiness creep into his body, despite the terrible situation he was about to find himself in with Millie. Comfort spread through his body, keeping pace with the setting sun. Twilight was fast approaching and with it came the return of his true self. The peace of night started to calm him and as a way to share his feelings with Millie, he reached across the car's console and lightly touched her hand. His heart swelled when she turned her hand and linked her fingers through his. Slade couldn't help the slight smile that found its way to his mouth. They rode in silence back to her apartment, much like before, but this time with a sense of familiarity that wasn't there before.

Chapter Seventeen – Millie

Slade pulled up in front of Millie's apartment building and before she could open the door for herself, he was already there. In a way it was nice they knew about each other's true form. There was a certain part of Millie that felt happy she found another supernatural being to spend time with. If only they hadn't had to get acquainted during this mess. She tried to imagine what it would have been like if they'd been able keep their date for the next night. In all likelihood, Millie wouldn't have been forced to reveal her problems to Slade and she probably wouldn't have got up the nerve to ask him what he was like she did at the hospital. In a way, it was nice to have everything out of the way, but she didn't want Slade's pity or for him to feel obligated to help her.

The feel of Slade's touch on her back when they were in Remy's room and then holding his hand in the car were so comforting that she was reluctant to let the feeling slip away. *Thank you*, she thought as he placed his hand on the small of her back as they walked into her apartment building and up the four flights of stairs. When they reached her door, she hesitated at the lock realizing she was going to have to walk into the room with Remy's blood still on the floor. The shiver that ran through her was visible and she saw Slade move to take the key from her hand. He unlocked the door, pushed it open, and entered the apartment first. After he darted around the apartment ensuring it was safe, he came back for Millie and led her inside. She could tell he was forcing himself to seem casual, but the smell of blood in the room was very evident and she knew if she could smell it, Slade definitely could.

“I appreciate all you’ve done for me this evening, Slade. You don’t have to stay with me. I’ll be alright,” Millie said giving him the opportunity to get out of the apartment and away from the smell.

“You shouldn’t be alone especially after Remy’s attack,” Slade said.

“Really, Slade, I want to be alone. I have a lot to think about.” Millie could tell Slade was struggling with the decision to leave or not. Millie turned and walked further into the apartment and started acting like she was getting ready to clean up the bloodstained carpet.

“At least let me give you my cell phone number so you can call me if you need something,” Slade relented.

“That is a great idea. Give me your cell phone and I’ll program my number in for you,” she said as she reached for his phone. When she was finished listing herself in his address book she gave the phone back to him and asked for his number. Millie quickly programmed his number into her phone and put it back into her pocket. “There, you can now get in touch with me whenever you feel the need,” she said with a smile pasted on her face.

She could tell Slade still didn’t feel happy about leaving, but after staring her in the face for longer than would normally be comfortable, he reached for her hand, gave it a squeeze, and walked out the door.

“Be sure to lock the door behind me,” Slade said from the hallway.

“Okay,” she said. *Not that it will do any good if they really want to get in,* she thought to herself.

Millie put the cleaning supplies she had pulled from under the sink back where they belonged and went to the junk drawer to get Remy's spare keys. Millie was ashamed she had never asked Remy about her family. She assumed since Remy didn't talk about them, there must be a reason and didn't want to violate their friendship by bringing up a subject Remy was clearly uncomfortable talking about. However, going over to Remy's apartment was a different story all together. Her and Remy never hung out over at Remy's and she never really thought about it until now. She couldn't remember one occasion when Remy asked her over, but instead just showed up at Millie's and didn't leave until it was time to call it a night. It just turned into a habit after a while.

With Remy's keys in hand, Millie walked across the hall and put the key in the lock. At first, it didn't want to turn and she was afraid she didn't have the right key for the door, but after a lot of twisting and wiggling the key finally moved and the door unlocked. Millie pushed open the door and stepped in, a little anxious to see what the apartment was like. Was Remy a tidy person or did she leave things lying around her apartment like she did Millie's? She was sure the kitchen would be empty since Remy ate at her apartment most every night. What Millie found stopped her in her tracks. Instead of an apartment that looked as if it belonged to a young, carefree girl, Millie stood staring into a room about as sparse as the hospital waiting room she just left. Walking around with her mouth hanging open, Millie started looking on bookshelves, in drawers, and in closets. She couldn't seem to find any personal effects – no pictures, no mail, hardly any clothes in the closet, and nothing at all in the kitchen – not even a plate. Millie felt dizzy and went to find a place to sit down. The only thing available

was a generic-looking couch and chair. The chair was closer so Millie opted for it. The chair was hard as a rock and provided absolutely no comfort. *What in the world is going on?* Millie thought. She sat there on the uncomfortable chair for several minutes holding her head in her hands. *It just keeps getting worse. It just keeps getting worse,* she said over and over.

Millie stood up and looked around the room once more. She went into the spare room containing office furniture and decided to search it too, not expecting to find anything. There was a computer on the desk, but when Millie turned it on it asked for a password. She tried “remy,” “remington,” and “pizza,” Remy’s favorite food. Of course, they didn’t work so she couldn’t see what, if anything, was on the computer of use. Moving to the drawers next, Millie found pens, notepads, and other usual office type supplies until she opened the bottom drawer. Not believing her eyes, Millie pulled out several ID cards, all with different names and addresses. There was one for a Beth Ward, a Samantha Morris, a Tiffany Hamilton, and a Kathy Polk. *How many identities did one person need?* Millie said to herself. She wondered if anything else interesting would be in the drawer. She didn’t think it was possible to be shocked any more than she already was. She set the IDs on the desk and continued to dig through the miscellaneous collection of items, coming across bankcards belonging to Remy’s other identities, several sets of keys, she assumed, to other apartments or houses, and pages and pages of notes about Millie’s whereabouts and activities. Some of the entries were down to the minute when Millie had no idea she was being watched or followed. She didn’t even see Remy on some of the days listed in the log.

With her hands shaking, Millie felt along the bottom of the drawer, reaching to the very back, just in case she missed something. Her fingers touched on something cool and hard. Millie pulled the object from the back of the drawer and clutched it in her hand. Taking a deep breath, Millie opened her hand and stared at the gold coin lying on her palm. Forcing her hand to stop shaking, Millie looked closer and saw, as she suspected, the imprint on the “heads” side of the coin was in the image of the Queen. Millie had heard mention of these coins. The Queen bestowed one of these gold coins to a human after they were lured into her service by promises of endless pleasure and fortune. The IDs, the empty apartment, the log on activities, and the coin all pointed to one conclusion – Remy was a spy working for the Queen. The realization hit her hard as it became clear that she hadn’t been in hiding after all. Why did the Queen allow her to live among the humans and thinking she was safe for six months? What purpose did it serve? She couldn’t understand the Queen’s logic. Millie went across the hall to her own apartment and locked herself inside.

Chapter Eighteen – Slade

Slade returned to his place in the alley next to the domino hall, hoping Charles was still inside. He couldn't believe his luck when he arrived and found that nothing had changed. He congratulated himself on a job well done. He was able to help Millie and still keep tabs on his target. It made sense that Stallings would make a move until it was dark so Slade knew now was the time he really needed to stay alert and keep his mind on the job.

Concentrating was difficult when Millie's face filled his head. He was torn because he didn't want to leave her alone with the trouble that was coming down on her, but the scent of blood that lingered in the air even after it started to dry was maddening. It was imperative he feed soon, but didn't feel like he could afford the luxury of abandoning his job for a second time in one night in order to find a "donor."

Slade knows he is over his head because of his lack of knowledge of faeries, both in general and their politics. He needed to get in touch with Roman and didn't think he could wait for an email reply. Slade reached into his jacket for his cell phone and scrolled through his few contacts. Millie's name came into view before Roman's and for a moment he contemplated calling her to be sure she was okay, but realized it might make him seem overprotective and opted not to place the call. Instead he continued down his list of numbers until he found Roman's name. Hitting send, he hoped that Roman would answer. After several rings, Slade was preparing what he was going to say in the message he was apparently going to have to leave on Roman's voicemail when he heard a voice on the other end of the line.

"Hello?" a girl said as she answered.

Slade was tempted to end the call since Roman seemed to have changed his number and not forward the new one to him, but he ended up staying on the line out of curiosity. “Um, I’m trying to reach Roman. Did I dial the wrong number?” he asked.

“Oh, no. This is Roman’s phone. I should have said that when I answered. I’m sorry.”

Slade couldn’t wrap his mind around what was happening. *Why in the world is a girl answering Roman’s phone?* he wanted to say, but instead said, “No problem. Is he available?”

“Sure, hold on just a sec,” she said.

Slade could hear her cover the phone to muffle the sound of her yelling for Roman to come to the phone.

“Hello?” Roman said.

“Hey, it’s Slade. What is going on and why is a girl answering your phone?” he asked.

“Well, nice to talk to you too,” he said sarcastically.

“Sorry, Roman, I’ve come into contact with something I have no experience with and wanted to ask you some questions.”

“I’m in the middle of something pretty big right now, Slade, can it wait until later? We are literally walking out the door right now,” Roman said. The background noise changed as Roman walked outside and got in his car. “Is it an emergency?”

“Not yet,” Slade replied, “but it could turn into one soon.”

“Alright, I’ll talk as long as I can. Wait a minutes while I put you on speaker.”
There was a second or two of the phone bumping around and then Roman said, “Okay, what are you dealing with there?”

“Faeries,” Slade answered.

“Faeries? Are you serious Slade? If so, you need to stay as far away from them as possible,” Roman demanded.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that Roman,” Slade said.

“What do you mean? You simply turn around and go the other way if you see faeries milling about. What is complicated about that?”

“I met a girl named Millie...”

“A girl?” Roman shouted, “Listen, Slade, I love you like a brother and I don’t want to see you get hurt so you really need to pay attention when I say that faeries are bad news. If this girl you met is mixed up with them she is definitely not worth getting into a fight with faeries over. You hear me?”

“She is a faerie, Roman, and she needs my help,” Slade admitted. Silence followed his statement for so long he thought the phone connection had been dropped. Finally he heard soft muttering coming from the other end of the line like Roman was saying something he didn’t want Slade to hear. Slade didn’t know how he felt about a girl he didn’t know finding out about hid personal business. He lost patience and finally said, “Roman, I can hear you muttering.”

“Well if you could hear me muttering you wouldn’t have interrupted me. I was attempting to calm down before I said something hurtful,” Roman said sounding strained. “Now, where were we? Oh, right. You’ve met a girl that just happens to be a

faerie that is in the need of your assistance. How nice. Tell me, Slade, do you feel the need to ride to the rescue of every person you see in distress because if you don't, then you should take this opportunity to get the hell out of her business.”

“I can't do that.”

“Why do you insist on causing me grief? I am not in a position to leave what I'm doing and assist you in this insane need for validation, Slade.”

“I'm not asking you to come here. I just need some information.”

“Ask then,” Roman barked.

“Do you know the Faerie Queen?”

“Which one? The Seelie or Unseelie court?” Roman answered condescendingly.

“I don't know,” was all Slade could say.

“See? There is so much to know, Slade,” Roman said with a kind tone.

“I've got to go, Roman. I'm in the middle of something here and just thought I'd try to get a little information while I was waiting. Thanks anyway,” Slade said.

“Wait – you need...”

“Roman, watch out,” the girl screamed in the background.

Slade heard the screeching of tires, the shattering of glass, and the crunching of metal. Then – silence. Eyes wide with shock, Slade put his phone back in his pocket. Slade felt sure that Roman would be all right unless the car was in such bad shape it caught on fire and he burned. The girl, if human, would have a harder time surviving an accident. Not knowing what happened drove him mad.

Slade saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Two large men stepped into the alley from the domino hall. After turning their heads from side to side on their ridiculously large, tree-stump necks, they turned behind them and motioned someone to come out. Charles Stallings appeared out of the darkened domino hall and proceeded to follow the steroid-using henchmen. Slade climbed soundlessly to the roof of the building next door using the fire escape to get a better view of where they were going. It seemed there was a car waiting for Stallings on the other side of the block. Slade made note of the car model and committed the license plate number to memory before bolting for his own vehicle. He lost a little time going to his car, but not knowing where Stallings was headed, Slade didn't want to follow him on foot. There was no way of knowing where they were headed. Slade quickly put the car in motion and drove toward the area Stallings was parked. By the time Slade reached Stallings original location he was already gone, but with his keen vampire eyesight and a myriad of one-way streets, he was able to catch up quickly. After Slade had Stallings' car in his sights, he settled back and followed at a safe distance so he wouldn't be spotted. He was anxious to finish this job, collect his money, and focus on Millie.

Chapter Nineteen – Millie

Millie sat in the bathtub behind a locked door in lukewarm water that was quickly turning her fingers and toes into prunes. She didn't feel motivated to do anything requiring her to get up and move. The more she thought about Remy's betrayal the more it hurt. It made Remy all the more glad she didn't allow Remy into her life any more than she did. She could only imagine if she told Remy everything about her life as a Little.

Millie decided to get out of the tub and put on some ratty clothes to prepare her for her next task. She knew it was silly to bathe before she cleaned up the blood on the carpet, but she couldn't face the grim task of scrubbing away Remy's blood before she soaked away at least some of her stress first. She planned to go clean the stain as best she could and then take a quick shower when she was finished.

Millie walked to the kitchen and retrieved the cleaning supplies from under the sink, which she already had out once today, and put on a pair of rubber gloves. Millie filled her washtub with cold water and grabbed a sponge from the collection of supplies she'd already retrieved. Millie eyed the stain and was glad to see that it wasn't completely dry, but it was clear it had definitely coagulated. Sure this would make it more difficult to clean, she knelt on the floor beside the stain and dipped her sponge in the water. Starting from the outside edge of the stain and working her way to the middle, Millie started sponging the stain with water. After doing this for several minutes, she grabbed a clean sponge and started to mop up the excess water careful not to press down too hard. She didn't want to push the blood deeper into the carpet fibers. Millie went to her bedroom and unplugged her fan and brought it into the living room to

help dry the water. She had to repeat the process three times before her sponge wouldn't bring out any more red from the stain and still Millie thought she could detect a hint of the stain.

As an afterthought, Millie decided to take a glance underneath the furniture sitting close to the bloodstain. It was completely possible there was splatter she hadn't seen at first glance when slapped in the face with the huge stain on the floor. Luckily, the couch only had a small amount of blood on the backside. Millie went through the same procedure to remove the stain from it as she did with the carpet. Making her rounds around the floor of the entry area she found herself at the small table she kept beside the door used to unload her arms when she came into the apartment. There was only one small drop of blood on the leg of the table and it wiped, which was a relief after dealing with all the fabric stains. A blinking light coming from under the table caught her eye. Millie reached for the source of the light and saw it was Remy's cell phone.

Millie felt a rush of excitement as she considered the possible information she could extract from the phone. Fingers shaking, Millie pushed the key to reveal the new text message. When the phone's inbox opened she was shocked to see the only message listed was the new one. Never had she seen a message inbox so empty. Either Remy deleted every message after she read it or it was a new phone.

The message was sent by someone named Zorn and said, "Find evidence of relationship with man from coffee shop. You have thirty minutes. Call when you have information in hand." The message was sent while she was sitting in the park waiting for the assassin to show his face so; Zorn knew Millie would be gone from the

apartment when Remy went looking for information. Millie backed out of the inbox and went to the phone's address book, but the only contacts listed were Millie, Where Ya Bean, and Zorn so it didn't turn out to be much help. Next, Millie went to the call log and noticed the only recurring numbers listed were the ones from the address book with the exception of one. She immediately called the non-assigned phone number. Millie was a bundle of nerves as she waited for someone to pick up the other end, her fingers constantly running through her hair, disheveling it even more than usual. After five long rings she heard a click on the other end and held her breath so she could hear what was happening on the other end of the line. Finally, she heard some giggling in the background.

“Hello?” a girl's voice said.

Chapter Twenty – Slade

Slade always made sure Stallings' car was up ahead, but he did take the time to enjoy the night drive at the same time. With the windows rolled down and his music turned up, Slade let the wind hit his face and blow through his hair. For Slade, there was nothing better than driving. Slade noticed they were getting closer to the docks, which didn't bode well for him. It most likely meant that Stallings' was preparing to hope a boat out of the country and soon. When Slade saw Stallings' car pull over and park outside of an abandoned-looking warehouse, he continued to drive as if he were any other Joe Schmo driving toward the docks. He looped around the block and parked on the other side of the warehouse, quickly hopped out of the car and ran for the warehouse. Using the aide of the fire escape, he jumped to the roof of the old building and started looking for a way to enter.

Slade found a door, made short work of the lock, and entered the building. He came to a short set of stairs leading to a catwalk suspended above the warehouse floor. Slade stops where he is so he can determine the number of people inside the warehouse and where they are located. He'd prefer to avoid as many people as possible – just get in and get out would be the best. His perfect plan would be to find Stallings alone, grab him, and escape the same way he entered.

There appeared to be only a few people in the warehouse, which was good. However, the few that were there were standing around doing nothing, which was bad, because they would be more likely to see him come down from the catwalk if they didn't have something they were doing. Slade needed a diversion. He took a survey of what was around him he could use to throw across the warehouse, forcing the lookout

lackeys to head to the other side of the building. He picked up two bricks and hurled them across the building, one right after the other. They flew like birds in the air and landed with a tremendous crash far far away. Like he hoped, the lackey's took off running to investigate the commotion, leaving Slade plenty of time to come down from catwalk and find Stallings.

Chapter Twenty-One – Millie

“Hello. Who is this speaking?” Millie asked.

“Who’s this? You’re the one who called me,” replied the bratty girl.

“I found this number in a friend’s phone. She’s been injured and I’m trying to get a hold of her family. Do you know a girl named Remington?”

“No,” the girl snapped. “I don’t even live here.”

“Then whose phone are you using?” Millie asked getting more and more irritated.

“I guess the city owns it,” said the smug girl.

“The city? Where are you?”

“We’re by the park.”

“Are you using a cell phone?”

“No,” the girl teased Millie by stretching out the word for an excruciatingly long time.

“Tell me where you are,” Millie screamed.

“Gosh. Calm down. We were just having a little fun. You’re the stupid person who randomly called a stinky pay phone,” the girl said as she slammed down the phone.

That wasn’t very helpful, Millie thought. The only thing left to do was call Zorn’s number and see if he answers. Maybe he’ll think she’s Remy and say something useful. Of course, calling Zorn is the scarier of the two phone calls, but she did it anyway. She located his name in the address book and hit “send” on the cell phone. Millie was beginning to think no one would answer when she heard a recording say, “This number has been disconnected. Please check the number and try again.” Millie

wanted to scream and almost hurled the phone across the room, but thought better of it at the last minute. She put it inside her pocket just in case someone tried to get in touch with Remy.

Millie flopped down on her couch tempted to switch on the TV, but the thought of not being able to hear if someone approached her door forced her to sit in silence. It had only been dark for a couple of hours and she hated to think about how long she had to sit here alone just waiting for something to happen. Sitting alone and staring ahead were her only two options because she didn't think her mind could settle down enough to comprehend the book she was reading.

Millie thought about Slade and how he would have stayed with her if she'd asked him. Admitting the whole truth of her crazy life was such a relief and Slade was the perfect listener. He was never critical or bossy, assuming he knew better than her what to do. She walked to the kitchen and picked up her own cell phone and scrolled through her list of contacts until she came to Slade's name. Debating whether it is the right thing to do or not, Millie hit "send" on the phone to place the call.

Chapter Twenty-two – Slade

Slade moved swiftly through the narrow passages of the warehouse making his way toward Stallings. His scent was strong leading to the front of the building and Stallings appeared to be behind the main office door. After closer inspection, it appeared Stallings was alone inside the room, which made this apprehension that much easier. The lackeys were making their way back from the diversion, but Slade wasn't worried. Feeling confident the job was almost over, he reached for the door. Just as his hand gripped the doorknob, his cell phone let out its annoying ringtone; alerting everyone in the warehouse he was there. Cursing aloud, he reached into his pocket to see who was calling and found it almost funny it was Millie. She was the only person he would want to see, but this was the worst time for him to go see her. Slade's mind raced with different outcomes of the evening. He could ignore the call, bust into the office and snatch Stallings, use his vampire speed to get him out of the warehouse, and turn him into the police. Another outcome might be, he waits too long to do anything and the lackeys end up getting the jump on him, hurting or possibly killing him, depending on their method of fighting. Finally, he could abort this mission and go to Millie's because she might be in trouble if she is calling him.

Slade launched himself up to the catwalk and ran for the roof. Once outside, he took out his phone and returned Millie's call, hoping she would answer.

"Hello," she answered.

"Millie? Is everything okay over there?" Slade asked.

"Everything's fine. I found a lot of stuff out about Remy though."

"Okay, do you want to tell me over the phone?"

“I was hoping you’d come over. Sitting here in the quiet is getting a little freaky. Am I interrupting something? Don’t feel obligated to come. I just thought I’d ask.”

Slade had to take a few deep breaths to push down the feeling of irritation wanting to bubble up, but then he realized Millie had no idea what he was doing. He told her to call; he didn’t tell her he was working tonight, so really, this was his fault. “I’ll be there in about thirty minutes, okay?”

“Super! I can’t wait.”

Slade ended the call and leapt from the roof of the building landing close to his car. He thought about the possibility of Stallings still being there when he came back and didn’t like what he came up with. He put the car in drive and started his way to Millie’s apartment building. Like always, the wind from the open windows made him feel better and the feeling of satisfaction and contentment came over him at the thought Millie would call him at all. She wanted to spend time with him and that was something to be excited about.

Chapter Twenty-three – Millie

Millie straightened her apartment while waiting for Slade to arrive, not that it was untidy to begin with, but she found it hard to sit still with so much going on inside her head. She was looking forward to talking everything out with Slade. It was always better to discuss problems with someone else. Sometimes the other person could think of something you would have never come up with on your own.

After what seemed like forever, Millie finally heard someone approach her apartment. She moved toward the door, waiting for the knock. “Millie, it’s me,” Slade assured her.

“Just a minute,” she said as she walked to the door. Millie saw Slade’s distorted figure through the lens of the peephole and unlocked the deadbolt on the door. Suddenly not sure what to do, Millie stood in the open doorway staring at Slade. After an awkward moment of silence, shook herself out of her daze and said, “Come in.”

“Thanks,” Slade replied.

“Slade, after I called you I really felt guilty. I hope if you were doing something important you’d tell me,” Millie said.

“It’s fine - nothing I can’t continue later,” Slade reassured her. “So, what did you find out about Remy?”

“A lot,” Millie replied. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Sure.”

“Come sit down,” Millie said as she led Slade into the kitchen area and pointed to the small dinette set. Slade sat in the chair facing the kitchen and watched Millie begin her task. She found comfort in going through the familiar motions of brewing

coffee. Her coffee tasted just as good, even though she didn't have all the complicated contraptions of Where Ya Bean to use. Millie brought two mugs over to the table and sat down across from Slade. She took the time to doctor her mug with some milk and sugar before breaking the silence. "The entire time I've lived in this apartment, Remy has been my friend. I didn't make the first move to get to know her; in fact, it took a little while before I'd really talk to her. Now, it makes sense."

"What makes sense?" Slade asked.

"That she was a spy working for the Queen and was my friend because she was keeping tabs on me," Millie said. Saying it out loud hurt a lot worse than she wanted to admit. The betrayal was devastating. Even though she'd had a couple of hours to let it sink in, hearing it made it seem so bad. *How could Remy do that to me?* Millie thought. "You know what makes it worse," Millie continued, "the fact that I never suspected a thing. Nothing seemed strange or weird. Was I just oblivious or was Remy just that good of an actress?"

"I'm sure she didn't give you any reason to question her intentions," Slade said after a bit of silence.

"You're right. I can't believe the Queen knew my whereabouts the entire time I've been gone." Millie just shook her head thinking about the strangeness of everything. For the next hour she went through her discoveries for Slade's benefit – filling him in on everything she found out in Remy's apartment. "The best lead I have is the number of the payphone near the park and unless I get a nice person to answer next time and tell me where it's located, it won't do me much good," Millie finished.

“I may be able to help track down the location of the phone,” Slade said, “My work requires me to use phone records to track people down sometimes. Give me the number and I’ll make a call.”

Millie took Remy’s phone out of her pocket and found the phone number in the address book. After reciting it to Slade, she sat back and watched as he pulled his own phone out and placed a call.

“Sandy?” Slade said into the phone, “Yea, it’s Slade. Can you do me a favor? I need to find the location of a pay phone. If I give you the number do you think you can look it up for me? Thanks. I’ll be waiting for your call.” Slade hung up the phone and turned to Millie, “Now we wait. It should take Sandy too long to find something.”

“That seems awfully easy,” Millie said in awe.

“Well, we don’t have the location yet.”

“Even if we find out where the phone is, it doesn’t mean we’ll see anything important. I mean, the person who sent the text and told her to go to my apartment disconnected their number so, apparently they want to break any contact they had with her. It seems a little like a set up. My only question is why? Why would they attack the person who has been working for them?”

“I don’t know,” Slade said.

“I’ve thought of one other way to get information about what the Queen has been up to,” Millie admitted.

“Okay, what is it?” Slade asked.

“I can return to my true form and go back home and do a little spying of my own.”

Chapter Twenty-four - Slade

Slade was surprised how excited he felt at the thought of seeing Millie as a Little. As adorable as she is in human form, he can only imagine how beautiful she'd be fluttering around him with tiny wings. For a moment he was lost in thought, but was brought out of his daze when he considered how vulnerable she'd be alone in the faerie realm with no apparent allies. "Wouldn't that be a bit dangerous?" he asked.

"There is definitely a risk," Millie admitted.

"You mean like having no one to back you up once you are around the other faeries and not knowing who is with you or against you?"

"Um, yep, that's what I mean."

"I guess I could make sure to be close by just in case you got in trouble. I mean, you'd be able to keep me in your sights wouldn't you? But, how would I see you?" Slade asked.

"We would need to find some four-leaf clover to put in your pockets so you could see faeries," Millie explained.

"What exactly are you hoping to find out?" Slade asked, not convinced this was a good plan.

"There are always faeries that know what the Queen is doing and if I use a glamour to disguise my true appearance it's possible the others would tell me what the Queen meant to do with the remaining "traitor" once she's been captured," Millie said developing the plan on the fly.

"I think that is a definite long shot. What makes you think the faeries would just open up to a stranger and spill the Queen's secret plans?"

“Faeries can’t lie. If I ask a question they’ll have to tell the truth,” Millie explained.

“Okay, but doesn’t that work both ways? What if they ask you who you are?”

“I could tell them one of my names, just not the name I’m most known by. That would still be the truth,” Millie answered triumphantly.

Slade really didn’t have any great ideas to offer, so he was willing to let Millie go through with it without much of a fight if she felt comfortable doing it. He was about to start formulating a plan when Millie interrupted his train of thought.

“There is one drawback to me going back to the faerie realm,” Millie said more to herself than to Slade.

“What drawback?”

“After I revert to my true form, I’ll be stuck like that for a couple of days because my power will be drained. It will take a couple of days for it to build up so I can take human form again,” Millie explained.

“I don’t like the sound of that at all,” Slade said. Images flashed through his mind of all the terrible things that could happen to Millie while she was without her powers. A slideshow of horror projected scenes of Millie surrounded by the Queen’s guards, struggling to get free, being carried off by a bird of prey for an evening meal, and finally, lying dead surrounded by the flowers she enjoyed so much. “I definitely vote we try something else before you go back to your true form. So much could happen when you are without your powers, especially if you aren’t guaranteed allies when you return,” Slade said.

Millie sat across from him, staring into her mug – more milk than coffee, Slade noticed, while constantly running her fingers through her hair. The nervous habit caused it to spike out in all directions until it resembled a fuzzy topped troll doll. Slade realized he'd never seen anyone more beautiful. Suddenly, the her scent forced its way through the heavy fragrance of coffee and burrowed into his senses. The smell enthralled him, forcing visions of the many ways he could drink from her veins into his mind. Nothing seemed more natural – to take her in his arms, gently turn her head, and sink into her delicate flesh was what he was meant to do and right now, he'd never wanted to taste the blood of anyone as much as he did Millie's.

Slade forced himself to close his eyes and break his visual connection to Millie. Sure he resembled an animal stalking its prey, he didn't want to scare Millie and add to her stress. Drinking from her was not an option. For one thing, he didn't think she would find it as appealing as he did. Also, she needed to keep her strength and feeding from her would definitely leave her in a weakened state. Finally, even though he felt a connection to her, it didn't mean she felt anything for him and their friendship was so new he couldn't even imagine suggesting something as intimate as taking her blood and using his powers to enthrall her just seemed wrong. In the end, Slade just stopped breathing. Physically, he didn't need to take in oxygen so by cutting off the intake of air into his nose, he hoped to decrease his awareness of Millie's stimulating aroma.

Slade opened his eyes and found Millie staring back at him.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I'm fine,” he lied. He considered slipping out of the apartment and finding someone to feed from, but realized she'd notice the difference in his behavior when he

returned. He wasn't ready to reveal the monster to her just yet. Slade didn't want to scare her away. He'd just have to force himself to hold out a little longer.

Slade's phone rang in his pocket and when he looked at the Called ID it showed Assure's number in the display. "This is Slade," he answered. "Hello Sandy, thanks for getting back to me so soon." Slade listened as Sandy gave him the location of the pay phone. "Sandy, you're wonderful. I owe you big – how about some of those chocolate covered espresso beans the next time I come to the office?" Slade was forced to pull the phone away from his ear and noticed Millie smiling across the table, clearly able to hear Sandy's shriek of delight. He ended the call with promises of visiting the office soon, gift in hand. "Are you up for a nighttime stroll?" he asked.

"Absolutely, just let me find my shoes," Millie said.

Chapter Twenty-five – Millie

The night air was crisp, making Millie glad she wore a sweatshirt and jeans. They chose to walk to the park instead of drive for a couple of reasons. 1) Both she and Slade had the ability to move faster than the humans around them if necessary, and 2) Millie would rather walk than ride in a car any day. Thankfully, it didn't take much to convince Slade to travel on foot. Her irrational fear of cars was too embarrassing to voice out loud.

Millie could tell Slade was attempting to take her mind off of their mission, which was for Slade to get a scent from the pay phone. From the scent, he would be able to tell if a faerie had placed calls from there recently or if only humans have been present. Millie secretly hoped a faerie had placed the calls. She hated to think about more humans being used by the Queen, especially to spy on her. Millie wouldn't know who she could trust if another human was involved. *What is Manny is working for her, or my landlord, or the librarian?* It sent shivers through her body just thinking how many people could be involved and her never suspect a thing. Look how well Remy kept things hidden.

“Did you hear me?” Slade asked.

“I'm sorry, what did you say?”

“I ask you what your favorite thing about being in human form was?”

“That question is too hard to answer,” Millie said. “I like so many things here. There's the food, the entertainment, the comforts – I mean you can only get so comfortable using things weaved out of plants. Don't get me wrong though, I loved living as a Little and never would have left if it hadn't been for Izzy being murdered.”

“What did you do before all this started?” Slade asked.

“Well, where I come from young faeries don’t attend school, but instead are encouraged to flutter around observing everything around them, in the safety of the realm of course, to gain experiences from every facet of faerie life. Once a faerie turns thirteen, the elders get together and choose an appropriate job for the faerie. From there, the faerie becomes an apprentice in the appropriate field. They train for three years until going to the Queen’s court for their required one-year of service. When their time with the Queen is completed, they return to their appointed division and work as an adult member of the faerie realm.”

“So, what was your division? You were already an apprentice when you ran away right?”

“Yep, I was assigned to be a chef. I liked it because you always had to be on your toes. What you cooked depended on what the hunters and gatherers brought home.” Millie explained.

“What were your most common meals?” Slade asked in a curious tone.

“Well, most of the time we had vegetarian meals because it took a skilled hunter to take down a bird, squirrel, or rabbit. So, most of the time our meals consisted of dishes made with nuts, berries, seeds, and greens. They could easily be turned into delicious soups. Sometimes the gatherers found tubers and legumes which, when added with the occasional meat we had, made for quite a feast.” Millie was getting hungry just talking about all the dishes she used to create. “The one item even more difficult to come by than meat was milk,” Maggie said. “It is such a delicacy that it causes many faeries to be trapped. Many times humans with knowledge of our world will put out

bread soaked with milk and honey in order to attract us. The desire for the sweet taste clouds their judgment and allows them to be trapped. They are at the mercy of whoever lured them to the treat. It is rumored the Queen occasionally uses this tactic when she is in the need of extra labor or has a dangerous errand to be completed, thus not having to rely on her skilled underlings to do work where she'd rather use expendable labor."

"I can't imagine the faerie realm being a happy place at all. Everything seems very cut throat," Slade said.

"Most faeries aren't involved in the ugly side of life and are oblivious to the dangers around them. I only know about them because of Izzy and my involvement in the rebellion. We were trying to get the word out about the Queen's injustices, but she found out and killed everyone involved, except me, of course," Millie said with a tone of sadness.

Millie felt Slade's hand touch her back and was surprised how good it felt to tell someone about her life – her real life. For a while Millie and Slade walked side-by-side in silence. Not an awkward silence like when they first met, but a comfortable one.

Millie sees an ice cream parlor a few stores ahead and suddenly wants a cone. Ice cream is something never seen in the faerie realm and she will desperately miss it when she goes back home. "I'm going to get an ice cream cone, do you want one? My treat," Millie offered.

"Um, I don't think so," Slade said with a smirk on his face.

Millie slapped her forehead with her palm and said, "Oops, sorry. Do you mind if I get one?"

"Of course not, I'd love to watch you enjoy an ice cream cone."

Millie walked into the store and ordered a dip of mint chocolate dip on a waffle cone and groaned as the first taste hit her throat. She walked out with a smile on her face as she joined Slade on the sidewalk and continued toward the park. Once she started talking about cooking and food, she really started thinking about how Slade went about getting his blood. She decided it was find to find out. “Do you mind me asking how you eat?” she asked without meeting his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-six – Slade

Slade wasn't surprised she asked about feeding, in fact, he's surprised it took her so long. Talking about it was only going to make him more aware of his growing hunger, but he didn't want to avoid her question and make her feel embarrassed for asking. He wanted to be sure to explain his process as delicately as possible, not knowing if hearing about it would freak her out or not. "For the last several years, I've fed one of two ways. My most preferred, but less frequent method is to take a bit from the bail jumpers I capture before taking them back to jail."

"So you're able to erase the memory of you biting them?" Millie asked "What about the bite marks? Doesn't anyone see them?"

"A vampire's saliva contains a coagulant as well as an additive with healing properties. After I'm finished, I simply lick the wound to stop the bleeding and the bite mark heals, leaving the flesh unmarred."

"That sure is handy," Millie said.

"I guess you could say that," Slade replied.

"What's the second way you get blood?"

"The alternative to the bail jumpers, while easy to come by is far less appealing. I find people who make their home in the subway tunnels. I never take enough to kill them, but most are already in bad shape from poor nutrition and sickness. I don't particularly enjoy this solution, but it has worked flawlessly for years."

"I see," Millie said.

Slade didn't know what to think about the blanket of silence that fell between them. He hoped Millie wasn't repulsed by the thought of him feeding from the

homeless – even though at times, he himself, was repulsed. Slade looked over at Millie and watched as she continued to eat her ice cream cone. She took such care when choosing her next taste, like she put thought in every bite. Watching her enjoy something as simple as ice cream added lightness to his heart he hadn't felt in a long time. The wall he'd built around himself had grown so thick over time he'd never had a chance to realize he missed the company of others.

“Do you ever take too much?” Millie asked tentatively.

“It is always a danger when feeding directly from the source, but especially if I haven't fed for a several days. If a vampire goes too long between feedings, every time he or she gets a chance, it's like a frenzy.”

“How long has it been since you've fed?”

“It's going on three days,” Slade said.

“Is that too long?”

Slade didn't know whether to tell her the truth or not. The last thing he wanted to see in her eyes was fear, but knowing the truth would make her cautious around him and her safety was top priority, even from him. “It's getting close,” he answered.

Slade saw Millie nod her head and could tell she was considering her next question carefully.

“Have you ever killed someone by taking too much blood?”

“Unfortunately, I have. Her name was Rebecca and it was soon after I was turned. At the time of the accident I hadn't mastered my control when feeding. She was the first human I'd had close interactions with since becoming a vampire. I had gone several days without feeding because I didn't want to leave her side. One night,

the scent of her blood was too much for me to resist. At first I told myself I could just take a little, erase her mind of the incident, and she'd never find out about the monster living inside the man she loved. But, once the blood started flowing down my throat I lost all rational thought. When my head cleared, I was standing above her lifeless body. I loved her and I killed her.”

“Can you smell my blood?”

“Yes,” Slade answered.

“Have you ever fed on something other than human?”

“No,” Slade answered. He didn't know if he should go on, but couldn't stop himself from saying, “I have to admit I find the scent of your blood intoxicating and have since the first time I saw you.” Slade stopped walking after he made his confession, forcing Millie to stop and turn to him. “I would never harm you and I would never take your blood without your permission.”

After an extended pause, Millie finally said, “Good to know.” She started walking down the sidewalk again, throwing her napkin in a trashcan along the way.

Chapter Twenty-seven – Millie

I'm sorry I brought that up, Millie thought as she walked toward the park. *He better not start staring at my neck*. The park entrance was in sight after Millie and Slade turned a corner. Instinctively, her steps slowed, almost like her body knew danger lay beyond the rock wall surrounding the park.

“The pay phone we are looking for is near the restaurant in the center of the park,” Slade informed her.

“Do you really think you’ll be able to pick up a scent at the pay phone? There are probably a ton of people that use it everyday,” Millie said.

“I will easily be able to pick up the scent of a faerie if one has used the phone recently and I’m not sure how many people actually use pay phones anymore with the popularity of cell phones today.”

Millie kept her eyes open as she and Slade made their way to the center of the park. She managed to catch sight of a few faeries hovering on the edges of the woods along the winding sidewalk and except for two lonely looking humans, there didn’t appear to be any activity in the park. It felt like danger surrounded them.

The park at night wasn’t the safest place to be, even under the best of circumstances. The nightly news reported on crimes taking place in the park on a regular basis. Crimes involving drugs, robberies, and homicides topped the list of most occurring offenses. Millie felt extremely fortunate to have Slade by her side. The fact that he secretly dreamed of drinking her blood didn’t seem so bad while she was surrounded by the darkness of the park.

Soon the restaurant came into view and Millie saw Slade's demeanor completely change. It was as if his awareness opened up to a different level. She saw his face harden as his eyes closed and he started taking in the scents around him.

"I smell the scent of faerie around us, but nothing overwhelming," he said.

Millie watched as Slade moved forward, getting closer to the pay phone with each step. Without warning, he stopped, turned around, and reached for her hand, pulling her along with him.

"I don't want you out of my sight while we are in the park. Do you understand?" Without waiting for a response, Slade continued forward while keeping hold of Millie's hand. Millie appreciated the confidence he gave her by sticking by her in her time of crisis. She didn't think many people would be willing to put their lives on the line for someone they've known for as little time as she and Slade have known each other.

The pay phone loomed up ahead and seemed to glow in front of them. Just a figment of her imagination, she knew, but it seemed dreamlike. Millie, a step behind, but always tethered to Slade, walked toward the glowing tower of communication. Millie watched as Slade stepped up to the phone and took a deep breath - it was an incredible scene to watch.

Chapter Twenty-eight – Slade

The scent of unwashed human mixed with the otherworldliness of faerie washed over him as soon as he stepped up to the phone. “A faerie has definitely been here recently,” Slade told Millie.

“I’d say that’s good news. At least there isn’t a middleman working for the Queen to worry about,” answered Millie.

“True,” said Slade. The scent of faerie became stronger the closer he got to the phone, but it had been in the air ever since they entered the park. Next, he’d attempt to track the faerie, hoping it was the assassin and take care of him once and for all. The sooner the assassin was no longer a threat, the sooner he could get Millie back to her apartment and back to Charles Stallings. “Let’s go,” Slade said.

“Where are we going?” Millie asked.

“I’m going to see if I can follow the scent. Maybe we’ll get lucky and find the person who’s been calling Remy.” Still holding a death grip on Millie’s hand, he started to lead her away from the lights and relative safety of the restaurant. He could tell by her reluctance to follow, Millie didn’t want to go deeper into the park. “Come on, remember I won’t let anything happen to you.” Slade saw trust in Millie’s eyes as she sped up to match his pace.

“I’ll keep my eyes open for faeries. Man, I wish we picked up some clover so you’d be able to see them too. We’ll be at a real disadvantage if we run into anything wanting trouble,” Millie said.

“I’ll just have to rely on you to tell me where they are,” Slade said confidently. He was careful to keep his nervousness hidden since he wanted Millie to remain calm.

Holding Millie's hand helped him a lot. It gave him something to focus on besides searching for an faerie, most likely an assassin, he wouldn't be able to see. He's been in many fights over the years and unless he was up against a much older vampire, he always came out better than his opponent. Fighting something he couldn't see was definitely going to be a challenge. He tried to prepare his mind for the possible fight since he'd be forced to use all of his senses to keep up with the attack.

Slade felt Millie tense beside him and came to a halt. "What is it?"

"It's him – the assassin."

"Is he close by? Is he alone?"

"Either he knows you are something more than human, or he is just toying with us because he is staying to the edge of the wooded area, following us as we move through the park. He is keeping his eyes on us, I'm sure trying to intimidate me," Millie said.

"I'll look to you for his location. You just keep your head turned in his direction and I'll just follow your line of sight. For now, let's keep walking like we are and see if he decides to become more aggressive." Slade reminded himself to try calling Roman again and force him to tell him more about faeries. After the way their last call ended, he hoped Roman would be in position to help him.

Chapter Twenty-nine – Millie

Millie kept her eye on the assassin as he skirted around the edge of the walking path. She didn't know how everything would work out or what exactly Slade intended to do. On one hand, she was sick of being afraid and wanted to get the confrontation over with, but on the other hand, she wouldn't be completely heart-broken if they turned and fled from the park either. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you looked at it, Slade didn't seem like the kind of guy to run. Millie's confidence was boosted because of Slade's vampire abilities though. If she was alone in the park at night with only a human while a faerie assassin stalked her, she is sure she would attempt to flee.

The assassin had a smug look pasted on his face and Millie couldn't stand looking at him anymore. "I think he is just going to continue stalking us. He doesn't seem to be making any move to approach," Millie whispered. "I think we're going to need to make the first move."

"What do you suggest?" Slade asked.

"In order to get any kind of chance at killing him, we're going to have to get him closer, don't you agree?"

"I do,"

"What if I started leading us toward the edge of the walking path and once we are close I give you a signal and we take off running at full speed. We will force him to follow us, hopefully pulling him out of the woods. Once he is running after us and he believes we are trying to escape, we'll stop, turn around, and fight. Even though you can't see him, you will be able to feel him. I'll keep my eyes on the assassin, so as long

as you follow my line of vision you should run right into him. Once you grab on him, you can fight like you would any other person. Just don't lose hold because it would be hard to trick him again."

"What will be the signal to run?" Slade asked.

Millie thought for a minutes and said, "I'll give your hand one hard squeeze and as soon as I let go we take off."

"What will you do to indicate it is time to stop and fight?"

"What if I just say your name? You'd be able to hear me while we're running wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Slade answered.

Millie was surprised at how serious Slade was acting. He seemed to be willing to take a chance on her plan, which made her feel great. It was good to know she didn't always need to be taken care of. She was glad to be adding something to their team instead of always expecting Slade to provide the support. "Are you ready?" she asked.

"Whenever you are, my dear," Slade answered with a surprising playfulness.

It was just the right thing to say because for a moment it took her mind off what they were about to do and actually put a smile on her face. After one hard squeeze to Slade's hand, they took off running deeper into the park.

Chapter Thirty – Slade

Invigorating was the only word to describe the feeling Slade had when running as fast as he was. Millie, even though she didn't have the same ability when it came to speed, was still able to remain just a step behind him. He strains his ears to make sure he doesn't miss Millie saying his name.

Slade started formulating his attack. His intention was to get his hands on the faerie, sink in his teeth, and drain him dry – two birds with one stone – getting some much needed nourishment and eliminating a threat at the same time. The thought of tasting faerie blood excited him even though the assassin's scent was nothing compared to Millie's. There was some trepidation buried deep within about how it would taste, but no matter what, he needed to drain him and kill him.

Slade could hear the pounding of feet on the pavement behind him. It seemed that when having to move this fast, the faerie couldn't maintain totally silence. Slade filed the information away for future reference. If Roman wasn't going to be around or willing to help him, he'd need to begin building his own database of faerie information.

Slade noticed Millie speed up and quickly followed suit. He had a feeling she was increasing the distance between them and the assassin before stopping to fight. Slade felt his body tingle with anticipation of the coming fight and made sure to focus on Millie. He saw her face change expressions and knew she was going to speak before the sound left her mouth.

“Slade!”

After hearing his name he stopped and turned almost simultaneously. Millie was staring at the spot directly in front of him and with any luck, the faerie would be

taken by surprise and not be able to stop in time. He braced himself for the impact and an instant later, Slade was on the ground with a huge, invisible weight on top of him. Slade reached out and grabbed whatever he could. First, he felt clothing in his fists and then he finally found a wrist. Together the two supernatural creatures rolled and wrestled on the ground. Slade didn't know what to expect in terms of a weapon the faerie might use, but knew he'd be forced to deal with more than simply hand-to-hand combat.

The moment he felt the burn of silver on his arm and smelled his blood in the air, he knew he'd be up against a dagger – one that could cause major damage. Silver would prevent him from healing immediately causing him to bleed. Enough cuts from the dagger could be deadly, leaving him too weak from blood loss to fight back. Slade knew he'd have to put an end to the faerie fast.

He focused on keeping his hands wrapped around the assassin's wrist as he jumped to his feet. Slade jumped several feet away from Millie hoping to disorient his opponent and once securely on his feet, he pulled the faerie against him, used his free hand to grab his neck, pushed the head aside, and sank his fangs deep into skin. The rush of blood in his mouth felt blissful after not eating for several days and for a moment, the only thought he had was quenching his thirst. Eventually, the faerie started to weaken and felt heavier in Slade's arms and when not another drop of blood could be sucked from his body, Slade allowed the dead assassin to fall to the ground.

Almost dizzy from the amount of blood, Slade stood and stared at the limp body at his feet. An annoying buzz filled his ears as he attempted to regain his composure. He caught Millie out of the corner of his eye as she made her way to his side.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, just give me a minute,” Slade responded. He started taking an inventory of his wounds made by the silver knife the assassin wielded during the fight and realized he was still bleeding from most of them. “The wounds were made with silver so they’ll heal slower than normal. Nothing to be alarmed about,” he said.

Together Slade and Millie stood and watched as the assassin dissolved into a crumbly mess right in front of them in the middle of the park.

“I’m so relieved he’s dead,” Millie said as she slumped onto a bench.

Slade followed suit and slumped beside her. “It is indeed quite a feat, what we accomplished,” Slade admitted. “Without your expert tactical maneuvers things wouldn’t have gone so smoothly.”

“Thanks,” Millie said. “Are you ready to go?”

“Gladly,” replied Slade.

Chapter 31 – Millie

Millie was breathless, even though she wasn't involved in the physical altercation. She felt adrenaline course through her veins as she got up from the bench and started walking out of the park with Slade. She felt shaky as she made her way down the path and hoped soon her wobbliness would disappear. The relief of knowing the immediate threat to her life is over made her feel almost giddy. Soon she was lost in thought and it took her a while to realize Slade wasn't beside her anymore. She turned and looked behind her and was shocked to see Slade moving slowly. "Are you okay?" Millie asked him. When he didn't answer, Millie stopped and walked back to where he was lagging. "Slade, you aren't acting right? What's wrong? Did you get worn out by the fight?" she teased.

"No," he chuckled. "I don't know exactly what is wrong. I expected to feel completely invigorated after the amount of blood I ingested."

"Well, how do you feel?"

"I can only describe it as strange," said Slade.

"Have you ever felt this way before?"

"I can't say that I have."

"Have you ever taken faerie blood before?"

"No, I haven't and now giving it more thought, maybe killing that particular faerie by draining him of his blood wasn't the best course of action."

Millie kept her eye on Slade as nonchalantly put her hand through his arm and got him moving down the path again. She wanted to get him to her apartment as quickly as possible and they had a ways to walk. The adrenaline of their mission was

enough to keep her pumped up on the way, but now, with the threat eliminated and her body coming down from the rush she was beginning to feel worn out.

“Let’s just keep walking, huh?” she said as she looped her hand through Slade’s arm a little tighter.

“Sure,” Slade muttered.

Millie found the longer they walked, the more she was pulling Slade along instead of merely escorting him. “What do you plan to do when you drop me off?” she asked him, hoping to strike up a conversation that would take her mind off of Slade’s deteriorating condition.

“Unfortunately, I have a few things to finish up before I can call it a night,” he said.

“This late?” Millie asked. “I can’t imagine what you would be doing at this time of night,” Millie blabbered to keep him talking.

“Well, Millie my dear, we all don’t keep to the respectable part of town all of the time you know,” Slade answered, clearly trying to keep things light.

“Respectable? You call hanging out with someone skilled enough to kill a faerie assassin respectable?”

“Well, in that, you have wonderful taste. I am definitely worth hanging out--.” Slade doubled over and winced.

“Oh, you are not good! There is no way we are going to make it home. I’m strong, but I can’t carry you to my apartment,” Millie said even though she knew Slade wasn’t listening. “Come on, let’s get to the park entrance so we can hail a cab.” Millie struggled to keep Slade moving forward. She practically cried out loud when she saw

the busy street in come into view. “Come on, let’s see what we can do. Just try and stand up so the taxi driver won’t think your going to drop dead in his cab.”

“Just leave me here. I’ll be fine in a while,” Slade choked out.

“Not a chance. If you don’t heal before daylight you’ll be a crispy critter come morning.”

“Nonsense.”

Millie ignored Slade’s grumbling and continued to half carry/half drag Slade to the street. The fact that he didn’t fight her and insist she leave him behind told her just how bad he felt. Once she had him propped against a street light pole, Millie turned her attention to the street to find a cab.

Millie raised her hand as she had seen countless others do when they wanted to hail a taxi. Her stomach started knotting up at the thought of getting into a vehicle, but she forced herself to ignore the sickness she was feeling in order to get Slade to her apartment as quick as possible. It didn’t take long for a taxi to appear, but the driver either didn’t see her or chose to pass her by because he didn’t even slow down. “Grrrr. Come on!” she screamed. She heard a rumbling coming from Slade and realized, after seeing his lips move, he was attempting to talk. Panic rushed over her and her limbs started to tremble. It didn’t look like Slade was going to be able to stand for very much longer. He had already wrapped his arms around the pole and appeared to be holding on for dear life. Any passerby would assume he was completely smashed and most likely give a wide berth, which would normally be a good thing, but they needed a taxi and she didn’t know how likely that would be if Slade looked like he would heave all over the cab’s backseat the minute they got in. Millie stepped closer to Slade so she

could hear what he was saying. It took a while for him to spit anything out because it seemed he had to stop every other word because of pain that almost doubled him over. “Slade, I don’t know what to do besides get you back to my apartment. Hang on, please!”

“It will be alright, lovely,” Slade croaked.

“How is it going to be alright? You look like you are about to die right here on the sidewalk.”

“Now, now, I’ll do nothing of the sort. Help me stand up straight and let’s hobble down the street a bit. Maybe we’ll find more willing cab drivers.”

Millie went to Slade’s side and put her arm around his back and used her shoulder as a crutch. She immediately felt the difference in his temperature. She remembered how cold he was when she first touched him, but now heat was coming from his body and she knew that couldn’t be good. “Slade, it is obvious the Faerie’s blood did this to you. Do you have any idea what I can do to help?”

“No, this is the first time I’ve come into close contact with the Fae and didn’t even consider their blood might be dangerous. Poor planning on my part.”

“Well, is there anyone you know that can help?”

“I attempted to get some information from my friend, Roman, but it didn’t work out. He was in the middle of something and didn’t have time to devote to me. Our phone conversation was cut off abruptly and I’m just hoping he is okay. It sounded like he had a lot going on at the time of our call.”

Millie continued to limp along the sidewalk supporting Slade until they reached another corner. There did appear to be more traffic on this street and her hopes lifted.

Adding to their good luck, there was also a bench for Slade to sit on so he wouldn't be forced to hang onto another pole while she attempted to get a taxi. After depositing Slade on the bench, Millie walked to the edge of the sidewalk; ready to do whatever it took to get a blasted cab to stop.

“Don't be afraid to show a little leg,” Slade deadpanned.

“Very funny. It's more likely that I'll have to jump in the middle of the road to get the driver's attention,” Millie said. Several taxis passed by carrying other passengers, as Millie grew angrier and angrier. Finally, Millie saw a taxi with its availability light illuminated. “Woo hoo,” she shouted as she jumped up and down waving her hand in the air like a maniac. However, her smile fell as she saw that the driver was going to pass by like the rest. Feeling desperate, she jumped into the middle of the traffic lane, landed with her feet apart and her arms stretched out, and shouted at the top of her lungs, “Stop!” The driver, apparently lost in a cell phone call, glanced up just as she shouted and slammed on the brakes. The cab was able to skid to a halt, but not before pushing Millie down to the ground and straddling a portion of her legs with the front tires. Millie landed hard on the concrete and knew she'd have a nice case of road rash on her rear end, but worse was the thump her head took as she hit the ground. She took a moment to make sure nothing was broken and gradually started to get up.

The taxi driver was out of his car and heading toward her, hands waving in the air and screaming, “What do you think you are doing? You could have been killed. Are you crazy?”

“I probably am, but instead of wasting time talking about my mental state, I'd like you to stop yelling and get back in the car. I need to get my friend home and it is

kind of an emergency. Maybe if you hadn't been on the phone you'd have seen me waving my arms like a crazy person in the first place."

"Oh no, young lady. I'm not taking you anywhere," the cab driver said.

"Oh, yes you are," Millie said as she moved toward the taxi, reached inside, and removed the keys from the ignition. "You'll get these back after my friend and I are in the taxi." Millie hurried over to Slade and hoisted him up. Millie opened the back car door and let Slade half sit half fall into the backseat. She walked back to the taxi driver and said, "Now, can you please get in the car and take my home?"

The driver walked to his door and got in, never taking his eyes off of Millie. "Hurry up," he said. "The sooner I get you out of my life the better."

Millie ran to the other side of the taxi and got in the backseat with Slade. As soon as she had the door closed behind her, she reached forward and handed the driver his keys. "Thank you sir. I wouldn't be bothering you at all if it wasn't an emergency," Millie explained.

"Your friend have a little too much to drink, did he?"

"He's just sick."

"Sure," replied the driver.

Millie gave the driver her address and leaned back in the seat. She felt extremely alert after her argument with the driver and forced herself to take some deep breaths to calm herself down. Millie glanced over to Slade to check on his condition and was alarmed to see that his eyes were closed. "Slade," Millie cried. Tapping him on the face she murmured, "Come on Slade. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up."

"I am awake. Stop assaulting me, will you?" Slade responded slowly.

“Everything alright back there?” the cab driver asked.

“We’re fine,” Millie snapped. Thinking it might not be a good idea to make the driver any more upset with her, she changed her tone and said, “I mean, yes, everything is alright. Thanks for asking. How much longer until we’re there do you think?”

“About five minutes,” he replied.

“Great.”

Millie guided Slade’s head into her lap and she absentmindedly stroked his wild hair. “Just hang on, Slade. We’ll figure out something.”

“Mmmmm, that feels nice, Millie. I should be sick more often if this is how you get treated.”

“What are you? A comedian? Why don’t you use that brain of yours to decide what we are going to do when we get to my apartment?”

“The only thing I can think to do is call Roman again,” he said.

“That’s the plan then. As soon as we get home we’re calling him.” They sat in silence the rest of the way. Millie felt a little better at least having a next step – even though that next step wasn’t guaranteed to improve their situation at all. At least they were moving in the right direction.

The taxi pulled up in front of Millie’s building and said, “That will be \$7.50.”

Millie pulled her wallet out of her pocket and found a ten-dollar bill and handed up front. “Keep the change. You’ve been so helpful.”

It was harder getting Slade out of the taxi than it was getting him in. Lifting his full weight was hard for someone her size, but managed to get him on his feet anyway.

“Come on, Slade. We have to go up the stairs now. I can’t carry you so you’ll have to try and help.”

Slade managed to let out a grunt and Millie took it that he understood what she was saying. “Okay, let’s go.” It seemed like it took forever just to get to the front doors, but she forced herself to stop thinking about how far they had to go and instead, just kept talking to Slade – as much to keep herself occupied as to keep him alert. “You are doing great. Only a little farther. Keep going. Almost there.” It was like she was on autopilot. She didn’t pay attention to what she was saying, just the act of talking helped keep her in a rhythm of step-pull-step-pull. When they reached Millie’s floor she felt tears prick the backs of her eyes. “We made it,” she choked. She unlocked the door as fast as she could and got inside. She led Slade to the couch and then went back to close and lock the door.

Millie went back to the couch and slapped Slade’s cheeks to wake him up. “Slade, wake up. I’m looking for your phone. Is Roman’s number programmed in it?” Slade’s reached out for Millie’s hand and brought it to his mouth. At first, she didn’t know what to expect. *Is he going to bite me?* When he kissed her tenderly on the back of the hand she was totally caught off guard.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done,” Slade whispered.

“You’re welcome. Now, focus. Where is your phone?” He led her hand to his inside jacket pocket and let go. Millie felt for the phone and found it. She immediately went to the address book and searched for Roman’s name. After finding it, she hits Send and waits for the call to go through. After several rings the call connects and she feels a moment of panic since she doesn’t really know what to say. “*Hello, this is Roman.*

I'm not able to take your call at this time so please leave a message and I'll call you back as soon as possible. Thank you."

"Grrr, stupid voicemail."

"Just keep trying, Millie. Call back and leave a message. Roman will return your call," Slade assured her.

Millie hit Send again as she watched Slade's eyes close. She hoped they weren't closed for good.

Chapter 32 – Slade

Slade felt himself slip further and further into the pain as waves of fire coursed through his veins. He watched as Millie periodically hovered over him with increased looks of worry. The longer Roman didn't return her call, the more frustrated she became. Millie paced around the apartment mumbling things he couldn't understand; her hurried footsteps telling him where she was in the room. He kept his eyes closed – opening them was too much work. He could tell Millie wanted him to be more responsive and he wanted to put her at ease, but it just wasn't a possibility.

Underneath the many layers of pain there was also anger. He'd had Roman on the phone. Why hadn't he mentioned something as important as, "Don't ingest faerie blood because it is poison?" It was a necessary piece of information. If only Roman had said something...He wouldn't be in this situation. He found it hard to think kindly about Roman. Slade felt betrayed; his pain making it impossible to think logically about the possible reasons for Roman's behavior. He seemed to remember Roman had a lot of activity going on when they were on the phone, but couldn't concentrate enough to replay the conversation so he could pinpoint the source of Roman's distraction.

Slade hated the feeling of helplessness and in this state he was completely at Millie's mercy. He was comforted she knew of his condition and didn't have to worry about being left in the sunlight to burn. After living a solitary life for so long, it felt nice to have someone keeping watch over him. He didn't recognize the feeling at first, but after a while he understood he was feeling happy. Slade knew it was insane to choose the moment when he is so close to death to be happy, but he couldn't help it. He

felt himself sink further into the couch cushions and focused his attentions on Millie. If he just kept her in his mind he would be okay.

As if Millie could tell what he was thinking, she came to hover over him with her worried, yet beautiful, lavender eyes once again. This time he felt someone cool as she touched him. As he struggled to open his eyes, Millie murmured, “It’s okay. It’s just a cool washcloth. You are burning up with fever.”

“Thank you,” Slade managed to croak.

“I just wish your friend would call back,” Millie continued as if she were talking to herself. She eased onto the couch and lifted Slade’s head so it could rest on her lap when she sat back on the couch. “I don’t know what to do for you. There isn’t anyone I can even ask. I’m so cut off from everything faerie. Maybe running away was a mistake.”

Slade shivered as Millie’s fingers lightly brushed his hair away from his forehead. The feel of her nails raking through his hair and over his scalp was mind numbing. He imagined it might feel like this to live in peace with Millie and he thought he could do it as long as she was at his side for the rest of his life. With Millie’s mumblings in the background, Slade felt himself lose consciousness once again as he slipped into a feverish sleep – only this time it was more peaceful.

Chapter 33 – Millie

Millie felt her eyes grow heavy as she sat in her quiet apartment. Slade's head resting on her lap made her feel warm and cozy. It was easy for her to close her eyes and snuggle deeper into the couch cushions. After pacing the apartment for so long it felt good to have some of the stress ease out of her body. Worry was still swirling through her body, but sitting with Slade, running her fingers through his hair seemed kind of normal. It was only an illusion of course; there was no way she could pretend they weren't in deep trouble. Slade's was hovering between life and death. It was imperative she talked to Roman, but if he didn't call there was little she could do.

“Thank you,” Slade whispered.

“Shhh,” Millie replied. “Don't talk.”

“You are so kind,” he continued.

“Quiet. I mean it,” she scolded. Kind – the word made her laugh. If it weren't for her, Slade wouldn't be in the situation he is in right now. Guilt hit her like crashing waves, threatening to drown her. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. She didn't want to cry – she didn't have the right to feel sorry for herself. She wasn't the one about to die. The tears didn't wait for permission, though, as they started cascading down her cheeks.

Millie felt relieved the assassin was dead. She didn't know what it meant for her though. Was she safe or would the Queen send another in his place to finish the job? After thinking about the Queen for a little while she came to the conclusion that she would never be safe. The Queen would never give up and would never allow her to get away. The Queen had many assassins at her disposal and her lack of compassion for

life made them easy to use. She didn't care how many died as long as she achieved her goal. Despair carried her deeper into the darkness that was her mood.

Chapter 34 - Millie

Slade's cell phone rang and she pulled herself out of the self-indulgent spiral of shame she was wallowing in. Raising Slade's head from her lap, she scooted out from under his weight and leaped for the phone. She made it to the kitchen counter in only a few steps; so eager she was to see who was calling. Millie saw Roman's name appear in the Caller ID panel and felt a pang of fear. She didn't know what to expect. "Hello," Millie answered.

"Is this Millie?" a deep voice asked.

"Yes, is this Roman?"

"It is and am I to understand from your multiple messages Slade is in danger?"

"Danger? More like close to death. He took blood from a faerie in a fight and now he is unconscious on my couch," Millie spit out in one breath.

"Hmm. I told him to stay away from the faerie folk. Why didn't he listen to me?" Roman said.

"He was helping me by killing the assassin that was after me."

"Stupid, stupid boy," Roman growled.

"Oooookay, what do I do to help?"

"I haven't had first-hand experience with this problem so what I'm about to tell you is only hearsay. Do you understand?"

"I understand," replied Millie.

"The first thing you will need to do is drain as much blood as you can from his body. You will have to use a silver knife in order to make the cut so the wound will remain open long enough to allow blood to escape. Once the blood stream begins to

slow, cover the wound and stop the bleeding as best you can. Do you understand so far?”

“Yes, keep going.”

“It will be necessary to give him fresh blood immediately. You may have to pry his mouth open and allow it to drip in at first, but soon he will revive enough to drink on his own. The source of the blood doesn’t matter – animal or human will do. Whatever you can get the fastest is what I suggest.”

“Oh my. Where am I going to get enough blood for him?” she said to herself.

“That, you will have to figure out fast young lady. You’ll need plenty. Even when he becomes fully aware he’ll need more blood to return him to his full strength.”

Millie’s mind was racing. How was she going to get him fresh blood? “Okay, I’ll call you back when I’m finished. Thank you for calling back.”

“My pleasure. I’d hate to lose Slade. He has been a good friend through the years.”

Millie picks up her pacing once again as she begins to process everything Roman told her. Blood...where was she going to get enough blood? She didn’t want to drag an innocent human up to her apartment because she was completely certain Slade would need to drain the body in order to heal. She didn’t want to kill anyone and she was fairly certain from what she already knew about Slade that he wouldn’t want to kill someone – even if it was to save himself. Roman mentioned an animal would work, but how many dogs and cats would it take to heal him? The image of dead animal carcasses strewn around her apartment popped in her head causing her to shiver. “Ugh, no way,” she said to herself. The only other option she could think of was a blood

bank. If she could break into one and carry home as many blood bags as she could, maybe that would be best. She could easily dispose of the used plastic bags and she was sure she could carry enough pints to equal a couple of humans. With a plan formed, she felt a little better.

Millie goes to her bedroom to change clothes. She puts on a pair of jeans and the knee-length T-shirt she normally wears to bed. She tucks the shirt into her pants and decides she'll be able to put the blood bags down the front of her shirt without any danger of it coming untucked since it is so long. Millie runs back into the living room and checks on Slade's still form, hoping he has enough time left for her to make it back. She grabs her keys and cell phone on her way out of the apartment. She locks her door, checks to see it is secure, and walks down the stairs of the building prepared to accomplish her goal.

Chapter 35 – Millie

So, which donation center should I go to? Millie wondered to herself as she reached the sidewalk outside her apartment building. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to picture the neighborhood around her. There were several donation centers around; she just needed to find the closest one that would also be secluded. East Side Blood Bank was just around the corner, but it was surrounded by businesses that drew crowds even late at night. Even though she was going to use a glamour, she didn't want to take any chances. Millie decided to head West to find the next closest center.

Stepping back in the entryway of her apartment building, Millie made sure no one was close by and pulled a glamour around her. She slipped out of the building once again and moved as fast as she could through the streets making sure to avoid other passersby in the process. She weaved in and out of people, cars, and other obstacles until she was standing in front of Save a Life Donation Center. Millie walked to the back of the building, hoping to find an alley entrance. She didn't have a tremendous amount of strength, but she was stronger than the typical human so figured she could force open the door. When she grabbed the handle and pulled with all her might, the door flew open with a crash, ripping the wooden frame around it. Millie cringed at the noise and expected concerned citizens and nosey gawkers to appear any second. She quickly jumped inside, praying there wasn't a security alarm, and closed the door behind her as best as she could.

Millie didn't know where the blood was stored so she started running from room to room until she found the refrigeration units. Assuming the police could be there at any moment, Millie didn't waste anytime pulling the doors open and shoving packets

down her top. Since the nightshirt was tucked in so far, she had plenty of room to bag it out and fill it up with blood bags. The shock of cold distracted her for a moment, but she kept going even though shivers were running through her body, causing her hands to tremble. Millie was an ice cube by the time her shirt was filled, but there were still more packets she could take. She had no idea how much blood Slade would need to drink and hated to leave it behind when she was already here. She took a quick glance around the room, hoping to find something she could use to carry the remaining blood. She saw something with handles poking out of the trashcan by one of the desks. When she dug it out, she noticed it was a Chinese restaurant takeout bag. *This will work just fine*, she said to herself as she went back to the refrigerator and filled it with as much blood as the flimsy bag would hold.

Millie was just about to close the refrigerator door when she heard the voices.

Darn it, I was so close!

“I’ll check the back,” whispered a male voice. “You stay up here and don’t let anyone get passed you.”

Millie attempted to pick up the Chinese takeout bag without it rustling too much and scooted to the wall closest to the door. If she could just stay silent and slip out when their attention was elsewhere, she felt like she could get out without any problem. *Just drop the sack and get out*, she told herself. Without the burden of carrying the extra blood she wouldn’t have to worry about sound at all, but she refused to abandon it.

By the time the police officer eased into the refrigeration room of the blood bank, Millie was already in place by the door. She was scared to move. She could either wait until the police left or attempt to get past them. By the sounds of it, only one

other officer was in the building, but they could have easily called for backup. If she waited too long she'd have even more difficulty leaving. *I'll just wait until this one is out of the room and then I'll slip out*, Millie told herself.

The policeman used his flashlight to look into every nook and cranny of the room. She felt a wave of guilt as she watched him open the refrigerator and saw the empty shelves. Only a handful of packets she couldn't fit in the bag or down her shirt were left. "Hmm," commented the officer.

Millie's fingers were beginning to tire and she was afraid she was going to drop the bag. She didn't even consider the bag not being strong enough to hold the weight and was completely shocked when she felt one of the handles breaking. It let out a ripping sound, causing the policeman to turn her way. Millie squeezed her eyes shut willing the policeman to go away, but instead he started making his way to her side of the room. She knew she was invisible, but if the sack left her hand it wouldn't be. She could only imagine the policeman's reaction if he were to see a Chinese takeout bag full of blood fall to the floor from out of thin air. *Please, please, please let the handle hold.*

The policeman walked to the door and pushed it aside to make sure no one was hiding there and seemed to be satisfied everything was clear. After only pausing for a minute, he made his way to the hallway looking into the other rooms as he passed them.

"Did you see anything back there?"

"Only some empty refrigerators," answered the cop. "I guess we better call the manager and get him or her down here to see how much is missing," he grumbled.

"I'll get the information and make the call," said his partner.

Millie felt herself wilt. It was going to be a while before this place was cleared out. She was going to have to slip out with the two cops still on the scene. Since they were both at the front of the office for the moment, Millie took the opportunity to see how much noise it was going to make to lift the bag in her arms and carry it out that way. First, she carefully set the bag on the ground. Next, she put both hands underneath and lifted it up to rest against her chest. The problem, of course, was the fact she had about a million pints of blood shoved down her shirt. She was round like Santa Claus and her arms were only so long. It took everything she had to hold the bag in place, but it was the only way to carry it since the handle was about to break. Finally, she took a tentative step forward hoping the noise would be minimal. *Not too bad*, she thought. If she just took it one step at a time until she were out of the building it would be fine. The most dangerous part would be the hallway. If someone decided to walk down the hall at the same time she was, there would be no way to prevent touching them. She was sticking out way too far for one person.

Millie felt like a robot as she took one step at a time toward the door. “You know, Mike. Things get weirder and weirder every year. What in the world would someone need with so many pints of blood? How much did the manager say should have been back there?”

“The manager said there should have been fifty-four pints in the refrigerator. They were about to send off a shipment to hospitals this week,” answered the Mike.

“Well, there were about five back there.”

“I don’t know, man. Probably some weird voo doo shit going on where they need a lot of blood for sacrifices and spells.”

“ I just hope nothing else is gone. The paperwork is already going to be a bitch. How much longer are we going to have to wait for someone to show up?” the cop asked.

“She said she’d be here in about thirty minutes. Do you want me to go down the street and get us some coffee?” offered Mike.

“That sounds good. Largest they have and 2 sugars.”

Millie was relieved. With one of them gone it would be easier to slip out unnoticed. The partner, Mike, went out the back door that led to the alley while the other officer stayed up front pacing. Millie took another tentative step forward aware of how quiet it was in the building and how every noise she made would be magnified. By the time she made it to the main part of the office, the policeman had taken a seat in one of the waiting area chairs. *Just a little more and I’ll be out the door. Just stay where you are Mr. Policeman.* Millie heard a thump and froze; her eyes immediately shooting over to the bored looking policeman. His eyes were definitely looking in her direction, but not at HER, but at the floor in front of her. Millie felt nauseous. She knew what he was looking at without looking down. She felt the bottom of the bag and found a hole. As the policeman eased up from his chair, Millie looked toward the door. Luck was on her side since the door opened to the outside and since the frame was broken, it seemed to be ajar. If she made a break for it and hit the door running she could be outside in under a minute, but fear prevented her from moving. Millie took another deep breath, counted to three, and took off for the door. She knew she was making noise, but couldn’t do anything to stop it if she wanted to get out of the building without the policeman touching her. She heard his heavy shoes hitting the floor behind her as she

hit the door. Millie was looking behind her as she stepped into the alley and didn't see policeman Mike coming in holding two cups of coffee. She hit him like a freight train, knocking him off his feet and almost losing her footing at the same time. She knew she'd dropped more blood bags, but couldn't stop to retrieve them. Her only thought was to get back to her apartment. Millie didn't hear the cop behind her once she got out of the alley and hoped he'd given up in all the confusion. She couldn't imagine what he was thinking. All he saw were blood bags dropping to the ground. He also had Mike to deal with – she just hoped he was okay.

After a couple of blocks are between her and the Save a Life Donation Center, Millie stops to rearrange the bags of blood in the sack. She wanted to make sure she wasn't going to lose anymore along the way. Finally, her thoughts returned to Slade. She had no idea how long she'd been gone, but it felt like forever. *Please let him be okay*, she thought as she ran the rest of the way home.

Chapter 36 – Millie

Millie didn't shake off her glamour until she was safely inside her apartment. She dumped the battered sack of blood on the kitchen table and ran over to the couch. Slade appeared to be the same as when she'd left. "Slade, Slade, wake up," she said as she patted his cheek.

"Ummaawwaaakke," he said as he stirred.

"Okay, I'm going to start the process Roman told me about. I'm going to have to cut you with silver and drain some blood. I know it will hurt, but hopefully you're too weak to kill me," Millie halfway joked.

Millie stood up and untucked her nightshirt, allowing all the pints to fall to the ground beside the couch. "What do I have that is silver?" Millie ran to the kitchen and pulled out the drawer containing her knives. Going through the few knives she had didn't take long. It didn't take long to realize they were all stainless steel and wouldn't do any good anyway. She ran to her bedroom and looked in her jewelry box. She didn't wear much, but hopefully there was something in there that was silver. As soon as she opened the lid she saw the necklace she bought shortly after she started living among the humans. It was her first frivolous purchase - a silver charm on a dainty chain. The charm was in the shape an abstract flower with a long stem. Hopefully the stem would be sharp enough to break skin.

Millie went back to the kitchen and grabbed two bowls to catch the draining blood. She returned to Slade's side after she had everything she thought she needed. Slade looked so pale, but he also looked peaceful. Her eyes glazed over for just a minute as she stared at him wondering if he was aware enough to be thinking, or

dreaming, or listening. Shaking herself, she kneeled beside him and grabbed his arm. She cradled it to her wondering where she should try to cut. Inside the elbow would be best, but she wouldn't be able to get it to the bowl to drain as easily as she could the wrist. With his hand in hers, Millie took the charm and dug it into Slade's skin silently praying it would break skin. She heard a slight sizzle as the silver touched him, but no blood appeared. Millie pushed against the skin harder and still nothing happened. The charm was too dull and Millie felt panic welling up inside her.

“For nature's sake,” Millie cried out loud. Millie decided to get a regular kitchen knife and use one hand to make a cut and the other to rub the silver across it hoping to cauterize it in some way so it would remain open long enough to drain Slade's blood. “If this doesn't work I don't know what I'm going to do,” she told Slade.

Once again by his side, Millie puts the blade against the inside of his wrist. After just a moment, she could see blood forming in the thin slice, but she wasted too much time looking at it and it sealed up before anything could drain. Just a small line of blood beaded where the cut had been. She didn't think to bring a towel into the living room with her and she didn't want to take the time to go get one, so she used her nightshirt to wipe off the blood so she could start over. This time she hovered over his arm, both hands in the air waiting to do their jobs. She put both the knife and the charm against his wrist at the same time. She dragged the knife down and followed it with the charm immediately. For a normal person it would have been excruciating to be cut so slow, but Slade seemed to be completely unaware of what was happening.

Her method seemed to be working. There was a thin stream of blood dripping down his hand and toward the bowl she had positioned before she started. The problem was the cut wasn't bleeding fast enough. Millie shivered at the thought of having to cut deeper, but she prepared to do just that. Following her previous strategy, Millie took the knife and put more pressure behind her cut. Instead of simply breaking skin, she was going to have to hit vein. Grimacing as she puts more force behind her cut, she feels the knife slide further into the wrist. This time she used the silver charm to go along the inside of the cut instead of just the top. Millie felt dizzy at the sight of the gushing blood as it ran into the bowl. She sat mesmerized watching Slade's "life" ooze out of his body, hoping Roman's instructions would work.

Chapter 37 – Millie

Oh, I hope this is the last switch I have to make, Millie thought to herself as she slid the empty bowl under Slade's wrist for the fourth time. After making sure the blood was flowing in the right place, Millie went to the bathroom so she could flush the full bowl down the toilet. Once the bowl was empty she took it to the bathtub to rinse it out completely. She couldn't stand the thought of the blood going into her kitchen sink where she put her dishes. After it was clear of all visible signs of blood, she went back to the couch to check on Slade. Millie's heart sped at the sight of Slade's wrist – blood was only dribbling out. Dropping to her knees, she lifted his arm to help stop the bleeding and reached for the towel she set beside the couch several minutes ago in preparation for this moment. As she wrapped Slade's wrist, she thought about feeding Slade. Millie was used to the blood, but she was worried about getting it down Slade's throat. What if he wasn't alert enough to drink?

As soon as Millie finished wrapping Slade's wrist, she ran to the refrigerator where she'd stored the blood while waiting for one of the blood bowls to fill up. She grabbed an arm full and ran back to Slade's side only to realize she'd forgot the knife to cut open the bags. When she finally had everything ready, she stood over Slade, opened his mouth, and made a large slit in the plastic bag. A steady stream flowed into Slade's mouth. *Please swallow, Slade,* Millie thought. She started to panic when she noticed blood pooling in his mouth instead of going down his throat. Millie tilted the bag back to prevent an overflow. "Slade, come on now!" Millie yelled as she slapped his cheek. She put her hand on his neck and started moving it back and forth, hoping she could

massage some of the blood down his throat. “Drink, drink, drink,” she said over and over as if she could will it to happen just by wanting it enough.

Millie wanted to jump for joy when she felt his throat move underneath her hand. Slade didn't seem to be awake or anything, but at least the blood was draining out of his mouth. After his mouth was empty, she tilted the bag down again so more would flow. It took Millie thirty minutes to feed Slade two bags of blood. She was relieved beyond words when Slade's eyes opened at the end of the second bag – until she looked into them. His eyes darted back and forth, giving his face an animalistic appearance. She'd never seen a look like that on anyone before and it sent ripples of fear through her body. Millie's instinct was to back away, but she couldn't move because Slade's hand shot out and grabbed her wrist preventing any movement at all.

Chapter 38 – Slade

Hunger was the only thing Slade was aware of when he regained consciousness. He didn't know where he was, how he got there, or who this girl was in front of him. She looked so afraid and that above everything else made him want to tear into her and feed more than anything else. The animal was difficult to subdue.

“Slade, let go. I have blood right here,” the girl screamed.

Blood, he thought, I know you have blood. You have plenty in that small body of yours.

“Slade, stop!” the girl said as she wrenched free of his grasp. She slapped him hard against the face. Slade's first instinct is to stand and force her into submission, glamour her, if need be, and drain her body of blood. His attempt to sit up was unsuccessful and before he could decide what was preventing him from standing, something plastic was shoved in his mouth and it tasted like blood. All thoughts of the girl disappeared as he sucked the bag like a newborn babe sucks his mother.

It seemed his hand was never empty. Whenever one bag was empty, there was another in its place. Soon, Slade's thoughts started to clear and he realized where he was. The surroundings of Millie's apartment came into view as his thirst started to subside. Finally, he felt like he could take a break and he attempted to lift himself into a sitting position. He felt Millie's supportive hands behind him giving him a helping push. He rested his head against the back of the couch and turned to look at Millie. Concern filled her eyes. He felt ashamed of his behavior and started to apologize. “Millie, I'm so sorry. I can't imagine what you must think of me.” Tears shimmered in her eyes ready to fall down her beautiful cheeks. Never has he allowed anyone to see

him in such a weakened state and he is startled to realize he doesn't mind that Millie has seen him at his worst.

“Millie, are you alright?” I didn't hurt you did I?”

Chapter 39 – Millie

“I’m fine, Millie answered. She hurriedly wipes away the tears from her eyes before they have a chance to fall, clears her throat, and starts to pick up the empty blood bags that litter the floor in front of the couch. “How do you feel?”

“The pain is gone, but I still feel weak. Unfortunately, I’ve lost a portion of the evening. What happened?”

Millie walked to the kitchen to throw away the empty bags and get more from the refrigerator. “You killed the assassin, you remember that, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, the faerie blood poisoned you and once I finally got you back to the apartment I kept trying to call Roman to see what to do. It took forever for him to call back.”

“It appears that whatever he told you to do worked. Did he tell you anything else besides the cure?”

“No, but he wasn’t exactly thrilled you were hurt while protecting me so I doubt he wanted to talk to me at all. I told him I’d let him know how everything went, but I think you should call him when you are ready.” Millie got back to the couch and handed Slade more blood. “Do you want me to bring you a glass so you don’t have to bite through the bag?” she asked.

“If you don’t mind. I think you’ve seen enough of my monster for one night,” he answered.

“How much more do you think you’ll need to drink?” she asked as she took his hand. She started to unwrap the towel from his wrist so she could see what the cut

looked like. New skin already covered the gash she'd made leaving only a thin scar. "You seem to be healing okay," she said.

"I feel fine, Millie. Really. I just need to replenish. I feel as though I haven't eaten in weeks."

Slade looked at his wrist and then lifted his shirt to check on the cuts he received from the assassin during the fight. Millie couldn't take her eyes off of Slade's chest. It looked like chiseled marble. She reached out and touched the scars without even thinking about what she was doing. Slade's eyes found hers. "Will you always have scars?" she asked.

"No, soon they will disappear. Once I get all the blood I need it will be as they were never there at all." Slade moved his hand to cover Millie's. "What did you have to do to save me?"

"I went to a blood bank to get as much blood as I could carry. Then I came back and drained you of all the poison. It took almost five bowls to hold it all. As soon as I had your wrist wrapped I started feeding you the clean blood. It took two bags before you even were aware enough to drink on your own."

"I am in your debt, Millie. I would not be here right now if you hadn't worked so hard to save my life."

"I had to cut you so hard and then to force the wound to stay open I had to burn it with silver," Maggie choked out. She was overwhelmed with emotion as she thought about the ordeal she'd just lived through. "I was so afraid you were going to die. I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself if Roman's instructions wouldn't have

worked. I'm so sorry, Slade. You should never have involved yourself with my problems." Tears were streaming down her face and she ducked her head to hide them.

Slade reached out and touched her chin, lifting it so he could look her directly in the eyes. "Listen, I'm glad I was able to help and I'd do it again. It has been such a long time since I've been able to let someone know me as you do. I don't want to give that up." He wiped the tears away from her face. "Come here, sit with me until I have my strength back," he said as he opened his arm as an invitation to lean against him.

Millie settled in the crook of Slade's arm and pulled her legs underneath her. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to relax.

Chapter 40 – Slade

Slade sank deeper into the couch cushions enjoying the weight of Millie as she leaned against him. He cut open the last bag of blood Millie brought to him and poured it into his glass. He no longer felt the need swallow the blood so fast, in fact he probably didn't even need the last bag, but it wouldn't hurt either. The more he consumed now the longer he'd have to go before he fed again.

Slade flipped through the events of the night, attempting to create a whole picture using the fragments from his memory together with what Millie told him. Killing the assassin was clear in his mind. He remembered how well he and Millie worked together initiate the fight. Slade remembered the rush of the assassin's blood as he ripped into the faerie's neck – the initial rush of power was unbelievable like nothing he'd ever experienced. Just recalling the experience was enough to cause him to shiver, especially with Millie so close and her blood smelling so intoxicating. However, it didn't take long for his shivers of desire to change into shivers of revulsion. How could the toxicity of faeries' blood not be common knowledge in the vampire community? Granted, Slade understood he kept to himself most of the time, but you would think this kind of information would be shared. He felt more than a little betrayed by Roman since he kept this information to himself.

Slade knew he needed to call Roman and tell him he survived the transfusion, but a small part of him wanted to keep Roman in the dark. *It would serve him right to think I was dead*, Slade thought. He especially didn't want to wake Millie. Looking over at her, asleep on his chest, she looked so fragile and innocent. He knows he shouldn't be thinking of her as something he needed to protect, but everything inside

him told him to keep her safe. He's known her for such a short time, but already he couldn't imagine not having her in his life. It embarrassed him, the thoughts he kept having of her. Her smooth skin, her pink lips, her slender fingers – he wanted to touch her and have her touch him in return.

Slade shook his head to clear his thoughts. He couldn't involve himself with Millie in a romantic way. *What am I thinking? There is no way a relationship between a vampire and a faerie could work*, he thought. He'd never heard of such a thing. But, he'd never known about vampires' reactions to faerie blood either. It seems there might be a lot in the paranormal world that he didn't know. Slade's thoughts drifted back to Roman and he realized it was time to make the phone call.

Slade eased himself out from under Millie and gently laid her on the couch. He walked to the kitchen to look for his cell phone and found it on the table.

"Slade?" Millie asked.

"I'm here," he responded. "I'm calling Roman."

Millie sat up and ran her fingers through her short hair leaving it standing up at all angles. Slade couldn't help but smile at her crazy hair. "I'm sure you are tired so you can go to bed if you want. I can let myself out."

"No, no, I can sleep late in the morning. I'm not scheduled to be at work until two o'clock. Go ahead and make your call. I can go into my room if you want privacy."

"I think you've proven to be trustworthy," Slade said sarcastically.

"Ha, ha," said Millie.

Slade found Roman's number in the recent calls on his phone and hit send. He still didn't know exactly what he was going to say when Roman answered. He was still

angry Roman didn't tell him what he needed to know, even after he asked about faeries. Slade was about to give up hope of talking to Roman when he finally answered.

"Slade?" Roman asked tentatively.

"It's me,"

"Thank heavens," said Roman. "I didn't know if what I told the girl to do would work."

"The girl's name is Millie."

"Right, Millie. How did you get mixed up with her after all and who is she to you?"

"Millie is a friend," Slade said as he glanced at Millie on the couch. He wanted Roman to know Millie was important to him, but didn't want to say anything that would embarrass him in front of her.

"Okay, she's a friend. Do you really think being friends with a faerie is a good idea? I mean, look what already happened to you."

"I could say that what happened to me is partly your fault. I asked you specifically what you knew about faeries and you said nothing," Slade said, trying to keep his temper under control.

"I told you to stay away from them."

"That wasn't an option. You should have told me what the blood would do to me."

"I didn't know for sure. I'd only heard rumors," said Roman.

“It would have been nice to know it was a possibility,” replied Slade. There was silence on the other end of the phone. It was possible Roman hung up, but after checking the phone he saw the call was still connected.

“I apologize, friend,” Roman finally conceded.

Slade didn’t like the feeling ignorant and wanted to know what other information he was missing, but knew this wasn’t the right time to ask. “I don’t want to be in the dark anymore. You need to share information with me.”

“Yes, I can see that now,” said Roman.

“Fine, we need to get together soon and share what we know.”

“Of course, Slade. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Now, on to other matters. What prevented you from answering the phone when I was trying to get a hold of you the last two days?” Slade asked.

“That, my friend, is a long and complicated story.”

“Give me a short version.”

“Well, I’m having some trouble with the Paranormal Team we’ve had issues with in the past,” Roman admitted.

“After all this time? You’ve kept out of sight for so long. How did this happen?” Slade asked.

“I’m helping a friend.”

“Is it the girl I heard in the background when we talked? Who is she?”

“Her name is Maggie and yes she was with me earlier. I can’t tell you more right now, but hopefully when we get together I’ll be able to give you more information than you could possibly want. The Paranormal Team, as you know, has dealings with

many paranormal species. Perhaps I can get some information about the faerie folk while I'm working with Maggie on her problem.”

Slade knew Roman could take care of himself. He'd met Roman over twenty years ago when they were both in the Paranormal Team's custody. The Paranormal Team had just recently been established then and they were attempting some early forms of experimentation on any paranormal being they could get their hands on – vampires were their preferred species. They considered the fact that vampires couldn't be killed a perk. It allowed the Team to perform more experiments with fewer subjects. Roman and Slade escaped from the laboratory more than twenty years ago. Since then, they both tried to remain out of sight. Roman chose a sparsely populated area in Alabama, while Slade went the opposite direction and moved to New York City to get lost in a sea of people.

“Just be careful and promise to call if you need my help,” Slade said.

“I will.”

Slade ended his call and turned back to Millie. “It seems Roman is having some problems of his own.”

“I'm sorry. Does he need you help?”

Slade couldn't help but notice Millie wouldn't look at him when she asked about him leaving town. “No, he'll call if he needs me, but I'm sure he'll be fine.”

“Good,” said Millie. “I mean, I'm glad Roman is okay.”

Slade watched as color crept up Millie's face and realized it was one of the most beautiful sights he'd ever seen.

“Slade, I hope you know how much I appreciate what you've done for me.”

“Of course, Millie. I’m glad I could be of service, but I can’t help but wonder what is yet to come.”

Millie flopped on the couch, “Grrrr, can’t we pretend that killing the assassin took care of everything?”

“Sure,” answered Slade, “does that mean you are going back home?”

“Uh, no! As long as the Queen is around there will be nothing but trouble for me, but maybe the assassin hadn’t reported back yet with my whereabouts. It could be fine, right?”

“Until she sends the next assassin to do the job.”

“I know, but I don’t care!” she pouted.

Slade knew she didn’t mean it and knew the stress of caring for him was causing her despair. “Well, I do care,” said Slade while staring directly at Millie.

As if she could feel his eyes boring into her, she looked up from the couch and locked eyes with him. “I know,” she whispered.

“Are you going to be okay by yourself? I have some business to take care of before morning,” Slade asked, almost hoping she would ask him to stay.

“I’m fine. You should go. I’m sorry I got you involved in this in the first place. I owe you so much already and I don’t want to add to my debt by keeping you from your business tonight. Go, really,” Millie assured him as she stood and walked toward the door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Be sure to keep safe,” Slade said as he slipped out the door.

Chapter 41 – Millie

She could tell he didn't want to leave, but she felt guilty for asking so much from him already that she told him she would be okay. She was more than a little confused about how she felt about him as she watched him walk out the door. A slow smile crept to her face as she heard him call, "Be sure to lock the door behind me." Millie flipped the dead bolt and turned to survey her apartment. It was a mess with the debris from Slade's transfusion. There were still a few empty blood packets on the floor in front of the couch, bloody fingerprints were in various places around the kitchen, and chairs in the kitchen and cushions on the couch were askew, giving the whole place a chaotic look.

Millie decided cleaning would be the only thing to calm her down. She felt fidgety and knew she wouldn't be able to sleep any time soon, so after turning on the television and setting it to a music channel for background noise, she got to work. Millie wanted to zone out a little and since she didn't have to be at work until two o'clock tomorrow afternoon she had plenty of time to stay up late and get the place in order. She always felt better when things were neat and organized.

Millie contemplated taking a shower before she got started since she felt so grimy, but figured she'd need another one after taking care of the apartment so decided to wait. She went to the couch and gathered the empty packets that didn't get picked up in the first trip to the trashcan then went back to straighten the cushions. On her way, she noticed something brown underneath the coffee table and when she bent down to investigate she saw it was a piece of leather. Apparently, it came off of Slade's wrist while he was thrashing around when he first regained consciousness. Millie sat on the

carpet and examined the craftsmanship. It was soft and well worn so she assumed he'd had it for a while. It was about an inch and a half wide with a floral design on each end and the name Michael in the middle. *Michael?* she thought. Millie put the bracelet around her wrist and snapped it closed. It was entirely too big, but didn't slip off. She pushed it farther up her arm until it fits snug. The bracelet fits securely just below her elbow. She doesn't ask herself why she put on the bracelet in the first place and she really doesn't want to think about why she keeps it there.

Millie went to the kitchen to start on the bloody smudges. They'd had plenty of time to dry and harden, which forced her to use a lot of elbow grease to get rid of all the blood evidence. After scrubbing everything with bleach cleaner she was satisfied with the state of the counters. It only took a minute to wash the bowls she'd used to catch Slade's tainted blood and once they were back in the cabinet, the only thing left to do was take care of herself.

Millie stripped off her nightshirt, wadded it up, and stuffed it into the trashcan. In addition to the bloodstains, it hung strangely on her body since it stretched beyond recognition when she stuffed it full of the blood packets. She considered it a small price to pay for saving Slade's life.

She stepped in the shower after the stream reached a nice, hot temperature and let the water flow over her. She felt her body loosen as her muscles relaxed. Millie knew it was going to feel great to crawl into bed and read for a little while once she was fresh and clean. When she noticed she started to prune, she turned off the water and reached for her towels. She wrapped one towel around her hair and another around her body. Millie walked to her bedroom to finish drying off because the steam in the

bathroom was so thick. She bent over to towel dry her hair and then sat on the edge of her bed to comb out the tangles. All of a sudden she realized she didn't feel like standing up to take her towels to the bathroom. All she wanted to do was crawl into bed and feel the cool covers on top of her. Millie allowed her towels to pile on the floor at the end of the bed and slipped under the covers. She reached over to the nightstand for her book and saw the leather bracelet she took off before the shower. She wrapped it around her arm again and slid it in place. She abandoned any thought of reading since her thoughts were bouncing all over the place. She thought about the possibility of actually being safe now that the assassin was dead, but knew in her heart it wasn't possible. Slade was right; it was only a matter of time until the Queen sent another one in his place to take care of the job. Even though she knew she didn't have much time before danger would be coming her way again, Millie couldn't seem to get worked up about it. Slade's face kept coming into focus every time she closed her eyes. She knew she couldn't count on Slade to be there every time she ran into trouble, but for some reason, she felt like he always would be. *I wonder what he had to go do tonight?* she wondered as she started to drift off to sleep. *He certainly didn't have to go feed since he was about to burst from all the blood he drank before he left. Where are you Slade?* was her last thought before her eyes closed for good.

Chapter 42 – Slade

Slade hurries through the dark streets back toward the warehouse with little hope that Stallings would still be there. It felt like a lifetime ago since Millie called asking for him. After what has happened, he regrets taking the Stallings job. It's turned into a hassle, but only because he wants to be available to Millie. *That is what happens when you have personal relationship with people*, Slade chastised himself. Isolation is much more convenient. Personal connections cause problems.

He couldn't seem to get Millie's face out of this head, even though he knew she was a distraction that could end up costing him a lot of money and, worst case scenario, his life. If he didn't get himself under control he didn't if he would ever get Stallings caught and out of the way. Millie's tear-filled eyes hovering over him while he lay on her couch touched him somewhere deep inside where he hasn't had feeling in many years. He knows, even though it would make his life more complex, that he would continue to see her as long as she would allow it. Slade knew he would go to the coffee shop tomorrow afternoon. Millie said she would be at work, but after the night she had he couldn't imagine her living her life like normal ever again. The things she had to do tonight to save him would scare most girls. He suspected Millie was stronger than most girls, both human and supernatural. There was just something special that leaked out of her. A sense of strength surrounded her at all times. Slade wondered if she would want to continue their friendship. He hoped she did.

The scent of Charles Stallings hit him like a brick wall as he turned onto the street of the warehouse. "I can't believe it," Slade chuckled. "I never would have thought he'd still be here." Slade realized Charles might not actually be in the

warehouse and it could simply be his scent left behind, but being it was so strong told him Stallings was close. Slade approached the warehouse from the back and made his way to the roof once again. Deja vu comes over him as he jogs to the access door he'd already used once that evening. As soon as he grabbed the door handle, he remembered what happened the last time he was here and reached inside his jacket pocket and turned off his cell phone. He didn't think Millie would call again tonight, but he didn't want a repeat of earlier. After the phone is back in his pocket, he heads inside the warehouse and is on Charles' trail once again.

Chapter 43 - Millie

Millie couldn't decide where the loud buzzing was coming from and why it wouldn't stop. It took her longer than usual to pull herself away from the arms of sleep. She was so comfortable and the only thing preventing her from turning over and burrowing deeper into the covers was the blasted buzzing. Eventually, Millie's eyes opened and she realized the buzzing was coming from her nightstand. She reached over and shut off the alarm clock with a practiced move. Forcing her eyes open, Millie stared at the ceiling and thought about the day ahead. "Everything should be back to normal today," she said out loud, like saying it would make it true. Dragging her self out of bed was difficult. It wasn't until she threw back the covers that she realized her went to bed naked and that her still damp abandoned towels were still on the floor by the bed. She was a little embarrassed to be walking around her apartment nude even though she knew no one could see her. She'd never slept naked before and attributed the occurrence to complete and total exhaustion.

Millie had to be at work in 45 minutes so she didn't waste any time hopping in the shower to rinse off. Once the warm water hit her, she started to feel more awake. She toweled off quickly and went to the bedroom to pull out her underwear and decide what to wear. She didn't want to put much thought into it so she just grabbed what was close by. She ended up with a pair of jeans that were in the closet by the door and a long-sleeve t-shirt that would be good for inside and outside. She didn't want to take a jacket. She didn't want to carry anything. Basically, Millie didn't want to be responsible for keeping up with anything today.

Millie let herself in the back door of the coffeeshop and immediately grabbed her apron. She could tell by the constant roar coming from the front that it was busy. The hustle and bustle almost made her want to crawl back into bed or go sit in a corner somewhere. Even though she felt overwhelmed, throwing herself into work and falling into the routine of making coffee, putting baked goods in the oven, and cleaning tables might be exactly what she needs to get through the day. Slade mentioned he would see her at work, but she didn't know if he really meant it or if he was just saying that because of the eventful night they'd shared. She didn't want him to feel obligated to continue their friendship. She would have saved him even if he hadn't just saved her life.

When Millie made her way to the front counter her eyes did a quick sweep of the customers. Almost immediately she sees Slade sitting in his normal table by the window. The only difference this time is he isn't looking outside; he is looking directly at her. She felt weak and her heart rate increased as she watched a slow smile spread across lips. Relief flows through her after seeing him and she doesn't know exactly why. She realized she is happy, just happy. She checked the front counter to make sure no one needed her assistance and then made her way to the tables with a rag in her hand. She'd act like she was wiping down tables so she could go over to Slade without looking completely obvious. Slade's eyes were on her the entire time. They were intense like last night, but without the wildness of confusion and pain. She approached him cautiously, not knowing what to expect from him when she got to his table.

Chapter 44 - Slade

Beautiful. It was the only word he could think of to describe Millie as she walked toward him. Even though she wore a tentative smile, he could tell she was tired and that only added to the affection he was feeling for her. He knew she was up so late because of him. All the trouble she went through to save him was done unselfishly. Slade knew Millie would have saved him even if she didn't know him. It was just her way. Compassionate, loving, giving, all words to describe her. She could have easily left him behind, but she didn't. Instead, she struggled to get him up to her apartment and saved his life.

Finally, Millie sat across from him at the table by the window. She held his eyes with hers so that he felt like looking away was impossible. The lavender color was mesmerizing; he'd never seen a color like it before in his life. He couldn't take it anymore and asked, "How do you feel?"

"I'm a little tired," she replied.

"Well, that is definitely understandable."

"How about you? Do you feel back to normal?"

"I haven't felt this good in a long time," said Slade. It wasn't until after he said this that he realized how true this was. One reason he felt so good was all the blood he had last night. It had been a long time since he had allowed himself to fill up on human blood. But, he suspected another cause for his good mood was Millie. He hadn't allowed himself to get close to anyone in such a long time that he didn't know how to act around Millie. He definitely didn't want to scare her away, but he wanted her to know that he enjoyed her company.

“That’s great, Slade. I’m really happy about that. There was a time last night I didn’t know if you were going to make it or not,” Millie admitted. “I was so afraid.”

“You were very brave, both with the fight in the park and when you were nursing me back to health.” Slade’s eyes drifted over her, drinking her in, suddenly feeling he couldn’t get enough her. He wanted to burn her image into his brain. As his eyes made a final sweep across her body they saw something surprising. There, pushed up on her arm, close to her elbow, Millie wore his bracelet. In all the excitement he hadn’t realized he lost it. The leather strap had been such a part of him for so long that he was amazed he didn’t feel naked without it. Automatically his left hand reached for his empty right wrist. Thinking of the bracelet forced memories into his brain – some pleasant and some that broke his heart. *Don’t get lost in the past, Slade. You have something more important right here in front of you,* he told himself.

Millie sat quietly for a minute and he wished he could see inside her head. He wanted to know what she was thinking. “Did you finish your business last night? I hate that I took you away from it in the first place. I hope I didn’t cause you too much trouble,” she finally said.

“I was able to take care of everything after I left you last night. Things went surprisingly smooth. Now that I have fulfilled my contractual obligations for the company I was working for, I plan to take some time off.” He didn’t mention that the reason for his vacation was that he hoped to spend time with her.

“Are you going somewhere on your vacation?” Millie asked.

“I haven’t made any specific plans, but since I’m free tonight I thought I could take you somewhere after work if you don’t have any other plans. What time do you finish your shift?”

“I get off at 9:00 p.m.”

“That couldn’t be more perfect. I will be waiting for you when you get off.”

“See you then,” Millie said before she got up and walked toward the counter to take her turn making coffee.

Slade sat staring after her for a long while. He couldn’t seem to motivate himself to go anywhere. He looked at his watch and noticed it was only 2:30 p.m. and couldn’t believe he had to wait six and a half hours until he saw her again. He couldn’t stay at the coffee shop until she got off because that would just be strange. After thinking it over, he decided to head to his apartment. He could spend some time straightening the place just in case Millie came over sometime soon. Admittedly, cleaning his apartment wouldn’t take very long so he would probably spend the rest of the time watching TV or reading. Reluctantly, he stood up and made his way outside being sure to stick to the shadows.

Chapter 45 – Millie

“Are you doing okay?” Manny asked Millie after her third mistake of the afternoon.

“I’m sorry, Manny. I have a lot on my mind today.”

“Don’t apologize. I think we can handle a few spills and order mix-ups, but this isn’t like you.”

“I know. Poor Ms. Hammond. Her blouse will never be the same,” Millie said with a tiny smile. Ms. Hammond was one of their most demanding customers. When Millie accidentally spilled the soy caramel latte she ordered all over Ms. Hammond’s light blue blouse she couldn’t believe her luck. Even though Ms. Hammond gave her quite a tongue-lashing there was a small part of her that thought it was very funny. She had been giving the employees at Where Ya Bean hell for years – demanding replacements if the coffee didn’t taste just right, demanding to use coupons even though they were expired, and never, ever tipping.

“That old bat had it coming. It is a wonder it hasn’t happened before today as nervous as she makes all the employees. I’ve never seen anyone cause employees to run and hide like that one,” Manny said with one of his good-hearted chuckles. “You know, Millie, you can talk to me if you need something. From what I’ve gathered you don’t seem to have any family around so if you need something, just ask. Okay?”

“Thanks, Manny. You’re great. I’m okay, really.”

“Whatever you say,” Manny said sounding unsure.

Millie decided she better not make any of the drinks if she could help it and instead focused on cleaning up the tables as sloppy customers left without picking up

their trash. After she completed a full circuit around the dining area, she decided to focus on pastries. If the employees weren't careful, the selection in the display cases could dwindle pretty fast. It took longer than she expected to make sure the late night crew had everything they needed. She even had to mix up the batter and prepare the baking pans for a batch of Where Ya Bean's best-selling WalCranChip muffins. Since the coffee shop closed at 1 a.m., nothing went into the ovens after 9 o'clock. She would slip everything in the ovens when she left and the late crew would take them out when they were done baking.

After working with the breads and pastries, she realized she was a little hungry. She grabbed the last WalCranChip muffin from the display case and poured herself a glass a milk to wash it down. She picked her way through the customers in the seating area until she found an unoccupied table in the back. Millie stared off in the distance, not focusing on any one thing. She couldn't help thinking about Remy. So often she would come to the coffee shop to sit with her for a little while. Remy once ate three of the WalCranChip muffins in one sitting. She loved the taste of the walnuts, cranberries, and chocolate chips blended together. Remy would analyze the muffins in the display case trying to decide which muffins would be the best. She especially liked it when a large walnut made it to the top of the muffin. Thinking of Remy brought a smile to Millie's face, but she stopped herself, because Remy wasn't really her friend. Remy was a spy and sent to report back to the Queen. The betrayal was overwhelming and hurt just as much as when she found Izzy and her other friends dead. In a way, Remy was dead too. At least to Millie she was anyway.

"Excuse me," a deep voice interrupts Millie's train of thought.

Millie shakes her head to clear her head and looks up the eyes of a handsome young man. “Yes,” Millie responds.

“Do you mind if I ask what you are eating?” the boy asked.

“It is a WalCranChip muffin.”

“It looks delicious. I was trying to decide if I wanted something to snack on with my coffee and I think you helped me make my decision. Thank you.”

“I took the last one.”

“Just my luck,” he said.

Millie looked at the time on her cell phone. “I need to get back to work anyway so, do you want the rest of this one? I never took a bite from it. I just broke pieces off.”

“I’m afraid you would think I was too strange if I accepted food from someone I don’t know,” he teased.

“Well, since it’s me and I know I’m safe, I promise I won’t think you’re too weird,” she chuckled.

“If you insist. I don’t want to be rude.”

“I insist. Enjoy the muffin.”

“Here,” he said as he reached for his back pocket, “let me give you some money.”

“No, no, really. Since I work here I don’t have to pay. Just one of the many perks, you know?”

“Let me do something. I feel like a begger and a mooch. What time do you get off work? Maybe I could take you for some dinner or a movie,” the boy offered.

“That’s okay. I wasn’t going to finish the muffin anyway and I already have plans after work. Thanks for the offer though,” Millie said as she wiped her crumbs off the table. “Enjoy, and be sure to come back first thing in the morning sometime so you can get a fresh muffin. If you can believe it, they are even better then.”

Millie turned and walked away from the young man. *He seemed nice*, she thought to herself as she made her way back to the counter. It was time for Martin’s break so Millie was going to have to make the drinks again. She just hoped it went better this time. She had to admit she felt a little better – not near as shaky and jittery as before her break. Talking to someone helped. Thinking about her encounter with the young man made her glance toward the table where she left the boy. She wasn’t surprised to see that he’d left, but seeing what he left on the table gave her a strange feeling. The partially eaten muffin she gave him was still sitting on the table. He hadn’t even taken a bite. *How strange*, she thought. *Maybe he just didn’t want to eat after me and was too polite to say something when I offered it to him.*

“Hi, can I have a large non-fat, mocha, peppermint, latte?” the customer asked, interrupting her thoughts.

“Absolutely,” Millie replied, happy to have something to do with her hands. Otherwise she would probably pull out her hair because all of a sudden, the jitters were back.

After serving several more customers, Millie realized she kept looking at the clock. She willed it to move faster, but instead time seemed to stand still. It felt, literally, like the shift that would never end. The closer to 9 p.m. it got, the more anxious she felt. Millie tried to imagine what Slade had in mind for the evening. Was

he just being nice when he offered to meet her after work so he could walk her home and make sure she arrived safe? She didn't think that's what he had in mind; there was more in his eyes than simply a duty to keeping her safe. His stare was intense – almost hungry. Thinking about him caused a chill to run through her body and she realized she had goose bumps on her arms. As she rubbed the tingle out of her skin, her hand brushed against Slade's bracelet. Her eyes widened with surprise as a rush of embarrassment flooded her. Millie tried to think back to when she was sitting with Slade. She was wearing a long sleeve t-shirt and the sleeves are pushed up to her elbow now, but were they when she was talking to him? Maybe not, but for the life of her she couldn't remember. *He probably thinks I'm a freak. Why wear it? Why not just put it in my pocket or a purse or a tote and carry it to him that way? Grrr.* "It's too late to worry about it now I suppose," Millie muttered under her breath as she ripped down the sleeves of her shirt.

At a quarter 'til nine, Millie handed over the responsibilities of the counter to one of the newer employees. "Do you have any questions before I go?" she asked.

"I don't think so," answered Sarah. "Have a good night."

"You too. I'm going in the back to put the last batch of muffins in the oven. Be sure to listen for the timer so we don't lose another batch," Millie warned.

"I will, but that wasn't my fault. Tony was supposed to listen for me because I was so busy with the lunch rush."

"Hey, I'm not blaming anyone. I'm just saying the muffins are in the oven. If you need to do something to remind yourself about them then do it. Write a note, put a

rubber band around your wrist, heck, set the timer on your cell phone if you need to. Just don't miss the timer.”

“Okay, Millie,” Sarah replied looking a bit wide-eyed.

Wow, that was a little harsh, Millie thought as she walked to the kitchen area and cranked up the oven temperature. She went to the racks where the waiting muffin tins were stacked and removed the plastic wrap covering each one. After waiting just a minute, she opened the ovens and slid the muffins deep into the oven. After setting the timer for 30 minutes, she turned and walked away.

Millie walked to back and hung up her apron. Checking the clock she realized it was only a few minutes until 9 o'clock so she decided to clock out. Slade was supposed to meet her at the front of the store, so she checked her pockets to make sure she had her money and cell phone, took a deep breath, and walked through the store to go outside.

Slade was leaning lazily against a bench right in front of the coffee shop. She felt a flutter as she saw a slow smile appear on his face and couldn't prevent her mouth from matching his. “Did you have a good shift?” Slade asked.

“It was okay,” Millie said automatically. “Oh, I spilled coffee on one of our best customers though,” she added.

“You sound a little too happy about that.”

“Well, I guess I should rephrase, she is one of our most frequent customers, not our best – if you know what I mean.”

“Troublesome I assume?”

“Oh, goodness, that is putting it lightly. My coffee is too cold, my coffee is too hot, it doesn't have enough chocolate, are you sure you are putting three shots of

espresso in my coffee? Ugh, it goes on and on and on,” Millie said rolling her eyes.

Slade chuckled as they walked along the street, easing into a comfortable pace. “What did you do with your day?” she asked him after feeling awkward about the silence.

“I took care of some paperwork related to the job I just finished. Nothing as exciting as your customer confrontation for sure,” Slade said. “Are you hungry? Do we need to stop and get you something to eat?”

“No, I’m good. I had a muffin at work not too long ago.”

Without realizing it, they had worked their way toward the park. She felt nervous as they kept approached the entrance, but not out of fear of what they’d find inside, but because of how she felt next to Slade. There was a comfortable silence between them as they sauntered along enjoying the cool, night air. Without meaning to, Millie’s arm brushed up against Slade’s. She pulled back, hoping he didn’t notice. “Have you thought anymore about where you might do with your time off from work?” Millie asked to cover up her nervousness.

“I haven’t really thought about it. I might just stay here and enjoy what is right in front of me for a while.”

Millie glanced over at Slade and noticed he was looking directly at her. Heat flowed through her body and she couldn’t tell if it was from embarrassment or attraction. Both emotions were swirling around inside her and she didn’t know if she could separate the two. “It would be nice having you around,” Millie said. Her eyes never left his as they continued to walk toward the park.

Millie felt Slade’s hand brush hers; she didn’t pull away. Slade’s pinky tentatively curled around hers and held on loosely. It seemed like if she protested to the

physical contact he could pull away as if the touch was an accident. She was thrilled with the touch and wanted more, but was afraid to pull his hand closer in order to lace their fingers together. “It is such a nice night,” Millie whispered afraid to break the “spell” between them.

“A wonderful night,” Slade agreed.

His pinky lightly tugged on hers to pull her closer and enveloped the rest of her dainty hand in his. Their fingers laced together loosely and their palms touched periodically as they fell into a comfortable rhythm and walked down the street like they were the only two people in town. Millie thought about how nice it was to have someone in her life that knows exactly who she is. There is nothing at all to hide from Slade. Millie thought about how she and Slade have been through so much together in such a short time and how their getting-to-know-you period was fast-forwarded, but realized the butterflies she was feeling weren't from nerves, but instead from anticipation of what was to come. So much emotion was tied up in their relationship already, but she discovered the emotion closest to the surface was happiness as their steps became more and more confident with each other.

Chapter 46 – Slade

Lightning flowed through his blood as he pulled Millie's hand tighter into his. Her skin was so soft and her scent was intoxicating. He didn't need to feed, but the thought of her blood and how wonderful it would taste caused him to crave it. It was torture knowing her blood was poison to him. Torture knowing he'd never be able to taste her. Torture knowing, that if their relationship took a romantic turn, he wouldn't be able to share the total experience with her since drinking from Millie, as other vampires drank from their lovers, during love making was out of the question. "I've enjoyed spending time with you these last few days, Millie. I know much of our time together has been stressful, but getting to know you has been worth everything I've been through."

"I've enjoyed it too," Millie said.

"Is there anything special you'd like to do this evening?" Slade asked.

"No, just walking is nice, but is there anything you want to do?"

"Let's see," Slade said as he thought of silly options that would make Millie laugh, "we could go bowling; I know of a place that has glow-in-the-dark bowling starting at Midnight." Millie's laugh sounded like wind chimes as it escaped her beautiful mouth. He could tell he caught her off guard with the suggestion. "Of course, if you don't like bowling we could always find some other intellectually stimulating activity to do."

"Like what, miniature golf or the arcade?"

"Exactly, you see, you and I are on the same wave length," Slade said as he let out a boisterous laugh. It felt natural when he let go of her hand and reached his arm

around her to pull her closer. He enjoyed the feel of Millie's body as she settled under his arm and melted into his side. He took it as a positive sign that she didn't pull away. *Don't get attached. How can a relationship between two totally different species succeed – especially since her blood will poison you,* he thought.

The park was unusually empty, which made Slade feel like he and Millie were the only two people in the city. Sounds from outside the park didn't even disturb their walk. Thoughts of taking Millie in his arms and kissing her senseless kept finding their way into his mind. At first he didn't recognize the feeling that pricked his senses, but as soon as he felt Millie tense beside him, he knew something was lurking in the darkness. "Dammit," Slade cursed low enough only Millie could hear, "turn around and walk back to the coffee shop as quickly as you can."

"No way, Slade. Someone is up there and you and I both know they are here for me. There is no way I'm leaving you here to fight my fight," Millie said.

"We don't need another night like last night. I'm not a fan of running away from conflict, but I suggest we attempt to stay out of harm's way if we can."

"Sounds good, but they'll just follow us. They can move as fast as we can so we won't be able to stay ahead of them long enough to lose them."

"Can you tell if there are more than one?" Slade asked. "Can you see anyone? Whoever it is, they must be using Glamour because I can't see anyone. I just sense something is amiss."

"I don't see anyone yet either, Slade, but I'm sick of running. If the Queen sent someone again this soon, it only means I'll have no rest until she is dead. Otherwise,

she'll send assassin after assassin after assassin. Someday our luck will run out and one of them will get lucky meaning all of our fighting will be for nothing.”

Resigned to the fact Millie wasn't going anywhere, Slade said, “What do you want to do?”

Chapter 47 – Millie

Millie closed her eyes and reached out with her senses trying to determine how many faeries were up ahead. It was difficult to tell, but she was fairly sure there was more than one this time. She wanted to do exactly what Slade told her to do and run, but there was no way she was going to leave him standing here alone to fight her fight. She didn't want to deal with another battle. She didn't want to put Slade in harm's way. She didn't, she didn't, she didn't. But, the Queen didn't leave her a choice.

Millie thought about Slade's question, *What do I want to do? Well, I could turn my self in and take the punishment that is handed to me or Slade and I could try to repeat what we did last night.* "Slade, I say we keep walking until they make their move. I'll be able to see them when they step out from the protection of the trees and I'll tell you where they are. Other than that, I don't see a lot of options other than me handing myself over to them and go back to the Faery Realm."

"Absolutely not," Slade growled. "There is no way you are going with them willingly."

"Well, let's keep walking and see what happens."

Millie slipped out from under Slade's arm and linked her hand through the crook of his elbow. They appeared to be two normal people out for an evening stroll. She took several deep breaths to calm down because the dread of what was about to happen sank in deeper with every step they took. When she felt Slade's hand cover the one she placed on his arm, she turned to him and saw a fierce expression looking back at her. "Are you okay?" she asked him.

“Nothing is going to happen to you,” he responded in a low rumble. Millie gave him a slight smile. She could tell he was fighting to control his voice and emotions and affection for him flooded through her. Looking into his serious face and feeling the pressure of his strong hand on hers made her decision easy. She would give herself up as soon as the situation seemed hopeless. She refused to put him in danger of dying ever again.

“Okay, I sense more than one this time. They are using the trees on the right side of the path to stay hidden so, I’m not sure they are using Glamour or not. As soon as I see anything I’ll tell you like last time.”

Millie felt Slade’s arm tense and she almost giggled. It was like he unconsciously flexed his muscle to prove to her his strength. She reached up with her free hand and patted his arm and pulled herself closer to his side. Even with the stress of what was about to happen, she couldn’t help smiling. Slade was a wonderful man – if only she’d met him under different circumstances.

A rustling in the trees drew Millie’s eyes to the side of the path. She is prepared to tell Slade what is happening when, all of a sudden, the trees parted to create an archway. Millie feels a knot of dread tighten in her stomach. Before it even happens, she knows what she will see. Two faeries, dressed in royal armor, step through the archway. Their drawn swords gleam brilliantly despite the inky blackness around them.

“This is different,” Slade commented beside her.

“Yep, at least we know it isn’t going to be a sneak attack this time, huh?” The ball of dread in her stomach continued to grow. This wasn’t like the night before. This wasn’t just a random assassin chosen to complete a job. “Slade, this is going to be a lot

worse than last night. Those aren't assassins; they are guards." Slade's wrapped his arm around her once again as they continued to walk toward the faeries.

Seconds later, the guards halted and stepped aside to create a pathway between them. Millie feet stopped moving without her permission, automatically pulling Slade to a halt beside her. "The Queen," Millie whispered to him as both guards dropped to one knee.

"Presenting Queen Raina, Ruler of the Faery Realm. Kneel and pay homage," one of the guards announced.

Millie felt the natural urge to genuflect before the Queen to pay her respect. Years of habit made it difficult to stand tall and refuse to show submission. Of course, having Slade standing beside her helped a great deal. Millie glanced at Slade to see how he was handling the Queen's presence and was pleased to see, for the most part, he seemed unaffected. His eyes seemed a bit wide, but there didn't appear to be any signs of fear on his face. She hoped it was just an act. If Slade didn't think the Queen was a threat, he was hugely mistaken.

"Hello, Millie," greeted the Queen. "You dare not show your allegiance to your Queen?"

"I no longer have a Queen. One as cruel and heartless as you isn't fit to rule," replied Millie. There was a slight tremor in her voice, but she was proud she could form words at all in the midst of danger.

"Now, now, surely you don't mean that, dear. While I admit, at times, a Queen must act harshly to keep her people safe, but I am far from cruel. And, heartless you

say? I love my people more than myself,” said the Queen as a beautiful smile appeared on her face.

“You don’t consider massacring a group of young faeries to be cruel?” Millie spat. Slade’s arm tightened around her as if to remind her to be cautious. The Queen’s eyes shifted to Slade like she realized he was standing there.

“I see you’ve found a friend, young Millie.”

Millie didn’t feel the need to respond to the Queen’s comment. The less Slade was involved the better and bringing him into the conversation would only make the Queen focus on him more.

“How is it you got involved with this trouble, vampire?” the Queen asked Slade.

Millie’s stomach dropped as soon as she realized the Queen directed a question to Slade and was going to force him to join the discussion.

“It is my pleasure to serve Millie in her cause against such an oppressive ruler,” stated Slade.

“Serve? You serve her? Ha! Do you know what you have there, vampire? You have a faerie that was abandoned at birth and raised by anyone willing to take her into his or her home. You have a faerie who was nothing more than the friend of a rebellious girl and, because of that relationship, was included in a plan to overthrow the Queen! Never would she have the brains or ability to pull something like that off on her own. Silly Millie, that’s what they called her, spent her days working in the kitchens. The only thing she was thought to be able to do with any success.” The Queen’s eyes drifted back to Millie. “Did you really think you could hide, dear one?”

Tears shimmered in her eyes, threatening to overflow and fall down her cheeks at any moment. The heat of embarrassment washed over her and having Slade there to witness her humiliation was something she didn't think she could handle. She hadn't told him anything about her life in the Realm. The Queen made everything sound so awful. It was true her mother abandoned her shortly after she was born. It was true she was passed from house to house until she was old enough to become an apprentice to a chef. But, it was not true to say she didn't have abilities. Izzy knew the real Millie. The Faery Realm had never given her the opportunity to shine. She glanced at Slade to see how he reacted to the Queen's assessment of Millie's life. She was so relieved when her eyes met Slade's. His ice, blue eyes were filled with pride causing his mouth to form a jaunty smile. She couldn't help but laugh when he reached out and knocked a tear from her eyelashes before it could fall.

After a quick wink, he turned to the Queen and said, "You have no idea what you had! Cruel and heartless is one thing, but clueless is something completely different. Millie is one of the most competent and smart women I've ever met and you'd have been lucky to have her as part of your Court. A shame you overlooked such talent," Slade taunted.

As much as Millie enjoyed listening to Slade's irreverent speech, she knew the Queen wouldn't take kindly to being talked down to by anyone, much less a non-faerie. Millie turned her head toward Slade and whispered, "Slade, I want you to leave right now. Fighting the Queen is more than you bargained for and I don't want to be the one responsible for getting you hurt or killed. I'll take care of this on my own."

Without taking his eyes off the Queen, Slade said, “Not a chance, beautiful,” as he tightened his grip around her.

“You know,” continued the Queen as if she didn’t hear him, “humans are so malleable. It doesn’t take much to get them to do exactly what you want.” The Queen seemed to be contemplating something for a while before she said, “We’ve known where you lived and worked for months. Remy was so very helpful in that regard, but when she didn’t make her usual report, I knew something was wrong. So, I simply found someone else to do her job.”

The Queen raised her arm and made a motion for someone to come forward. It didn’t take long for someone to appear from behind the trees. “Meet Derek. He was kind enough to make contact with you in the coffee shop tonight and alert us to your whereabouts this evening. What a useful boy,” she said as she patted him roughly on the cheek. Derek seemed to be aware of what was going on around him, but she wondered how much he knew about the situation. Millie’s eyes found Derek’s and willed him to get away from the Queen.

“Hello, Millie,” Derek said. “I bet you wish you’d have agreed to go out with me tonight after all. I wouldn’t have told the Queen where you were if we were busy elsewhere,” he said.

Ick, Millie thought. He had hidden his creepiness well when he was in the coffee shop. When she felt Slade stiffen beside her, she reached behind him and squeezed, like she was pulling herself even closer to him, as if to reassure him.

“He talked to you?” asked Slade without taking his eyes off Derek.

“He came into the coffee shop this evening and talked to me while I was taking a break,” she responded.

“Did he touch you?”

“No,” she assured him.

“But, he must have waited for you outside the coffee shop and then followed us.”

“It seems so,” Millie stated. “He asked me to go out after work, but I told him I had plans. I didn’t think anything about it.” Millie mind flashed back to the uneaten muffin he left behind at the table – the one clue that his inquiries about the muffin weren’t legitimate.

Millie wasn’t paying any attention to the Queen during her exchange with Slade and was shocked to see her eyes had left them as well. The Queen was completely focused on Derek and rage seemed to flow from her body in waves. Unfortunately, Derek didn’t seem to notice. He was too busy looking at Millie with hunger in his eyes. No one was prepared for the Queen’s booming voice when she said, “You dare consider betraying me?”

At first Millie thought she was addressing her, but realized the Queen’s eyes never left Derek. Derek was slow to understand the statement was directed at him and turned abruptly to find the Queen staring at him with death in her eyes.

“I didn’t mean anything by it. H-H-Honest, I would have brought her to you. I just wanted to have a little fun first,” Derek stammered.

“You having fun is not my concern,” the Queen boomed again.

Millie tugged on Slade's shirt with the hand she had behind his back. When he turned to look at her she whispered, "Let's run while she is busy with him," indicating Derek with her eyes.

"Okay, I'll go when you go," he said, almost like he didn't believe she would run.

"Ready?" Millie asked.

"Always," said Slade with a breathtaking smile.

Chapter 48 – Slade

“Are you ready to die?” the Queen asked. “Because if you run, as I assume you two are planning, that is exactly what will happen. In fact, I’ll kill you slowly so Millie will have to watch and suffer knowing she caused you death.” As if to prove a point, the Queen reached out with lightning fast reflexes and grabbed Derek by the neck. Before he could even utter a sound of surprise, she twisted his head around until a sickening crack filled the air. She let the body drop to the ground at her feet while she wiped her hands, as if they were dirty.

“As you can see, I mean what I say and since I have no problem with you or your kind, I’ll allow you to walk away from this situation, unharmed, as long as you do it now.”

Slade felt Millie trembling beside him and turned to look at her. She was staring straight ahead, like she was afraid of what she’d see in his eyes. Like she was afraid to see if he had made the decision to leave her, even though she had asked him to several times. Slade reached over and touched her chin. Slowly, he turned her face to his and noticed tears, once again, welled in her eyes. “Hey, don’t cry. There is no way I’m going to leave you,” he told her.

“I wish you would,” Millie choked out.

“That is just one of the reasons I’d never leave,” he replied.

“Thank you,” Millie said as she gave him one of the most beautiful smiles he’d ever seen.

Looking at Millie made him realize he would do anything for her and even though it wasn’t the time or the place, he couldn’t stop himself from leaning down and

placing a kiss on her soft lips. It took only a second for Millie to respond to him and soon her arms reached up and around his neck to pull him in for a deeper kiss.

“Oh, look at that. How touching,” the Queen sneered.

Slade gently broke the kiss and gave Millie a tight squeeze before releasing her. “What is it going to take to let Millie go?” Slade asked.

“Let her go? Oh my, that will never happen. Can you imagine how that would look back in the Realm? The Queen allowing someone as defiant as Millie go without any consequences, how disgraceful,” the Queen laughed. “I’d have every half-brained faerie who didn’t want to serve their year of service running away. It would turn in to such a hassle. Plus, who would I get to serve me at Court?”

“I’m not allowing you to take Millie away from here.”

“I didn’t say I needed to take her with me. I could just as easily kill her and solve my problem. How would that work for you?”

The Queen’s words dripped with sarcasm and caused Slade’s blood to boil. There wasn’t going to be a way to get out of this without a fight. He just needed to figure out a way to keep Millie out of harm’s way. Instinctively, Slade put his arm in front of Millie in an attempt to shield her with his body.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Millie asked.

“Protecting you,” answered Slade.

“Well, don’t. This is my fight, not yours. I don’t deserve to have you protect me when I’m the one who put you in this terrible situation.”

“Come now,” interjected the Queen, “let’s stop this silliness. We will gladly put you both out of your misery. No need to argue your last few minutes alive.” With the

flick of her hand, the Queen signaled the two guards. Immediately, they blinked out of sight.

“Unbelievable,” Slade muttered. “Afraid to fight fair?” he bellowed. Before he could say anything else, both of his arms were pulled behind his back. Struggling didn’t do any good.

“Please stop struggling, dear. You won’t be able to break free and you are only making yourself look pathetic. Not a good look for you, especially in front of your girlfriend,” the Queen said.

Slade continued to fight the guards until he felt a searing pain shoot through arms. Sizzling could be heard as his skin burned from the silver they used to bind him tight.

“Stop,” screamed Millie.

Slade’s attention snapped to Millie. The thought of her standing alone and unprotected in front of the Queen caused him to fill with rage. Panic started to rise in his throat as the Queen started moving closer and closer to Millie. Even with the silver wrapping his wrists, Slade started to struggle again, but this time the guards put blades to his throat. He could feel a slow trickle of blood drip down his neck and the sting of the silver of the blade.

The Queen stopped directly in front of Millie and stared at her as if she was attempting to put her in some kind of trance. Slade didn’t know what to expect. Images of the Queen killing Millie while he was helpless to do anything filled his mind.

“Millie,” he yelled, “look at me.”

Millie's head turned slightly as if it was difficult to move at all. He eyes were filled with fear. Slade realized Millie had more of an idea of what the Queen was capable of than he did and for the first time, felt dread creep into his thoughts.

"Millie," the Queen cooed. "Millie," look at me.

Slade wanted to scream for Millie to keep her eyes on him and not look at the Queen. Nothing good could come from eye contact with the Queen – he could feel the energy radiating from her body. The Queen was ramping up her power for a reason and Slade didn't want to see her use it on Millie.

Slade's heart sank when, first, Millie's eyes slid over to the Queen and then, her head followed.

"That's it, my girl," the Queen said encouragingly.

"Millie, don't!" screamed Slade. He was relieved to see Millie pause.

"Millicent Blossom Willowglitter, stop being silly. I command you. Look at your Queen."

Millie seemed powerless to refuse the order and looked straight at the Queen. "I was hoping you wouldn't make me use your true name, Millie. I'm very disappointed. You have turned out to be more trouble than I anticipated and I am ready to be finished with you. I just need a little information from you first. Now, let's get this ugliness over with, shall we? This place stinks of humans. I'll have to soak for hours to get the stench off of my body."

It was clear Millie was under the Queen's control. Her glazed eyes and slack facial expression said it all. Slade didn't know what he could do to save her, but hoped something would come to him soon.

Chapter 49 – Slade

The Queen paced in front of Millie - a lion approaching her prey. She slowly weaved her way closer to Millie until she was standing so close it seemed even a piece of paper wouldn't even fit between their bodies.

“Release her,” screamed Slade.

The Queen spoke as if she hadn't heard Slade at all. “What did you think you could accomplish by challenging my authority? Did you really think you could get away with your secret meetings without me knowing about it? I know all – everything that happens in my Realm.” The Queen started her pacing again. With each sentence she became more and more agitated, as if just talking about the attempted rebellion was sending her into a renewed rage.

Slade never took his eyes off the Queen. He didn't know what he would do if she put her hands on Millie, but he also didn't want to be caught by surprise. Hopefully, she would drop her guard since she assumed Slade was subdued and didn't produce a threat.

“I have to admit, it was brave of you to run to the city. Striking out on your own, without a friend or true knowledge of the human world must have taken great courage,” the Queen continued. “That bravery could be put to great use in my Court. It would be a shame if I had to eliminate you for disobedience.”

The Queen turned her back on Millie and walked a few steps toward the trees as if she was choosing her next words carefully. “That pitiful Remington girl turned out to be useless. So much time wasted. Oh, no matter. I was growing tired of the reports

detailing your incredibly inconsequential life among the humans anyway. Something I didn't even consider though was the vampire. Shame on me."

Millie didn't appear to be aware of the Queen at all. There was no recognition in her face, she didn't blink, she didn't move. Millie seemed frozen and completely at the Queen's mercy. Slade wondered what it would take to release her from the Queen's spell.

"So, what do I do with you, Millie?" the Queen asked herself. "Letting you go isn't an option of course, but I'm sure I can come up with some type of creative punishment we could both live with. Of course, you might not want to live with it. I'm not guaranteeing the punishment will be pleasant for you, but I'm sure I'll enjoy it," the Queen said with a cackling laugh. "I see that you have two choices. The first being, you return to the Realm and serve me at Court for the rest of your days or second, you die right here and now. Truthfully, I'd prefer to return. As I said, you seem to have many talents I would most likely find useful, but killing you would be just as easy for me. It is completely up to you." The Queen walked back toward Millie until she stood toe to toe with her.

Slade realized the Queen must have give Millie back some control because her eyes flicked over to him. The Queen didn't miss the move. "Ahh, the vampire. Well, I'll kill him just for fun. My only decision when it comes to him will be, do I make it fast or will I drag it out? Unless, of course, you decide to come back with me. Your vampire will be spared if you take your place at my Court and agree to serve out the rest of your days. Come on, what a small price to pay for the life of the one you love," the Queen spouted sarcastically.

“Fight it, Millie,” Slade yelled. “You can break her control. I know you can. Don’t worry about me.”

“Shut him up,” the Queen told the guards.

Slade felt the slice of the silver blade cut across his neck – this time much deeper than before. His eyes never left Millie, and when she turned her head, ever so slightly toward him, he saw concern in her eyes, which chilled him with fear. He didn’t want her to feel concerned for him. He didn’t want her making a decision that would ruin her entire life, based on him.

“Well, speak up, Millie. What will it be? Life or death?” The Queen’s eyes burrow into Millie as if looking at her hard enough could force an answer out of her. Slade was sure the Queen wasn’t used to waiting because with each moment that passed, she seemed to get angrier

Millie turned toward him, her eyes filled with tears. Slade’s heart froze at the sight of her in so much turmoil. He could feel his control coming to an end. He’d left her to fend for herself long enough. It felt as if he was going to break out of his skin. He felt the tremors start in his hands and then move slowly up his arms. *It is not going to end this way*, he thought. Slade wanted to see Millie smile again and that wouldn’t happen if she went back to the Faerie Realm.

Millie’s eyes searched Slade’s face. It seemed like she was trying to memorize it as if she wouldn’t be seeing it again. Panic welled up inside him when he saw Millie’s lips begin move. “Millie, don’t do it,” he screamed as he struggled against the guards hold once again.

“I’ll go,” she said. It came out as barely a whisper. Her voice trembled and he didn’t know if it was from fear or loss or maybe some of both.

Slade couldn’t think of anything except getting Millie away from the Queen. He’d grab her and run if he had too. He didn’t care if they’d have to be on the run for the rest of their lives – being with Millie was all that mattered. Using the energy that had been building up inside him, Slade bent his legs and rocketed himself straight up into the air. The guards lost hold of him and staggered back in surprise. By the time Slade landed on the ground the guards were gathering focused on him again. He’d have to move fast in order to take them down so he could focus on getting to Millie.

The second Slade hit the ground he kicked high in the air and landed a blow directly in the center of one of the guard’s chests. While he was on the ground, Slade twirled around and caught the remaining guard by the throat with his left hand. He squeezed to keep the guard in place until he could work himself behind him. Once he had solid footing with the guard in front of him, Slade placed his hands on both sides of the guard’s head and wrenched it around as hard as he could. The crack of the guard’s neck registered in his mind as he dropped the guard to the ground and stepped over him to get to Millie.

The Queen’s eyes narrowed on him as he walked toward Millie. As graceful as a cat, she eased herself in front of Millie and created a barrier Slade would need to remove in order to be successful. Without a second thought, Slade launched himself at the Queen, arms out and teeth bared, and aimed for her neck. Thoughts of the night before fill his head. He was able to drain the assassin with no problem. It took a couple of minutes to feel the negative effects of the blood in his system. He was sure he could

do it again. Draining her was the only way to remove the threat. Millie could save him again, possibly, but if not, it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered at the moment was keeping Millie alive.

Slade's teeth punctured the Queen's alabaster skin releasing a rush of blood into his mouth. *Can I take all her blood?* he thought. Slade wasn't hungry because of his wonderful feeding last night. He almost laughed at the thought. Never had he been in this position. He'd never wanted to refuse blood before. Millie provided him with a wealth of new experiences.

Chapter 50 – Millie

Millie watched as Slade ran straight toward her. Tears of frustration spilled down her face. She knew she couldn't do anything to help Slade – she wasn't strong enough to fight the Queen. She thought of their kiss and desperately wanted to experience the feeling again. His soft lips gently pushing against hers, coaxing her mouth open, inviting her to deepen the kiss by teasing her tongue with his. Shivers ran through her as she watched him get closer and closer. She felt a scream rise in her chest when the Queen put herself in front of Slade. “You bitch. Why don't you just leave me alone?” she screamed. It took Millie a minute to realize she was able to move freely and that the Queen's hold on her must have been broken when she started focusing on Slade's approach.

The Queen gave no indication she heard Millie's scream behind her and remained focused on the threat coming at her a full speed. Slade was gorgeous in his attack mode. His fierce countenance made it difficult for her to identify the sensitive vampire she had come to know. Millie watched as Slade hit the Queen with bone-crushing force and, immediately, his plan became clear.

Millie started running toward the Queen. “No, don't,” she yelled at Slade, but all she could do was watch as he reached the Queen and pulled her head to the side – attempting to kill the Queen as he did the assassin the night before. Millie froze in mid-stride when Slade looked up from the Queen's neck and locked eyes with her. It felt as if he were trying to communicate with his intense eye contact. He wanted to save her, protect her, even though this wasn't his fight. Anger bubbled inside her and guilt choked almost choked her. How would she ever be able to repay him? What is she

couldn't save him this time or worse, couldn't defeat the Queen. Then where would they be? He'd be dead and she'd be forced to go back to the Realm and she'd have to carry the guilt with her for the rest of her days.

Millie used the anger as a jumpstart to action and bolted forward once again, hoping to pull Slade away from the Queen and stop him from ingesting too much of the poisoned blood. She darted around the Queen and reached for Slade's shoulders. Her hands gripped his shoulders and tugged as hard as she could. She soon realized he wasn't going to budge so she changed tactics. Millie hopped on Slade's back, wrapped her arm around his neck, and shifted all her weight backwards, hoping to dislodge Slade's teeth from the Queen's neck.

Laughter drifted from the Queen's mouth as Millie struggled with Slade. "Silly vampire, don't you know this will kill you?" Slade didn't give any indication he heard her as he kept draining her. "You thought you were sick after killing my assassin – well, that experience will be nothing compared to this one. You have no idea how powerful my blood is," boasted the Queen as she produced a low, menacing laugh. The taunting and laughter only seemed to spur Slade as he renewed his efforts to take her down.

"Slade, stop," Millie screamed. "Please, Slade." Millie yelled his name until she was hoarse. The thought of losing him was unbearable and being forced to witness it only added to the nightmare. Millie frantically started looking for something she could use as a weapon – her weight on Slade's back apparently not sufficient to stop him. Her eyes landed on the fallen guard and the abandoned silver dagger beside his still body. Millie ran for it, only to be cut off by the Queen's remaining guard. She

assessed the situation and concluded that, since the guard was definitely advantaged when it came to brute strength, Millie would be forced to rely on her agility. The guard was large compared to others of their kind, which was typical of the Queen's protectors. He would be tough to beat in a fair fight, but Millie didn't see any reason she needed to be fair.

Millie darted to the left and assumed he would follow her. She moved toward the trees, taking him further and further away from the dagger with each step. For a moment, she felt exhilarated and relished the adrenaline pumping through her veins and hope washed over her. What if she and Slade defeated the Queen and her guard? Hope filled her with energy as she continued to stay a step ahead of her pursuer. She eventually wanted to work herself back toward the knife. The guard was never far behind her, even when she used short bursts of faerie speed. It was clear she would need to use wild and erratic twists and turns in her strategy.

A quick look over her shoulder confirmed Slade continued to hold the Queen in his grip. Millie's priorities immediately shifted as she realized the guard would attempt to save the Queen if left unoccupied. She didn't know how long she would have to keep the guard busy, but she knew she had to do her best to keep him away from Slade. It was difficult to judge how much time had passed since Slade first attacked the Queen, but it seemed like forever ago.

Millie darted around a tree and headed back toward the park's walkway where the knife was on the ground. The guard swiped for her with his hand, but only managed to catch a piece of her shirt in his grasp. Millie turned on her speed and felt her shirt rip as she continued forward. She could tell when the guard came away with a portion of

her shirt in his hands because the air and a caused her to shiver as the light sheen of sweat on her body from the physical exertion evaporated. Millie lost her balance as soon as she was free from the guard's grip. Her arms pin wheeled in a desperate attempt to stay on her feet, but she had been moving too fast and crashed into the concrete of the walkway. Pain shot through her knee from the impact and the inevitable scrape until she came to a stop. Her hands, too, were torn and bloody causing a burning sensation. She shook off the fall and scrambled, on hands and knees, for the knife. Her hand touched the hilt of the knife at the same time the guard's boot stomped on her fingers. She couldn't prevent the squeal as it escaped her lips.

Millie's painful exclamation drew the Queen's attention to her once again. Millie noticed the Queen wasn't laughing anymore though and if she looked carefully, she could detect something other than confidence in her eyes. *Is it pain? Fear?* Millie couldn't decide.

"Don't be stupid, girl," the Queen spat, "you think you can kill me? Perhaps you think you'll be heralded as a hero? Well, think again. People need a leader, Millie, and a good leader is a strong leader." The Queen renewed her struggle against Slade, attempting to pry him off of her neck. Locked together, they were the picture of horror, covered in blood from chin to chest.

The guard abandoned Millie in favor of saving his Queen and leaped toward Slade. It appeared Slade couldn't be moved. No matter what angle the guard approached, Slade stood firm. The guard reached for his belt and brandished his silver dagger. Slade would either have to let go or be stabbed. Millie grabbed the knife that

lay next to her and sprinted toward the fray. She positioned herself between Slade and the guard and hoped to deflect some of the knife strikes meant for Slade.

The Queen spoke again, this time a little less confidently. “Millie, if you continue to live among the humans you’ll lose your power to return home. It may already be too late. Your power will drain the longer you stay in human form. You’ll never be able to get back to the Realm without my help.”

Chapter 51 – Slade

Slade latched on to the Queen fully aware of the possible consequences. Draining the Queen dry would most likely result in his death. He couldn't assume Millie would be able to pull him back from the brink of death like she did last night. His life didn't matter to him. He only wanted the Queen immobilized so she couldn't cause Millie harm. The thought of Millie serving at the Queen's court for the rest of her life served as the only motivation he needed.

He was fully aware of Millie's body pressed against his back when she was standing up to protect him from the guard's blows and nothing but affection for the wisp of a girl ran through him as she stood her ground next to him. She didn't stop every knife blow, but she was able to prevent the brunt of them from hitting their mark. If she weren't standing behind him, he wouldn't have been able to continue with the Queen.

He knew Millie didn't want him to attack the Queen the way he did. He could only hope she would forgive him. Would she be willing to go through another blood transfusion with him? Something niggled in the back of his mind. A tiny thought attempted to form, but he couldn't quite grasp it to hold it in place and give it time to develop. Before he could give it much thought, Slade felt a change in the Queen. Her once vice-like grip on his body started to relax and she seemed to become heavier in his arms. *Is she weakening?* he wondered. Either that or it was an attempt to lull him into a false sense of security. The next moment it hit him – the thought that slowly worked its way forward in mind.

The power in the Queen's blood was undeniable – so much more than the assassin he'd killed last night. But, even though the power of the blood was coursing through his veins, he didn't seem to be feeling any ill effects whatsoever. If anything, he felt invigorated. It seemed like every sensor on his skin was working overtime. Millie felt so close to him even though her body was only light brushing against his back. Again, her bravery made him proud and his feelings for her just continued to grow.

Slade pulled his thoughts back to the situation at hand and started putting the pieces together. He was feeling extremely strong, which was different than last night with the assassin, the Queen seemed to be losing some of her fight, and then finally, the Queen's own words came floating back to the surface of his brain. Without the Queen, Millie would have no way of going back to the Faery Realm. Considering it might be a terrible mistake, Slade decides to unlatch himself from the Queen's neck and hopes she hasn't been faking her weakness and break free, but he can't continue to drain her and lose Millie's chance of going home before they figured out if the Queen was lying or if Millie wanted to go home. He would never forgive himself and didn't know if Millie would either, if he were the one to take away her chance to return to the only true home she'd known.

In one fluid move, Slade stops drinking, secures his arm around the Queen's neck, and swing her around so he can make eye contact with Millie. The move takes the guard by surprise and stops him in his tracks. The guard looks directly at the Queen while Slade looks directly at Millie. It seemed a bit like a standoff.

“Throw down your weapon or I’ll kill your precious Queen this instant,” Slade threatened the guard.

It took the guard longer to comply than he liked, but soon the silver knife was clattering to the concrete walkway of the park. Slade focused his attention back to Millie and searched her face for any signs of what he should do. His face asked the question he didn’t want to verbalize? He didn’t want to force Millie to make the decision – he wanted to save her from that, but she was the one with everything to lose. Did she want him to allow the Queen to live so she could go home? The thought of her leaving broke his heart, but if Millie never intended on staying among the humans this could be her only chance to return. Slade’s eyes beseeched her to tell him what to do. He couldn’t allow Millie to regret the events of this night forever.

Chapter 52 – Millie

So many thoughts were swirling around Millie's head it was hard to focus on what was happening in front of her. She was aware when Slade turned around and released the Queen from his fangs and was mesmerized by what she saw in his eyes. Slade's eyes were always beautiful with their icy coldness, but this was something entirely different. They were absolutely glowing with power. It seemed they were staring holes into her and could picture laser beams coming out of them even though she knew they weren't. The stare was that powerful though. She couldn't look away. She knew exactly what he wanted from her.

The Queen's words alarmed her. Losing her powers? Never able to go home? It seemed unfathomable. She'd lived among the humans for six months, but how often had she used her powers? She used glamour and speed last night, but before that, it was hard to remember. She attempted to fit in as much as possible and with so many people in the city; it was difficult to find a time when there weren't people around her. She couldn't very well slip on a glamour in the middle of the street without people noticing she disappeared or changed appearances. Millie also considered using her powers while she was in hiding dangerous, thinking her power might be the thing that gave her away to her enemy.

The Queen wasn't above lying to her enemy to get what she wanted. She could be making the entire story up, but what if it was true? Did she want to risk losing the ability to be a faerie, because without her faerie powers, she would be just like everyone she lived around now – human. *Is that even possible?* Millie thought. She'd never heard of such a thing before. Surely, there would have been rumblings around the

Realm if it were possible. Other faeries spent time with humans. How had she not heard of this before?

Looking into Slade's eyes, Millie said, "If you let her go, she'll kill you. I don't want you to die."

"I don't plan on dying anytime soon. Don't make this decision based on what will happen to me," Slade responded.

Millie stood for a moment longer weighing the pros and cons of staying among the humans. Pro – she wouldn't have to return to the Faery Realm and serve the Queen. Even if she could manage to get away from the Queen's court, she'd still have no place to go except back to the kitchens. The kitchen was never a place of great excitement, but after a taste of life in the city, it would be especially dreary. Pro – all the modern conveniences she has enjoyed since passing as a human. She loved television and cell phones and working in the coffee shop. She would miss sitting in the park reading books from the library. Pro – Slade. She couldn't help but list him as a Pro. Meeting Slade was unintentional, but he turned out to be one of the best things in her life right now. Con – she'd never unfurl her wings and fly again. Millie's heart ached at the thought of never taking flight again. Con...she couldn't come up with another Con. The Queen killed all of her closest friends, she didn't have a family to go back to, and there wasn't anyone she missed when she thought about the Realm. Could she live without flying? If so, there was no reason to go back.

Millie looked back at Slade and made her decision. "Finish her off," she said.

"What about going home?" Slade asked.

"I am home," she responded.

Millie watched as fear crept into the Queen's eyes while, at the same time, relief flooded into Slade's. She felt her face transform with a smile.

"You aren't thinking straight, girl. To give up the powers of faerie is unthinkable. You will be no better than a lowly, weak human," the Queen said in an attempt to change Millie's mind.

Millie didn't answer. Instead, with the smile still plastered on her face, she gave a firm nod to Slade to signal him to kill the Queen. She watched with fascination as Slade bent his head toward the Queen's neck again, extended his fangs, and bit deep into her flesh.

The Queen's eyes widened with panic as she started to scream, "Guard, don't just stand there. Stop them."

Millie swung around with her knife still in her hand and ran straight for the guard. She hit him hard and knocked him to the ground. Sitting on the guard's chest, she put the blade against his neck and sliced. She watched as his blood seeped onto the concrete and pooled around his body. She tossed the knife on the ground and got away from the body as quickly as possible.

She turned to look at Slade once again and realized how great he looked compared to last night after drinking the assassin's blood. Even the Queen mentioned how her blood would be even worse since she was so powerful. Just as she was about to say something, the Queen interrupted with the exact same question. "Why aren't you dying?" she whispered.

“I was just about to ask the same thing,” Millie said surprisingly conversational, considering the situation they were in. It made her realize how free she felt – like she didn’t even consider the Queen a threat anymore.

Slade didn’t stop what he was doing so Millie started to theorize out loud. “Do you think you developed an immunity after surviving the assassin’s blood?”

The Queen’s eyes changed from panicked to confused. “Immun....,” she attempted to say before her eyes closed and she fell limp on Slade’s arms. Without a second thought, Slade dropped her to the ground and wiped the corners of his mouth. He stepped over her body and moved closer to Millie.

Millie didn’t hesitate any longer and launched herself into his waiting arms. She reached around him and pulled him into a fierce hug. The feel of his hard chest sent warmth through her body. She smiled again when she felt Slade return the hug and planted a kiss on top of her head. Millie watched as the Queen’s corpse dissolved and disappeared, leaving nothing behind as evidence. “At least we don’t have to worry about getting ride of the body,” Millie said.

“I was just about to say the same thing since the guard just disappeared in front of my eyes. I definitely wasn’t expecting that to happen,” Slade said.

Slade gently pushed Millie away so he could look her in the eyes. “Are you sure you’re okay with staying in the city?”

“It’s a little late to be asking that now, isn’t it?” she teased him. “Hey, I’m kidding. I’m happy with my decision, Slade. Really.”

Millie’s eyes searched Slade’s face for any signs of distress.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“How do you feel?”

“I have never felt better in my life and I definitely have never been this full before. I don’t think I could drink another drop of blood, even if someone forced me to,” he joked.

Millie pulled Slade in for another hug and giggled into his chest. She tingled all over and knew she wanted more, so she turned her head up toward his and, silently, invited him to kiss her. He didn’t waste any time at all and leaned down to greet her lips with his. Heat permeated the air around them as their kiss deepened and Millie’s hands tangled in his hair. Slade’s hands matched Millie’s as his fingers worked their way through her short, spiky hair. They settled into a slow rhythm as Slade moved to cradle her face between his hands. Time had no meaning as they stood in each other’s arms and enjoyed each other so thoroughly.

Chapter 53 – Slade

Amazing – the only word to describe how Slade felt. He didn't want to ruin the feeling by over thinking his good fortune, but his mind continued to search for an explanation as to why he felt so amazing. *Could Millie be right?* he thought. *Could I have developed immunity to faeries' blood?* He made a note to call Roman and ask him about it, but since he didn't mention anything during their phone conversation he was fairly confident Roman was clueless as well. The more Slade thought about it, the more excited he felt. This could be an amazing advantage to the vampire community. The Queen had apparently expected him to die after ingesting some of her blood so it could be common knowledge in the faerie community that vampires couldn't survive after drinking from them. If the vampires could find a solution to the problem, faeries wouldn't know which vampire was immune and which wasn't. It would definitely be an advantage during a fight.

Slade wondered if there would be any retaliation for killing the Queen. How much thought does he need to give to protecting Millie? He didn't think there was reason to be overly concerned, but he definitely didn't want to be caught unaware so made a mental note to visit with Millie about being vigilant and aware of the things around her.

Slade loosened his grip on Millie just enough to lean back and hook at her face. "What do you think will happen in the Faery Realm now that the Queen is dead?" he asked.

“It’s hard for me to say. I’ve been gone so long and I don’t know if other faeries joined the rebellion after I left. Hopefully they did and they’ll set in motion the process of electing a new ruler and ensure a valid election takes place.”

Slade watched as Millie took a deep breath. He remained silent and waited for her to continue. He didn’t want to rush her after such a traumatic experience. So much has changed for her and he desperately wanted to know what she was thinking.

“My main concern is the law that started the rebellion in the first place. The one that stated all faeries at the age of sixteen must report to the Queen’s court and serve a year of duty. She could ask you to do anything for her and you couldn’t refuse. It was rumored that she had many creative methods of punishment in place for those that tried. Hopefully the law will die along with the Queen.”

Slade followed Millie’s lead as she turned toward home. A comfortable silence settled between them as they started to walk in the direction of the park’s exit. Slade looked at Millie and hoped to get an idea of what was going on in her head. He hesitated to ask her directly; afraid she wasn’t sure ready to talk about everything that happened. The big question still remained unanswered and he didn’t know if he wanted to know the answer or not.

Millie’s face remained blank and gave no clue as to what she was thinking. Perhaps all the excitement from the last two days was starting to catch up with her. He tentatively reached for her hand and was relieved when she gripped his in return. Her soft skin soothed him and he couldn’t even imagine losing her from his life.

When Slade attacked the Queen, he was fully aware he could die and would have gladly if it meant it was the only way Millie could be rid of danger. His mind

drifted to the jobs he'd had over the years and how he rarely took into account the danger involved or how careful he was in completing them. He'd been in more tight spots than he'd care to remember. But now, after knowing how his life can be changed for the better with Millie in it, he would never choose to put himself in harm's way without a good reason. As selfish and cowardice as it sounded, he would avoid any situation that could possibly take him away from Millie. *How long will she live?* he thought. *It shouldn't matter*, he told himself. *Even if she loses her powers and ends up living a human life. I'll take whatever time I can get.*

The busy city street loomed ahead, which meant their seclusion was about to come to an end. Slade felt himself slow as he attempted to prevent the inevitable. Millie matched his pace and eased closer to him and Slade felt another rush of heat at the feel of her body touching his. He longed to pull her into another kiss, but knew it would be wrong. He didn't want to cloud her judgment with desire and emotion. Millie still had a hard choice to make and Slade didn't want her to use him as an excuse to put it off or make the wrong decision. *I'll walk her to her door, politely kiss her goodbye, make sure she is safely locked inside, and turn around and leave.* He knew it would be a hard, he knew it would take everything he had to leave her, but he knew it was the only thing to do in order to be fair to Millie.

As they exited the park, the sounds of the busy world enveloped them - it was like breaking out of a cocoon. Slade watched as Millie's face changed. He stared at her in an attempt to get a feel for what she was thinking. He willed her to look at him and say something, anything that would put him at ease. Assure him she would remain with him forever. Promise to never leave. Convince him she would be happy never

knowing what happened in the Faery Realm. But, all she did was turn to meet his stare and give him a faint smile.

“I think I’m a little hungry. Do you mind stopping so I can get something to eat before I head home?” she asked.

“Of course,” Slade answered. He was thrilled she didn’t want to go straight to her apartment. It only meant he’d get to spend a little more time with her before depositing her at her door. “What are you in the mood for?” he asked.

Millie thought about it for a minute and then said, “Pizza sounds great for some reason.”

“If that’s the case, I’m confident we can find a suitable establishment to cure that craving,” Slade said.

“I couldn’t imagine not eating real food. I mean, something solid like pizza or even a salad. I know you live on blood, but do you ever eat anything else?”

“I haven’t in years, but living alone as I have, there hasn’t been much temptation,” he answered.

“What did you like to eat?”

“I loved a good slice of pizza back in the day,” Slade reminisced.

“Oh yeah, does that mean you might have a slice with me tonight?” she said with a wink.

“I don’t know if I’m that brave. I might need to start slow and just take a bite or two of yours.”

“No way, buddy. All of a sudden I’m starving so I don’t think I’ll be able to spare even a tiny pepperoni,” Millie laughed.

Slade felt practically giddy – light on his feet. He gave Millie’s hand a tight squeeze and led her across the street at a slow jog. “How do you feel about Slice of Life?” he asked.

“The way I feel right now, any place would be great. Let’s go.”

The sidewalks were populated with a light crowd of young people. Their laughter was contagious and Slade felt his spirits soar, especially when he looked over at Millie and saw the peaceful look on her face. With a playful tug, Slade pulled her closer to him and tucked her under his arm. He felt warmth spread through his body as her arm snaked around his waist and pulled him close.

The light from Slice of Life leaked out onto the sidewalk creating a welcoming path leading into the establishment. Slade led Millie to the line at the counter. “What slice do you want? Supreme, triple meat, cheese?” Slade asked.

“Oh, I think I’ll stick with a classic.”

“Cheese?” he asked.

“I’m not that boring,” she said as she bumped Slade’s hip.

When it was their turn, Millie stepped up to the counter, slapped her hand down like a cowboy bellying up to a bar, and said, “I’d like two slices of pepperoni and a soda please.”

“Two?” Slade whispered in her ear. “You are feeling very hungry.”

“I told you,” Millie said as she grabbed the tray the worker slid toward her.

Slade reached to grab the tray from her as she started to walk toward the small seating area, but Millie was too quick and easily avoided his hands, leaving them empty and full of nothing but air. Millie maneuvered her way toward a small table beside the

window and plopped down with her tray in front of her. The aroma of meat, cheese, and grease wafted up to her nose and triggered the saliva glands in her mouth. Before Slade realized it, Millie took one of the pizza plates and slid it over to him.

“Millie, I was serious when I said I wouldn’t be able to eat a whole slice. It has been so long since I’ve attempted to digest solid food. I don’t even know what it would do to my system. I wouldn’t want to gross you out with any terrible reactions,” he only half joked.

“I didn’t say you had to eat the entire piece. Just pick at it and see how it goes. I’ll probably be reaching for your leftovers anyway, so it won’t go to waste. Go on, you better hurry before I finish mine and reach for your before you even start.”

Slade smiled as he watched as Millie grabbed her slice, folded it, and started eating. The gusto with which she attacked her food was so enjoyable. The amount of pleasure she was getting from her pizza was obvious. Slade looked down at his plate, at the grease pooling around the pizza, at the cheese melting off the sides of the crust, and the pepperoni that seemed to float on top of the pizza. The aroma was tempting and he realized there was a small part of him that wanted to try and eat. He reached forward and broke a piece of crust off the slice and brought it to his lips. Without giving it too much thought, Slade opened his mouth and threw in the crust. The sensation was foreign – the chewing of food and gnashing of teeth to grind the food small enough to swallow. He took his time and chewed until there was nothing but mush left in his mouth before he even attempted to swallow. He had to consciously tell himself what to do. It seemed like he could feel the signal from his brain travel to his throat and in

order to force the muscles to do their jobs. He felt as if he could trace the food on its way down his esophagus as it landed in his stomach like a rock.

“How was it?” Millie asked.

“Like riding a bike,” Slade responded with fake enthusiasm.

“What?”

“Like riding a bike. It’s a human phrase used to refer to things you’ll never forget how to do. Once you learn to ride a bike, you’ll never forget how to do it, even if you hardly ever actually ride a bike,” Slade explained.

“Okay, well just because you can do it doesn’t mean it was any good. So, what I meant was, how did it taste?”

“It was interesting. The sense memory hasn’t kicked in yet so it isn’t like, ‘Oh yeah, this is what pizza tasted like.’”

“Maybe you should try a bit of the important part of pizza. You know, sauce, cheese, and pepperoni. Just take a little bite off of the end there,” Millie encouraged.

“I will, don’t hurry me. Let’s see how that crust is going to settle first,” Slade said. “How does yours taste? Are you glad we came here?”

“Oh, yes! It’s delicious,” she answered with a huge smile as she took another bite.

Slade sat in silence and watched her from across the table. She was gorgeous and couldn’t look away. *It could be like this all the time if she didn’t go back*, he thought. Sadness wormed its way into his mind. He knew if she decided to go back he would have to let her without putting up any resistance. It wouldn’t be fair to make her feel guilty for wanting to return home. He couldn’t even make her promise to come

back. She could be returning to an entirely different place compared to what she left. With the Queen dead anything was possible. On the other hand, someone else could attempt to take control of the Realm and make it even worse than it was under the old regime. In that case, she might want to come back, but she might decide to stay and fight like she started to the first time. *Let's just have a nice evening before anything has to be decided*, he thought.

Millie finished her final bite of crust and started eyeing his piece longingly. He decided if he was going to eat anything other than crust he better get to it or else she'd swipe it away from him. He slowly brought the slice up to his mouth, sank his teeth into the melted cheese, and tore off the end of the pizza slice. Again, he consciously chewed, but it was easier than the first time. The taste combination was incredible and he had to admit he enjoyed this bite better than his first one.

"Are you going to finish that?" Millie said as she pointed to the pizza still in his hands.

"I think I might attempt one more bite, if you don't mind."

"Of course not, I just don't want you to feel obligated to finish. Plus, I'm sure your stomach has shrunk to nothing since it hasn't been used for years and years. It can probably only hold a bite or two," she said with a smile.

"You are most likely right," he said as he took another small bite and handed the rest to her.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Completely sure."

"Great, thanks," she said as she started eating again.

Slade loved watching her enjoy her meal and hoped she took a while to finish. He wanted to prolong their evening as long as possible. He knew once they arrived at her apartment he'd need to leave in order to make it easier for her to make her decision. He'd have to pry himself away from her. He didn't want to let her out of his sight ever again, but it was necessary. It just wouldn't be easy – for either of them.

Millie remained silent between bites and Slade wondered if she was thinking about the same thing. After taking her last bite, she wiped her mouth and threw her napkin onto her plates. She drained her soda in one long sip from the straw and didn't stop until she heard the satisfying sound of the straw slurping air. She sat back in her chair and groaned. "I ate entirely too much. How dare you not eat more than you did."

"Ha, you would have ripped it from my hands if I hadn't of handed it over to you. I saw a predatory look in your eye. I know when to surrender."

Millie laughed and her eyes sparkled like Christmas lights. The tinkling sound of her laugh made Slade tingle and he wanted nothing more than to jump up, pull her into a tight hug, and kiss her senseless – until she had to beg for air.

"Well, now I think I might be able to sleep," Millie said.

"Are you ready to go?" Slade asked.

"I guess," she answered.

She didn't sound too sure about her answer, but he figured they might as well get this part over and done with. He reached for Millie's tray and put stood from the table. Slade felt her close behind as he stopped at the trashcan and dumped the empty plates and napkins in the receptacle. Millie took her empty glass to the counter and told the employee thank you and turned back toward the door to leave. For just a moment,

their eyes met. Slade could see sadness clouding her once bright eyes and wondered if she saw the same in his. He reached out for her hand and pushed open the door to go outside.

They walked together in silence once again. Slade didn't know what he could say that wouldn't put her in a tough spot. He couldn't try to make plans for the next day just in case she didn't plan on being here. He definitely couldn't plan any farther in the future since he didn't know if she would even be coming back. Small talk just seemed like a waste of words. She was more important to him than meaningless conversation.

Millie's apartment building came into view much too soon. He didn't want to go inside and automatically slowed his pace. Millie followed his lead and matched her pace to his. When she tightened her grip on his hand Slade could feel her tremble. He didn't waste any time tucking her under his arm once again.

"I don't want to go inside yet," Millie whispered.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"How far away do you live?" she asked as color crept into her cheeks.

"Not very far, but distance really isn't an issue anyway," he said.

"Why not?"

"If you really want to go all you need to do is allow me to carry you and we'll be there in no time. Vampire speed, you know."

"If that's the case, I can use my faerie speed and just run beside you? That way you don't have to be burdened by my weight."

Slade thought about watching her run. She was beautiful in the park before their fight with the assassin and he'd love nothing more than to see her move like that again,

but he didn't know how much power she had left and if the Queen was telling the truth, she'd need everything she had left in order to return home – if she decided to go. He couldn't do that to her. “No, please. I'd love nothing more than to feel you in my arms. It would give me a chance to show off and I don't get to do that very often since vampire powers are usually kept secret,” he chuckled.

“Do you mind if I come over? It just hit me that you've been to my apartment several times and I've yet to see yours. However, it doesn't have to be today if you'd rather not take me.”

“Nonsense. I'd enjoy a chance to entertain. Shall we?” he asked as he opened his arms, ready to cradle her to his chest and run like the wind.

“I can't wait,” she said and he reached one hand up to his shoulder for support and jumped into his arms.

Slade loved the feel of her in his arms. He started running toward his apartment and thought about how lucky he was tonight. One thing was for certain – Millie felt for him the way he felt for her. If she didn't she wouldn't attempt to come up with things to do in order to extend their time together. She would have gone home and called it a night. Taking her to his apartment sent excitement coursing through his veins. He enjoyed where he lived and being able to share it with someone he cared about made him very happy. He hoped she'd like it and wouldn't consider it too dark and secluded. He wanted her to love it as much as he did. He wanted her to consider it home too – someday.

Chapter 54 – Millie

The speed was incredible. She thought she could move fast, but it was nothing compared to how fast Slade could move. His arms held her tightly as they weaved up and down back streets and alleys toward his home. “How much farther?” she asked.

“We’ve only been traveling ten minutes. What do you expect, superhero speed? I admit, I am incredible, but superhero quality? I don’t know,” he teased.

“I wasn’t complaining,” she said. “I was just trying to gauge how far apart we lived.”

“We’ll be there in about five more minutes,” he answered.

Leaning against Slade’s chest wasn’t what she would call warm, but it was comforting. She couldn’t stop herself from thinking about what it would be like to touch his bare chest. She knew he was muscular, but would her fingers be able to locate softness or would it all be like rock? She felt embarrassed for even thinking about touching him in such a private way. She wasn’t used to thinking of men in romantic terms. In the Realm she never had the opportunity to date and socialize. Even on the rare occasions she was around others her age, there were other, more beautiful girls to attract the guys’ attention.

“Are you cold?” Slade asked.

“No, why do you ask?”

“I felt you shiver.”

Embarrassment ran through her and caused her to feel warm all over. “I’m fine,” she said.

“I know I’m not the warmest person to be next to, but we’ll be at my apartment soon and we can get a blanket around you or something.”

“Really, I’m fine.” She leaned her head against his chest and closed her eyes. She was excited, but at the same time she could tell she’d get sleepy if she sat still too long. She’d have to make sure she didn’t fall asleep over at his place because she knew she needed to go home. She’d already given some thought to going home and her first instinct was to run home. What if the Queen was right and she would lose the power to do so if she stayed among the humans too long? Her life here is great though. She loved living in the city and, now, with Slade added into the equation, it was going to be even harder to leave. She had a lot of thinking to do and she didn’t think it was possible to think clearly about something so important with Slade in the same room with her.

She could tell they were slowing down, so she opened her eyes to get a good look at the neighborhood surrounding them. It was difficult to make out much with the speed they were still traveling, but she could see trees lining the street on both sides. The trees seemed to shade the stoops of the houses giving them a warm and welcoming look. Wrought iron fencing lined the walks, dividing the houses from the sidewalk.

Slade came to a stop in front of a cream colored building and approached a break in a wrought iron fence. He carefully set her on the ground in front of him and started down a set of stairs that led to a basement apartment. Trees and bushes hid most of the apartment from view. She could make out a small portion of a window from her vantage point at street level, but it was covered in wrought iron bars to match the fence. Slade was definitely more secluded and secure than she was where she lived. She followed him down the steps as soon as she saw he was already at the door working the

lock. Millie didn't want him to think she was having second thoughts about coming over. By the time she reached him, he had the door open for her and stepped aside for her to pass through and walk into the apartment ahead of him. The apartment was very dark and she was afraid she would walk into something.

“Slade, I think I need a little light,” she said.

“Of course, I don't know what I was thinking,” he answered.

Slade reached inside the door and flipped a switch right inside the door. Light flooded the apartment and Millie's eyes began to adjust. She stepped inside, giving Slade room to come in behind her.

Millie could see all the way to the back of the apartment. It seemed to be broken into two sections. The front door led them directly into a living / kitchen area. The apartment was decorated in tans, creams, and wood tones. The exposed brick walls added a rustic feel to the apartment. The kitchen had simple white appliances with a wood countertop island dividing it from the living area. The living area had a soft tan couch, a small table, and an amazing looking entertainment center housing game systems, a stereo, and a huge television. The finished concrete floor was covered by a large area rug and pulled everything in the living area together.

The second area in the apartment was hidden from view. An exposed stud wall creatively added to the uniqueness of the décor. A lamp and some picture frames sat between the studs and a sheer white curtain hung from the other side of the wall to add some privacy. Millie walked toward the back of the apartment to get a look at the other room. It turned out to be a bedroom. At first she didn't know if she should continue or

not. Should she barge in and start roaming around his apartment? Was it weird she was walking into his bedroom without his permission?

She figured it was too late to stop and didn't want it to seem awkward, so she walked all the way in and looked around. The bed looked extremely cozy with its tan comforter and plump pillows. A single lamp sat next to the bed on a small nightstand and a dresser sat against the back wall. Millie decided she loved Slade's apartment.

"Is everything to your liking?" Slade asked from behind her.

Millie jumped at the sound of his voice. Everything was so quiet in the apartment and she was in such deep thought she almost forgot she wasn't alone. It didn't help that he moved like a cat and made absolutely no sound when he walked. "Good grief, you scared me. Hasn't anyone told you it is rude to sneak up on people?" she teased.

"I assumed since I did just carry you in and this IS my house you'd figure I was here," Slade said sarcastically.

"Ha ha. I was just too busy looking at your wonderful apartment. I love it. I had a much darker picture in my head of what a basement apartment might look like. The wall dividing the bedroom from the rest of the house is especially clever."

"I'm glad you approve," he said with an adorable bow.

"So, by the looks of things it seems that you spend most of your time...let me guess...um, playing video games, watching movies, and reading. Am I right?" she asked playfully.

“What a keen observer you are. What gave it away? The huge television and the shelves full of games, DVDs, and books? Has anyone ever told you, you should look into a career in detective work? Maybe a private eye.”

“You are hilarious,” she said as she walked into the living area again. She ran her hand along the cushions on the couch and squeezed the accent pillows. It felt so plush, like the material would be suitable for a child’s blanket. She instantly wanted to sit down and sink deep into the stuffing.

“Please, sit down,” Slade said as he gestured to the couch.

Millie didn’t waste any time and plopped down on one side of the sofa, being sure to leave room on the other side for Slade, just in case he wanted to join her. She noticed there wasn’t any other seating options except for a couple of bar stools pushed up against one side of the kitchen’s island.

“Do you have many visitors?” Millie asked. She wanted to know who else had seen his inner sanctum. Millie didn’t like the small tendrils of jealousy working their way out of her heart, especially since she didn’t have a claim to Slade. She knew he felt something for her, but their relationship was so new, it was hard to define it was anything yet. The fact they hadn’t know each other for very long also made her feel embarrassed for evening wondering about the other girls he could have brought into his home. It was none of her business. She was sure he was lonely and wanted companionship and with his ruffled good looks, there wouldn’t be a shortage of girls wanting to fill that role in his life.

“I don’t have visitors,” Slade answered. “That’s the main reason I have limited seating in the apartment. I’m happy with the couch. It provides a wonderful place to kick back and enjoy a good book.”

Millie stood up and walked over to his bookshelf. Mostly paperbacks, they all looked to be well loved. The spines cracked in several places – almost making it difficult to read the titles on some. She ran her fingers along the books and wondered if she would find one she was familiar with. “I spend a lot of my time reading, too,” she said. “I read every night before I go to sleep and when it is nice outside, I love to read in the park. I’m not familiar with any of these titles though. Are they mysteries?”

“Yes, I love a good mystery, especially ones with a bit of suspense. What do you read?”

“I’ve had to make up for lost time since I didn’t have access to these treasures in the Realm so I’ve mostly been reading the newer releases. I find I’m drawn to fantasy and romance.”

“I guess I can see that. You do seem to have a tender heart – one that would enjoy a good love story.”

Heat crawled up her body once again. *Love story*, she thought. Was it possible for them to create a love story? Could two beings as different as they were ever be able to have a life together?

“Is there anything you’d like to do?” Slade asked.

When Millie looked at Slade to answer him, the intensity of his eyes took the words out of her mouth. He looked at her with such fierceness and seemed to be looking inside her - like he could see everything she was thinking and feeling without

her even saying a word. Her eyes were glued to him. She didn't think she could turn away even if she wanted to. There were so many things she wanted to do right now so how could she even choose? She wanted to curl in his arms and sleep. She wanted to sit beside him and read a book, maybe even one of his mystery novels. She wanted to lie beside him and kiss him until her lips were numb. So many images flipped through her head it made her dizzy. She wanted these things, but could she have them? He was a vampire – she a faerie. But, a faerie for how much longer if what the Queen said was true. If the Queen was right and she would lose her powers, she would be no better off than the humans. Could a human survive a relationship with a vampire? Then, there was always home to think of. Could she be content with never seeing the Realm again? Never knowing how the Queen's death influenced her home?

“Come and sit,” Slade said, patting the cushion beside him.

Millie couldn't help but comply. She slowly made her way back to the couch and sat beside Slade.

“Relax,” he said as he pulled her closer to him.

She didn't realize how stiff she was until she leaned against him and felt her body curve into his side. As she leaned against him, he leaned back on the couch. She instinctively kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet under legs. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world. Before she knew it, her eyes closed – not because for sleep however, just comfort. She felt him lean forward a little, but didn't worry about opening her eyes. Soon, she heard the television come to life and randomness as Slade changed channels.

Slade leaned forward again. This time Millie opened her eyes to see what was going on. He must not have found anything he wanted to watch on TV so he was resorting to a video game. With a practiced hand, Slade started his game, apparently saved from a previous session. He was in the thick of battle before he could even lean back on the couch. The scene of the battle seemed to be set in the past. Soldiers were running around everywhere and Millie couldn't see how Slade could determine who to shoot and who was on his team. It all moved too fast for her.

“Do you want to play?” he asked.

“No way,” she said automatically. “There is no way I'd know what to do.”

“I have many other games I'm sure you'd like. Hmm, let's see,” he said as he stood. “Why don't we try a classic? Not too technical – a good place to start, I think,” Slade said as he grabbed a game off of the shelf. “I'll just save my game before we switch to another one,” he said picking up his controller and hitting a button or two.

Slade turned one game system off and turned on another one. He expertly placed the new game in the machine and started choosing settings. Apparently, they were playing “2 Players.” He came back to the couch, handed her a controller of her own, and sat beside her again. The room filled with various computerized beeps and tones as the name, “Pac-Man” on the screen signaling it was time to start.

“Do you want to be Player 1, or would you like me to go first to see how the game is played?” he asked.

“Please, go ahead. I'd love to watch first,” Millie said in order to delay her inevitable humiliation.

Slade took the control he had handed her and hit a green button. The small, yellow circle started moving around the screen, eating dots that filled a maze. It was clear the trick was to stay away from the colored blobs that chased after the circle.

“As you can see,” Slade started, “you need to eat as many of the dots as possible, hopefully clearing the maze so you can move onto the next level. The ghosts try to catch Pac-Man and if they are successful, you lose a life. You only have three lives in a game.”

Millie noticed how intense he looked. She knew this had to be an extremely easy game for him, but yet, he was giving it everything he had.

“Look here,” he said interrupting her thoughts, “you see those larger dots in the corners?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“If you can get Pac-Man to eat one of those, you’ll have a short window of time where the ghosts pose no threat. In fact, you can eat them for extra points. You just need to decide which of the two, eating the ghosts or clearing the board, is of higher importance at the time.”

“That is a lot to think about,” said Millie.

“You’ll get the hang of it in no time. I’m going to make sure you see what happens in each situation. You’ve already seen how I maneuver Pac-Man around the maze, oh, except for this. You see this tunnel on the side, watch this!”

The Pac-Man disappeared before her eyes and popped out the other side of the screen.

“Wow, she said. That could be handy.”

“Right, now, as I was saying. You’ve seen how to maneuver on the board, now I’ll eat a big dot and eat some ghosts. Then, I’ll complete the level and move on to Level 2 and allow myself to get eaten by a ghost so I’ll end my turn. Do you think you’ll be ready to play by then?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said.

“Excellent.”

Millie knew she should be watching what was going on with the game, but she couldn’t help but watch Slade. Especially since he was so engrossed in something else and couldn’t see her staring at him. He was beautiful - utterly and completely beautiful. His dark hair curled along his collar, just begging for her hands to run through it. Like it had a mind of its own, her hand reached forward, touched his back, and slid up to the back of his head. Her hand lightly cupped the back of his neck and since he didn’t object, she allowed her hand to slide up his head and buried her fingers in the back of his hair. Millie heard a low rumble come from deep in Slade’s chest. A moan escaped his lips and she quickly looked at his face. She could see his eyes looked heavy, but he still attempted to focus on the game.

“I already told you I would lose on purpose during Level 2, are you trying to distract me so I’ll lose even earlier?” he asked in a soft voice almost like he was afraid to speak normally for fear it wouldn’t come out right.

“I’m sorry, is this bothering you?” she asked playfully – knowing she was playing with fire. She knew she shouldn’t tease him, but she couldn’t help it. She wanted to keep her hands on him. At that moment, a sick sound came from the television and she assumed it meant he had lost a life.

Slade looked at her with his heavy lidded eyes and said, “It is your turn.”

Millie looked to the screen and saw “Player 2” flash on the screen. She knew she had to start focusing on the game. The computerized waka waka waka waka pulled her from Slade’s gaze and she started working her controller. Pac-Man moved left, up, and through the tunnel. She was determined to clear the maze. Her strategy was to eat the big dots and clear as many little dots as she could. She would ignore the ghosts all together. She knew it would give her more points, but what good would points be if she couldn’t move around the maze confidently.

Millie’s eyes were focused on the little, yellow circle as it sped around the screen. She couldn’t help putting her whole body into the turns almost like her moving would help Pac-Man move. Focused, intent, determined – those were the emotions she felt until...he...touched...her. She felt her eyes begin to water as she choked back the emotion he welled up inside her. Desire swept through her body, her stomach started to tickle, heat spread across her skin - all this from a simple touch to her back.

She was hyperaware as his hand traveled up her back and rested on the back of her neck, just like she had done to him only minutes ago. The screen started to blur in front of her and she knew she wouldn’t be able to continue playing if he kept touching her. She felt his fingers close around the back of her neck for just a moment before they traveled into her hair. She cleared her throat and said, “Are you trying to pay me back for distracting you because it won’t work.” She knew she didn’t sound convincing.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I simply couldn’t resist playing with that short spiky hair of yours. How ever do you get it to stand out like that?” he responded innocently.

She couldn't help but laugh and not just a small girly laugh either, this was the kind of laugh that takes you by surprise. It came out in such a rush it blended into a short coughing fit. *How embarrassing, she thought. Just choke right here in front of him why don't you?*

Slade patted her lightly on the back, clearly not worried. "Are you going to be alright?" he said finally.

"Yes, but I think I deserve another chance at the game. You were obviously trying to kill me," she snapped.

"Oh, I see. You sabotage my game and it is okay, but it isn't acceptable for me to do the same to you. We're going to play like that, huh?"

Millie watched as a slow smile spread across his face. *Does he know how attractive he is?* she wondered. For a while they just sat still and looked at each other. Neither made a move to continue the game. Slade reached for Millie's hand and laced their fingers together. Once his grip on her was firm, he tugged her closer so their bodies touched. Millie felt her heart beat quicken with anticipation. She didn't know what to expect. Was he going to kiss her again? Hold her? Pick her up and carry her to the bedroom? *What? Stop that right now!* Millie screamed to herself.

"So, you want another chance, huh?" he asked seductively.

"Uh, huh," was all she could say.

Slade leaned forward, kissed her on the forehead, and lifted her under the arms to scoot her back on the couch. "Well, not until I get my turn first. I am Player 1. You'll probably want to get comfortable – I'm pretty good at this game."

Millie sat awestruck. She watched him as he prompted his controller to start a new game and started clearing the maze of dots all over again. Every once in a while he'd call out taunts to the ghosts as they chased Pac-Man around the screen. She couldn't help but laugh at his total enjoyment of the game.

He was finally overtaken by a ghost at Level 11. Slade harrumphed and stretched his back, raising his arms above his head. Millie's eyes were drawn to the muscles as they moved under his shirt.

"Your turn," he said as he sat back on the sofa beside her.

"It's about time," she teased.

Millie hit play and started her turn. She continued with her previous strategy and hoped to move through levels even though it meant she wouldn't accumulate as many points as Slade. While she remained focused, she was still aware of how close Slade was to her. She loved the feel of his leg pressed against hers. The game was fun and he was glad he recommended they play, but she'd almost rather just sit and look at him. If she decided to go home, she'd want to have his face burned into her memory so she would always be able to call on it when she needed it. The game is a great way to relax though. This will definitely be one that stays locked in the memory bank forever. She had only had a chance to see him serious and protective. It was nice to see another side of Slade. The side that would laugh, tease, and be content to sit at home and read or play games. She considered herself very lucky to have found him and even if nothing else developed between them, she knew she'd always have a friend she could count on in Slade.

Halfway through Level 3, she was caught in a trap by three ghosts. “Grrrr,” she growled. She sat back hard on the sofa and blew out a frustrated breath.

“It just takes a little practice. You’ll get there. In fact, I think you are a natural. You are taking to the game very fast,” Slade said.

“Don’t pacify me,” Millie said.

“I would never do that, Millie. Even at something as silly as a video game, I will always tell you the truth,” he promised.

“Thank you,” Millie said. “Do you want to keep playing?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “I think I’ve played enough for today. You can continue though, just play both Players turns. I’ll be completely happy watching you play.”

“Naw, I’m done, too.”

Slade lifted his arm and invited her to lean in against him again. She eagerly accepted his offer and settled in beside him and without thinking, rested her hand on his leg. She felt his muscle tighten at her touch and jerked back her hand for fear it made him uncomfortable.

“No, put it back,” he whispered.

Tentatively, Millie returned her hand to its original location and wiggled until she was comfortable again. Her eyes closed as she felt his hand tangle in her hair again. She moved so he had better access – it felt better than anything had ever felt before. The feel of his light touch against her scalp sent shivers through her body. She wanted nothing more than to burrow even closer to Slade’s hard, muscular body.

As if he could sense her thoughts, he twisted toward her so he could reach her with his other hand as well and lifted her from her place beside him and placed her on his lap. Millie found herself cradled against his chest like when he carried her earlier. She immediately wrapped her arms around his neck, buried her face against his chest, and curled her legs around him as best she could in an attempt to wrap herself completely around him. He smelled divine – so clean and fresh, even after everything he'd been through tonight.

Millie felt his arms wrap around her to pull her as close as possible. Millie raised her head to look at Slade's face. She didn't know what to expect to see, but wasn't surprised when she saw his eyes were closed and his jaw was tense - the muscle throbbing under the skin. She stretched her neck so she could reach his face and placed a light kiss on his jaw. Slade's skin was cool under her lips and she let them linger there for longer than was necessary, but the coolness felt so good against the heat of her lips. Millie was burning on the inside and Slade's skin could was the only thing that could provide relief.

Slade let out a moan as Millie finally put an end to the kiss. She squeezed her eyes shut as she tucked her head into his chest again. She didn't want to see it if he was unhappy about her kiss. *You should probably go home, Millie*, she told herself. *Don't put yourself in a situation that is going to make your decision even than it already is.*

Millie felt his lips touch the top of her head and remain there. He kissed the same spot a few times and then reached for her chin with his hand and tilted her face to meet his. His eyes searched hers. *What is he looking for? Approval? Permission? Acceptance? How can he not already see all of those things radiating from me?*

Millie smiled as she felt tears begin to form and it seemed that was all he needed because before she could form another thought his lips crashed into hers, his arms locked around her tighter than ever before, and he let out deep, growl that would make her nervous if she didn't know better. His kiss was deep and desperate, forceful and fierce, tentative and tender all at the same time. His tongue coaxed her lips apart and she welcomed him eagerly and greeted his desire with her own. Millie's hands found his chest and she explored the hard surface of his muscles without worrying about the consequences. Slade's shirt was preventing her from the contact she really wanted so she bravely reached for the waistband of his pants and tugged the shirt free of its confine. As soon as she freed enough space, she snaked her hand up his chest and pressed it to his chest. Millie was able to feel a tremble beneath his skin and was pleased she caused such a reaction in him.

Matching her movements, Slade sought a way to touch more of her skin. Along her back, between her waist and the bottom of her shirt, he found an opening and didn't waste any time. Slade's hand left a trail of fire as it flowed up her back. Her bra strap provided little resistance as he slipped his hand under it making its way up to the back of her neck. Slade's hand kneaded the skin along her shoulder blades and the base of her neck in rhythm with his kisses. The hand Millie had wrapped around the back of Slade's head did nothing but pull him closer while Slade's free hand gripped her waist and rubbed her hip.

Millie was taken by surprise when Slade pulled himself away from her, held her at arm's length, and stared intently into her eyes. She was breathless, chest heaving, and dying for more of his kisses. Effortlessly, he lifted her from his lap, got up while

still holding her, and placed her in a reclining position on the sofa. She could barely control herself as she tried to imagine what he was going to do. Did he plan to stop? Was he afraid they were going to far? Millie felt like she was going to scream if he didn't do something soon. She gripped the cushions around her in an attempt to keep quiet, but couldn't prevent the gasp from escaping from her mouth as she watched him reach for the bottom of his shirt and slowly pull it over the top of his head. It was her turn to moan, as he stood in front of her shirtless and gorgeous. Slowly, so slowly, he lowered himself to the sofa being careful to put most of his weight on the cushions beside her, but enough on top of her so she could feel the pressure of his body against hers.

Slade put his mouth against her neck and kissed slowly down to her collarbone, again leaving a trail of heat. Her hands had free access to his naked back and she took full advantage of it never stopping in one place too long. She wanted to feel as much of him as possible. *More*, she thought. *I want more contact*. Millie removed her hands from his body and found the hem of her own shirt. Slade must have realized what she was doing because he stopped his kissing and pulled back to stare at her. His expression seemed to be asking her if she was sure she wanted to reveal so much of herself to him.

“You don't have to,” he whispered in her ear. “I didn't remove my shirt so you would do the same. I'm completely content to have you the way you are.”

With a voice trembling from emotion she said, “I want to feel you against me. Help me.”

More tender than she even thought was possible, Slade lifted himself off of her just enough to raise her shirt up. With the hand he wasn't using to support himself, Slade eased the shirt up and over Millie's head. After she was free of it, he carefully placed it on the back of the couch. Before he placed his weight on top of her again to resume his kissing, he took the time to stare at her body. Millie thought she'd be embarrassed lying in front of him so exposed, but she wasn't. In fact, excitement coursed through her veins because it was clear from the look on his face he liked what he saw.

Slade placed his hand flat on her stomach and slowly rubbed circles on her skin. The circle continued to widen until he was brushing the underside of her bra. Millie thought she would lose control when she felt his fingers creep under her bra just enough to touch the sensitive skin under her breast. Her body rocked underneath him and she reached to pull him closer. A smile spread on his face as he watched her beneath him – almost teasing. His hand went to the skin underneath her throat, tickled her collarbone, and trailed down to her sternum. Millie felt like she was going to bust out of her skin, his fingers tickling her into a frenzy and when his hand traveled further down and lightly brushed along the top of her breast – even though it was through the material of her bra – she had to hold back a scream. Millie's eyes rolled back, her back arched underneath him, and she dug her fingers into his arm.

“Please,” she cried.

“What do you want?” he cooed in her ear.

“Kiss me again,” Millie growled.

“Gladly,” he said and fell on top of her and ravaged her mouth with his once more.

Millie pulled him so he would be directly on top of her - she wanted to feel his full weight. Once he was directly above her, she wrapped her legs around his in order to pull him even closer. Their kiss was even more frenzied than before. He took several breaks from her lips in order to devour her neck, her face, her shoulders. Slade moved even lower to rain kisses on her collarbone and lower still to brush his lips over the tops of her breasts. His hand reached for the shoulder strap of her bra and slipped it down her arm in order to kiss the small area of skin it had been hiding. He went to the other side to do the same. Millie reached up and grabbed Slade’s face with both hands. She placed a tender kiss on his lips, made sure to make eye contact, then pulled away slightly so he could see her clearly. Slowly, she reached around to her back and unclasped her bra. Slade moved down her body and placed his lips to her stomach. After he playfully teased her belly button with his tongue he started kissing his way back up her body – stopping just under her breasts. Millie left her bra in place even though it was unhooked and put her hands in his hair. She grabbed two handfuls of his brown curls and tugged lightly, moving him up once again. Millie pulled him into a slow, deep kiss. Slade’s hands slid up her sides, but hesitated when he felt the loose bra strap. Millie reached for his hands, laced their fingers together, and squeezed. She felt only slightly embarrassed when she moved his hands to cover her breasts, but the growl he emitted told her there was nothing to be embarrassed about. Slade started kneading her breasts and Millie thought she would levitate – only one thing prevented her from feeling his hands totally and completely against her. She covered his hands with hers to

make stop him from moving. Millie grabbed the strap of her bra and slid it out from between their bodies leaving nothing between them at all. Skin to skin they lay breathless, motionless, and helpless. Millie reached for Slade's hands again, brought them to her lips, kissed them both, and lowered them to her breasts once again. Her eyes rolled back at the feel of Slade's fingers on her naked breasts. He lowered himself to he could kiss her lips, her throat, her shoulder. Millie felt a tiny scrape on her skin as he returned to her neck to place more kisses. At first, it didn't occur to her what caused the scrape and then, as if a fog cleared from her mind, the picture of his fangs appeared in her head.

“Were those your fangs I felt?” she whispered in his ear.

He froze the minute she asked. His body grew rigid and Millie wanted to kick herself for saying anything about it. “I'm so sorry, Millie. I've been trying to keep them in check, but it is difficult. You have me almost out of my mind with desire,” he admitted.

“I didn't ask because I was mad. I was just wondering. Slade, look at me,” she said as she grabbed his chin and forced him to look her in the eyes. “Really, I liked it. It felt amazing. It was different from the kisses – more intense somehow. I just wanted to know for sure what it was.”

“When aroused a vampire's fangs drop. It doesn't matter if it is arousal from the thought of feeding or the thought of sexual pleasure,” he explained.

Millie pulled Slade toward her and put her mouth against his neck. She let her tongue tickle his skin until she felt his body relax against her. When she had him

comfortable enough to run his hands up and down her body again, she took her teeth and raked them across the skin of his neck – biting lightly.

Their bodies writhed together on the sofa, both of them lost to emotion.

Chapter 55 – Slade

Slade didn't want to move, more specifically he didn't want to disturb Millie and force her to move. He had never been more aroused in his life. The kissing and touching was glorious, but nothing was better than looking at Millie while she dozed on his chest. He wouldn't do anything to cause her to move. He wasn't feeling very proud of himself though. Even though he loved what happened between them and desperately wanted more of it, he knew it wasn't what was best for Millie. He shouldn't have allowed his desires to cloud his judgment. Their closeness now would only make her decision harder and that was exactly what he was trying to avoid.

Millie's eyes fluttered open and revealed her sexy, lavender eyes. He would never get tired of looking into them – never in a million years.

“How long was I asleep?” she asked wiping the sleep out of her eyes.

“Not long. In fact, I don't think we were completely asleep. I'd consider it more of a nap.”

“What time is it?”

“Late.” Slade shifted to his side a little and rolled Millie onto hers so they could face each other while lying on the couch. “Do you want me to take you home?” he asked, not really wanting her to answer.

“No, I don't want to go, but I should.”

“Just say the word and we'll get going.”

“Let me just wake up a little and I'll be ready.”

It looked to Slade like Millie wanted to do nothing more than go back to sleep. Her eyes started to droop as she settled into her new position beside him. He was

tempted to let her do just that, but his conscience got the better of him. “Let’s sit up. Do you want to go get a coffee or something on the way home? We can stop by the twenty-four hour donut shop down the street,” he offered.

“We better not. If I have coffee now, I won’t be able to sleep when I get home.”

“Good point.”

Millie started to sit up and Slade felt the emptiness beside him grow until it was all he could do not to reach up and pull her to him again. With a deep sigh, she pushed herself into a standing position and ran her fingers vigorously through her hair causing pieces to stick up in very interesting places. She resembled a troll doll pencil topper – the kind you twist and make the hair stand out every which way. Millie was a tousled doll.

“Is it alright if I use your restroom before we go?”

“Of course, just go through the bedroom and you’ll hit it at the back of the apartment.”

“I’ll be right back,” she said as she skipped away from the couch.

She was heart-breakingly beautiful. He should probably call her a cab and send her home that way. It would be too difficult to walk her to her apartment and leave her there – alone – not knowing if he would ever see her again. Would she say goodbye? Would she tell him when she was leaving? Or would it be too hard for her to face seeing him before she left?

Slade was still on the couch when Millie returned to the living room.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

Now is the time. If you are going to call her a taxi, do it now! “Sure,” he said, ignoring his own advice. Slade stood up, stretched, and started walking toward the front door. When he reached the front door he turned and noticed Millie was still standing by the couch. The look on her face tore him apart. She was stood frozen with one hand on the back of the couch for support and tears streaming down her face. He knew better to ask what was wrong – he knew she was scared of what was coming next. Slade smiled and offered her his hand. Millie returned the small smile, wiped the tears from her face with the palms of her hands, and walked toward Slade to take his hand.

“Do you want to walk for a while or would you prefer to go the fast way?” he asked.

“Let’s go the fast way.”

Slade didn’t know how to interpret her answer. Hopefully she was just attempting to get the hard part over with, much like ripping a band-aid off in one tug. He hoped she didn’t feel strange about what happened between them or worse regret what happened all together. Slade opened his arms and said, “I’m ready if you are.”

Millie put her hands on his shoulders and jumped into his arms. Once he had her in a secure grip, he stepped through the door of his apartment and allowed Millie to close it behind them. He didn’t waste any time easing Millie into the speed, but burst forward so everything passing by was a blur. It would be easier for him if he got her home as quickly as possible. Delaying the inevitable wasn’t doing either of them any good. Slade felt Millie turn her face into his chest. He wanted to comfort her so badly, but knew he couldn’t. It wasn’t long until he felt the dampness on his shirt from her tears.

Slade slowed his pace, as they got closer to her apartment building. At the alley across the street from the building, he stopped and gently put Millie on her feet. It would draw less attention if she were walking on her own. He tilted Millie's face up to his, wiped away her tears, and took her hand to walk the rest of the way. *You will leave this girl at her apartment door*, he told himself. *There is no reason to make it any harder on Millie than it already is.* Millie's hand is like a vice on his as they start the climb up the four flights of stairs to her door. It seemed each step was more difficult than the last, moving slower and slower with each flight.

When Millie's apartment came into view, he sensed Millie's breathing increase. Slade saw her hands shake as they started to dig into the pocket of her jeans for her keys. He couldn't stop himself from reaching for her. He placed his hand on her shoulder and gently slid his hand down her back to make lazy, comforting circles. It was true he wanted to be sure to touch her one more time before she walked out of his life, but he meant it to be a comfort to Millie as well. She stopped jiggling her keys and lifted her gaze to him. When their eyes meet, tears fill Millie's eyes again sending such a rush of emotion so strong through Slade that it takes every bit of will he has to prevent tears from running down his face too.

Clearing his throat, Slade reached for the keys and unlocked the door to her apartment. With the door opened wide, he stepped inside and pulled Millie in after him. He dropped her hand in order to complete a quick search of the apartment to make sure everything was safe and secure. He stops directly in front of her and loves how she seems perfectly at ease with him even in the pitch black of her apartment. Millie made

no move to turn on the lights and Slade didn't either. Maybe it would be easier to say goodbye she couldn't see him clearly.

Even though he knows he shouldn't, Slade reaches for Millie to pull her into an embrace. With her tucked tightly into his arms he took the opportunity to breathe her scent – hopefully to lock it away forever so he would always be able to remember Millie. Slade felt Millie's body shudder and he couldn't help but respond. He pulled back from Millie just enough to tilt his head down to hers. Like a magnet, she was pulled to him and when their lips touched he realized he had never felt so much love for another person on the planet. The kiss, so tender, pulled small sounds of pleasure from Millie, which caused Slade's resolve to crumble. Millie's hands pulled him closer and snaked into his hair; it didn't take long for their kiss to intensify. *You have to be strong*, he screamed to himself. He gently pulled away from her, leaving her breathless and beautiful standing before him. He wanted nothing more than to scoop her into his arms and carry her to the bedroom to explore every inch of her gorgeous body, but he couldn't. It wouldn't be fair to manipulate her emotions that way. He knew Millie had to make the decision to stay or go on her own without any distractions from him.

Slade didn't want to hurt her feelings by abandoning her when she was feeling so obviously vulnerable, but what choice did he have? He kissed lightly down her neck feeling shivers run through her body. In a voice, barely above a whisper, he said, "I can't wait for more time with you. My new immunity to faerie blood is excellent news, but right now I'm a little too full." Slade lightly dragged his fangs across the tender skin of her neck. He kissed her on the forehead, stepped away from her completely, and walked to her front door. Just before crossing the threshold he turned and said, "See

you, Millie.” It was the hardest thing he’d ever done in his life. Seeing the look of confusion on Millie’s face was hard to bear. He desperately wanted to go back and assure her he needed her more than anything, but knew he couldn’t. He walked down the flights of stairs without looking back, not wanting to know if she was watching him leave or not.

Chapter 56 – Millie

Millie stood frozen in place. So many emotions were crowded inside her body, swirling around almost making her dizzy. They'd shared a wonderful evening together and not once during the night did he seem as flippant as he did when he left her at her apartment. It almost seemed like all he wanted from her was her blood – the power faerie blood could give him.

Millie walked to her front door to close and lock it. With her mind reeling from her encounter with Slade, Millie walked into her bedroom to prepare for a shower. She hoped the warm water would calm her. “See you,” she said to the empty apartment. “What kind of good-bye is that?” She threw her clothes haphazardly around the room as she walked into the bathroom to turn on the water in the shower. As Millie stood and waited for the water to get warm, she replayed Slade's farewell in her mind. When she reached in her pocket to pull out her keys and he stopped her – the look in his eyes was almost tortured. Tears threatened to spill down his cheeks. The kiss – so passionate sent shivers through her body and she knew he felt them too. Slade was cautious of her going in her apartment alone, sure to check and make sure it was safe before allowing her to enter. Finally, the feel of his fangs against her neck. Just thinking about it made her turn into a pile of goo – her knees weak enough she had to grab onto the sink. There was no way he felt nothing for her. The only explanation was he knew what she was about to do and needed to distance himself from her to allow her to do it. Either to make it easier for her or for him – the reason didn't really matter. What mattered was, he did it to be kind to her and not to hurt her feelings.

Millie slid the shower curtain aside and stepped under the showerhead and silently rejoiced at the feel of the almost-too-hot water cascade down her weary body. Slade was strong enough to do what needed to be done and now it was her turn. She needed to decide whether or not she was going back to the Faery Realm now that the Queen has been removed from power or if she was going to remain among the humans and eventually lose her power to go home – if what the Queen said was true. Times like these made her wish she had another Faerie close by to talk to and question about matters such as these. Millie sank to the bottom of the tub and let the spray hit her. As scary as it was, she'd have to make the decision on her own.

When Millie couldn't take the water on her skin anymore, she climbed out of the shower, toweled off, and went to her bedroom. She stepped over her clothes, not having the energy to pick them up, and walked straight for her bed. She peeled back the covers just enough to crawl under and pulled them up over her head – hoping that hiding would take away all of her problems.

Morning came too early and the light that peeked through her window seemed to be screaming at her to get out of bed. Millie was surprised by how much better she felt than she did when she went to sleep. A sense of calm flowed through her – like making the decision put her mind at ease. Now, the only thing to do was to tell Slade. Millie wondered how he would react. She got out of bed and walked to her crumpled jeans on the floor and fished out her cell phone. Checking first to make sure she didn't have any missed calls, she unlocked the keypad and dialed Slade's number. She didn't expect him to answer – it was daylight after all, but on the second ring she heard his voice on the other end of the line.

“Hello?” he answered.

“Hi, it’s Millie.”

“How are you feeling this morning?” Slade asked.

“Much better after a shower and a good night’s sleep.”

“That’s good to hear,” he said.

After everything they went through together last night it seemed strange to be so nervous with him on the phone. Millie finally broke the awkward silence, “Do you have any plans later this evening?”

“No,” he replied.

Ugh, why is this so hard? she wondered. “Well, do you want to meet me at my apartment around eight o’clock?”

“I’d love to,” he said “Do you have any big plans for us?”

She could tell he was fishing for information as to what she wanted to meet with him about. “No, not really.”

“Okay then, I’ll see you at eight o’clock.”

“Great, I can’t wait,” she said and then ended the call.

Millie had a lot to take care of before this evening so sitting around her apartment wasting time was out of the question. She made a stop in the bathroom to brush her teeth and run her fingers through her hair and then picked out something to wear. After getting dressed, she left her apartment and started walking. She was scheduled to work a short shift in the middle of the afternoon, which as she thought more about it, was probably a good thing. She left with plenty of time so she could stop by the library and return the books she had checked out. Millie decided to use the

outside book drop since she didn't have time to browse the shelves and wouldn't have time to finish the books before they were due anyway.

After leaving the library, Millie started her trek to Where 'Ya Bean. She couldn't remember if Manny was going to be in today or not, but hoped he would be. Manny had been so good to her over the past several months and she owed it to him to give him a little notice about the time she would need to take off. She also needed to make arrangements for her last paycheck.

The weather was so nice. Her long sleeve t-shirt was perfect for the slightly breezy day and she couldn't help but put a small skip in her step as she walked along the busy sidewalk. There were people everywhere and every now and then, Millie would catch a glimpse of a faerie hovering above or walking behind the unaware as they walked to and from their destinations. Seeing these mischievous faeries made her think about her own life in the Realm. How was it she never had the opportunity to leave and mingle amongst the humans as these are? Before she ran away, Millie had never stepped foot in the human world and had only seen them from afar. She always remained behind the veil of glamour that protected the humans from the otherworldly sites they weren't prepared to admit existed. Was it because these faeries remained hidden to the human eye that they were allowed to cross back and forth between the two worlds? If that was the case, she didn't want anything to do with it. Millie felt there was no reason to be among the humans if you didn't fully interact with them.

Millie was completely lost in thought when someone bumped hard into her shoulder. The person didn't look up, didn't apologize, or even seem to notice they had ran into her at all. When Millie turned and looked she realized she recognized who it

was and before she could stop herself she yelled, “Remy, Remy, wait...come back.”

The girl made no move to slow down or turn and look at her. Millie had to run to catch up with her. She wanted to look Remy in the eye and ask her how she would act like she was her friend for so long when she was working for the Queen the whole time.

Millie hadn't even given Remy a second thought since she found out she was betraying her and she couldn't understand why it was so important for her to see her now. *You should just forget about her and go on to work*, she told herself, but she couldn't do it.

As soon as she was within reaching distance, Millie put out her hand and tapped Remy on the shoulder, hoping to stop her so she would turn around and face her. Remy made no move to stop. This time Millie grabbed Remy's arm to pull her to a stop and without any resistance Remy stopped. Millie had to walk around in front of Remy to look her in the eye. What she saw was frightening. Remy had always been fiery and full of life – and the person standing in front of her now was nothing at all like the Remy she knew.

The girl standing before her had vacant eyes and a blank expression. There was spittle gathered at the corners of her mouth and her lips were cracked and crusted with dried blood. It was easy to see she'd chewed on her own lips to make them that way. Remy's hair hang lank and hadn't seen a brush in days. “What did they do to you,” Millie asked. Millie lightly slapped the sides of Remy's face in an attempt to snap her into focus. “Remy, Remy, come on,” she said over and over again. Guilt washed over Millie. She should have returned to the hospital sooner – before the Queen's lackeys go to her. Apparently, this is what happened if you no longer served a purpose in the Queen's court. Thank goodness the Queen was dead.

Millie didn't know what to do with Remy. She didn't feel comfortable just sending her on her way with no way of knowing who or what she'd run into on the streets. Remy just seemed to be gone. *I'll just take her to work with me*, she decided. "Come on, Remy. You're coming with me. Are you hungry? I'll get you one of the muffins you love so much." Millie linked her arm through Remy's and led her toward the coffee shop. She'd worry with what to tell Manny when she got there.

Millie let herself in through the back door of Where 'Ya Bean. She pulled Remy in after her and made sure the door closed behind her. "Let's get you cleaned up before we go out front, huh?" Millie led Remy to the employee restroom located in the storeroom. She pulled several paper towels from the dispenser and held them under the water. Millie sat Remy on the closed commode lid and squeezed the excess water out of the paper towels. She carefully wiped away the blood and spit from Remy's mouth and then, after wetting more paper towels, washed the rest of her face. Remy's lips looked like they were painful. "Remy, I'll be right back. I'm going to Manny's office to get something from my cubby. Stay here," Millie said as she slipped out of the restroom making sure to close the door so she'd hear it if Remy tried to leave.

Manny sat behind his desk when Millie walked in his office. "Hello, Millie. You're here a little early aren't you," he said as he looked at his watch.

"Yes, I kind of need to talk to you, but I have something else pretty important going on right now so it will have to wait."

"What's going on?"

"Well, Remy is in the restroom in the back and she isn't looking too good. I'm here to get something from my cubby for her that will hopefully make her feel better."

“Can I help? I’d noticed she hadn’t been around the last couple of days, but I didn’t want to say anything incase something happened between you two to cause hard feelings.”

“Since you offered, would you mind if she stayed here for a little while? I don’t feel comfortable sending her out alone and I don’t have time to take her home and make it back in time for my shift. I really don’t think she’ll be any problem.”

“No problem. She can use the couch in here if she needs to take a nap or something,” Manny said.

“You are the best, Manny. I mean it. No one could ever ask for a better boss.” Millie felt herself getting emotional at the thought of telling Manny she was going to be leaving for a while. She tried to hide it, but she didn’t do a very good job.

“What is wrong, Millie?”

“A lot is going on, Manny. I think I’m going to have to go home for a little while. I was going to talk to you about it later, but I might as well ask you now.” Millie took a deep breath. “Manny, would it be all right with you if I took a little time off?”

“It isn’t anything serious is it?” Manny asked.

“Well, I left some things unresolved when I came to live here and the time has come to see where I stand with everyone.”

“Of course you can have some time off, Millie. You are a wonderful employee and I definitely don’t want to lose you. You’ll always have a place here with us.”

Millie felt like crying all over Manny, but instead she walked over to him at his desk, patted him on the arms, and said, “Thank you so much.”

She went over to her cubby and pulled out what she needed and went back to the bathroom. Remy was sitting exactly where Millie left her – staring straight ahead as if nothing unusual were happening. Millie opened the lid to her chap stick and rubbed some on her finger to apply on Remy’s lips. Her lips seemed to soak up the moisture. Millie kept applying the balm to Remy’s lips until there was a coating on her lips. “Now, doesn’t that feel better?” Millie searched Remy’s eyes for any recognition and was disappointed to see none.

Millie worked her fingers through Remy’s hair until it was pulled back into a slick ponytail. She used an abandoned hair band she’d seen on top of the paper towel dispenser earlier to hold Remy’s hair back out of her face. After cleaning her up as best she could, Millie helped her stand and led her to Manny’s office to rest. Before entering the office, Millie knocked on the door to announce they were coming in. Manny pushed himself out of his chair and started walking toward them, but stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Remy’s condition.

“What happened to her?” Manny asked.

“I don’t know,” replied Millie. “She bumped into me when I was walking to work. She hasn’t appeared to know who I am since I stopped her and brought her here.”

“My goodness. Do you think we should call the police?”

“We probably should now that I think about it,” said Millie even though she didn’t like the idea of police sniffing around Remy’s background. She really didn’t want anything coming back to her since she didn’t have anything legal to prove who she was. *Maybe going back to the Realm isn’t such a bad idea after all*, she thought.

“Manny, can I use your phone to call the police? Should I use the emergency number or the non-emergency number?”

“Let me handle it,” Manny said. “You go on out there and get her that muffin she likes and some juice, too.”

“Okay,” said Millie, glad to have some weight taken from her shoulders. She left Manny’s office feeling a little better since she had something specific to do. Get a muffin and juice - an easy enough task to complete. Millie says hello to a couple of the workers behind the counter as she gets one of the WalCranChip muffins out of the display case and a bottle of apple juice from the refrigerator. She grabbed a couple of napkins and a fork on her way back to Manny’s office as an after thought.

Millie got to Manny’s door and pushed it open with her elbow. She would have screamed at what she saw if she could’ve, but a huge hand covered her mouth and prevented any sound from escaping. Millie couldn’t believe the amount of blood she saw. Remy was covered in it and, at first glance, seemed she was exactly as Millie had left her, just sitting still, staring in front of her with a far away, unfocused look on her face. It didn’t take Millie long to find the source of the blood once she started looking though. An angry gash was torn open across Remy’s neck. It seemed someone slit her throat in a hurry and didn’t bother using a proper knife.

Millie tried to resist the urge to struggle and fought the desire to turn and look at who held her so tightly because deep down, she knew the only person it could be was Manny. She had dropped the juice and muffin when she first entered the room, but realized she still had a hold of the napkins and fork. Millie decided to tuck the fork away and as nonchalantly as possible, slid it into the front pocket of her jeans.

“Are you going to scream if I let you go?” Manny asked. His voice had an edge to it Millie had never heard before. She could feel his hot breath on the side of her neck as he spoke and in an instant, all thoughts of the loving boss she thought she knew flew out the window.

Millie shook her head in an attempt to let him know she wouldn't scream. She couldn't take her eyes off of Remy and wondered if Manny had the same thing planned for her. Her knees started to shake as she fought off the panic course through her body.

“Okay then. I'm going to let you go and you are going to sit in that chair right there,” he said as he shoved her toward the chair in front of his desk usually reserved for visitors. Manny's shove caused Millie to lose her balance and led to a very ungraceful landing. Her hip took most of the impact as she landed sideways in the hardwood chair. Fortunately, she landed on the side without the fork. Not knowing what to expect, she was positive slowly bleeding to death from a fork puncture wouldn't add to her chances of surviving the evening.

“Why, Manny?” was the only thing she could think to ask.

“Do you really want to know, Millie? Do you?” he challenged.

“Manny, you seemed like such a nice guy. How could that be an act?”

“Who says it was an act? I am a nice guy. You can't see that because you are blind to what is important in life. Loyalty.”

“Loyalty to whom, the Queen? She was a terrible ruler and only cared about herself and the power she gained by holding others down.”

“You have no idea what you are talking about,” Manny spat.

“Then tell me,” Millie said. She hoped to keep him talking until someone from the coffee shop came to his office for something. Surely he couldn’t get away with this with a store full of employees and customers.

Manny started to pace in front of his office door. The knife he used to cut Remy’s throat was in his hand again. He slapped the blade into his palm, like a music teacher keeping rhythm for his student. He seemed to be considering what to say.

“Have you noticed anything strange about your powers yet, Millie?”

“No,” she replied. She could feel irritation building. She wanted to know how he was connected to the Queen, not talk about her faerie powers.

“I guess I’m not surprised you haven’t felt the drain of your powers yet. You’ve blended in quite well among the humans, haven’t you? You made some friends, even though two of them were ordered to befriend you by the Queen, you located a place to live, and you have even started socializing. That has been the hardest thing to watch these last couple of days. I can’t believe someone of your upbringing would stoop to fraternizing with one of the walking dead.”

Millie couldn’t help but roll her eyes. Manny seemed to be lost in his own world. “What do you mean, someone of my upbringing? I was being trained to be a cook and looking forward to nothing more than a year of forced service to the Queen when I left the Realm.”

“Left the Realm, ha! Do you really think you could have remained in hiding forever? You see how the Queen had eyes on you at all times. Do you really think she couldn’t have brought you back home any time she wanted?”

“Then why didn’t she?”

“My guess is she wanted to see how long you could stay without losing your powers.”

“So, it’s true? The longer I stay with the humans the harder it will be to use my powers and eventually, I’ll have nothing left?”

“That has generally been the case,” Manny replied. “There hasn’t been a faerie to last as long as you have in the history of the Realm. The Queen was intrigued. She suspected it had something to do with your lineage.”

“My lineage? What do you mean?”

“Yes, there have been many faeries sent to the human world simply as an experiment to see how long they could last. I was one of the first.”

Millie was shocked and couldn’t think of anything to say. Thankfully, it didn’t seem like Manny was expecting her to respond. If what he said was true, Manny is a faerie or was a faerie if he is implying he lost his powers while living here.

“In the beginning, the Queen asked for volunteers to live among the humans. She provided enough money to live and the freedom to do whatever we wanted. In exchange, it was expected we monitor our powers, make weekly contact with the Queen or one of her emissaries, and be willing to aid her in human matters whenever called upon to do so. It didn’t take long for the faeries to realize the volunteers weren’t coming back. I was one of the lucky ones though. While I did lose my powers, I was able to stay in the Queen’s good graces by having the forethought to establish a way to survive even without powers.” Manny stopped pacing and looked directly at Millie. “You see, instead of just using the money the Queen provided for frivolous reasons like most, I started a business. The others chastised me because I wasn’t enjoying my life

among humans, but it was me who was left laughing at them when their powers were gone and the Queen no longer had any use for them. The money stopped coming, they didn't know how to survive, and they slowly disappeared, never to be heard from again. I, on the other hand, didn't need the Queen's money after my powers were depleted and the Queen appreciated my independence and ability to survive in a foreign world. I have remained one of her most loyal and trusted servants ever since." Manny resumed his pacing in front of the door.

"How long ago did you start living among the humans?" Millie asked.

"A little over six years ago."

Millie started putting together a timeline. Manny volunteered over six years ago. No faerie has lasted as long as she has and she's been among the humans for six months. Volunteers stopped coming forward shortly after Manny came to the human world. The Queen established the law forcing sixteen-year-olds to give a year of service five years ago. Already knowing the answer, Millie asked Manny, "How did the Queen get people to come to the human world after volunteers stopped coming forward?"

Manny laughed. "Are you going to sit there and pretend like you don't know?"

"I don't know," Millie snapped.

"Well, you sure stumbled into a mess didn't you? Why did you and your friends start your little secret society then? Why start a rebellion against the Queen's law?" he challenged.

“It wasn’t right for the Queen to require sixteen-year-old faeries to do her bidding. We were fighting against the law in general. We didn’t know the Queen was using some of those sixteen-year-olds for this?”

“Like I said, you sure stumbled into a mess didn’t you?” Manny walked behind his desk and opened a drawer. He pulled out some angry looking chains and let them clank on top of the desk. He pulled a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked what looked like a cuff.

Millie instinctively jolted from her chair and headed straight for the door only to find it locked.

“Now, now. Come back here and we’ll get through this quickly.” Manny said as if he were talking to a child.

Millie stood frozen at the door unsure of what to do. For a moment, she considered banging on the door and yelling for someone to come help her, but would that put an innocent bystander in danger? She didn’t know what to expect from Manny. He was a totally different person than the one she thought she knew.

Millie didn’t resist when Manny pulled her roughly by the arm back to his desk. He’d taken the chain he’d dug out from the drawer and secured it to a loop built into the side of the desk. The other end had not only one cuff like she’d seen at first, but two – one larger than the other. A sick feeling formed in her stomach as she realized what the two cuffs were for – she only prayed they weren’t made out of iron.

Manny pushed Millie roughly into the chair and caused her to land on the same hip as before. *There is going to be one heck of a bruise there, that’s for sure*, she thought. While she was still rubbing her sore hip, Manny grabbed one of her hands and

locked the smaller cuff on her wrist. The pain in her hip suddenly seemed like nothing compared to the searing burn of the wrist cuff. Just as she feared, the cuff was made of iron. Not only would it cause her pain, it would slowly drain away what power she had until there was nothing left.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked Manny. Millie tried to keep the fear out of her voice with little success. She just hoped he didn’t detect the quiver like she did.

“Oh, there are so many reasons really. I don’t have time to get into them all right now, but I will say this. The Queen was the best thing that ever happened to the Realm. You would have been smart to listen to her and go home when she asked you to. She had plans for you. But now, you’ll never know what you could have been in the Realm and you and your blood sucker friend will pay for what you did.”

“Leave Slade alone. He was only protecting me and has no knowledge of the inner workings of the Faerie Realm. He won’t cause any trouble after I’m gone,” Millie pleaded.

“Nope, I’ve made up my mind and I’m sticking to the plan. Who knows who will take over in the Realm now that the Queen is dead? Taking care of her murderers might just be the thing to put me in the good graces of the new ruler. I’ve enjoyed quite a successful relationship with the Realm ever since I’ve left and I’d hate to see that get flushed down the toilet because of you. Yep, getting rid of you is what I need to do. Can’t have you popping up later and causing trouble.” With his final word he snapped the larger cuff around Millie’s neck and tugged the chains to make sure everything was secure.

Millie thought she was going to pass out. The pressure from the neck cuff on top of the pain from the iron made her feel like she couldn't breathe. Helplessly, she watched as Manny put the keys to the torture device in his pocket and walked out of his office. Millie closed her eyes and attempted to control her breathing. Questions started running through her mind and she couldn't decide which one she should focus on first. What would Slade do when she didn't show up at her apartment at eight o'clock? Naturally, he would come here after a while and walk right into Manny's trap. How did Manny plan to kill them? When was he planning to do something with Remy's body? Leaving her here didn't seem to be a smart plan, but maybe he intended it to be a visual reminder of what he was capable of in case she got any ideas about escaping. What did he mean by her lineage? What plans did the Queen have for her if she had gone back to the Realm? Why is it her powers have lasted longer among the humans than any other faeries'? How much longer would she last with this iron on her skin? Millie hoped it would be long enough to see Slade.

Chapter 57 – Slade

Slade looked at his watch for the dozenth time and fought the urge to panic. He'd been standing outside Millie's apartment since a little before 8 o'clock. When she didn't show by fifteen minutes after, he went up to her apartment in case she got home before he arrived. She didn't answer the door and he couldn't pick up a recent scent so he went back to the sidewalk so he could meet her out front. He didn't want to seem overprotective so instead of leaving to search for her immediately, he decided to give her more time and wait until 8:45 p.m. before going to look for her.

Slade thought the best place to start looking for Millie would be at the coffee shop. He went to the back of her apartment building, scaled the fire escape, and reached the roof. He would be able to make good time jumping from rooftop to rooftop and not have to worry about drawing the attention of any passersby on the sidewalk.

It doesn't take long for Slade to reach Where 'Ya Bean and a quick glance down toward the street in front of the coffee shop revealed Millie wasn't standing outside. He decided to look down into the back alley as well since Millie usually used that entrance. After seeing she wasn't in the back either, Slade had to think about how continue. Perhaps he'd walk in the front door and she'd be behind the counter stuck working a late shift because someone didn't show up for work. *That would be the best-case scenario*, he thought, but there was a feeling in his chest that told him he wasn't going to find the best case. Most likely he would have to resort to asking one of the other employees when she left.

Of course, he could break into the back door and explore without talking to anyone. Slade thought this course of action would bring him more results. He didn't

feel especially hopeful that Millie's coworkers would be able to tell him why she is late for their date. He had to remind himself not to go overboard. There wasn't any reason for him to think Millie was in some dire situation in need of his help. The Queen and her assassins were dead. Who else would be out to get Millie? She never mentioned the possibility of anyone else coming after her.

Slade decided he would go in the front door first and then, if things didn't feel right, he would leave as if nothing were wrong and head to the back alley and enter the coffee shop from the rear. With his plan in place, Slade walked to the side of the building where he wouldn't be seen and silently jumped to the ground. He walked from between the two building where he landed and nonchalantly entered the flow of foot traffic on the sidewalk heading in the direction of the coffee shop.

Slade didn't know if it was the fact he was feeling extra cautious or not, but the unnatural light used to illuminate Where 'Ya Bean seemed to put him on edge. It was so bright inside there was no way for anyone to hide. He hoped no one was hoping to steal a few romantic moments with his or her loved one in here tonight. The fluorescents hanging from the ceiling would put a damper on any rendezvous. The coffee shop seemed like a completely different place than what he experienced during the day. He guessed the sun provided most of the lighting then, which gave the coffee shop a warm and welcoming feeling. What he walked into just now was a place meant to keep people awake, preferably by drinking Where 'Ya Bean's expensive, designer coffee drinks.

Once inside, a quick glance told him Millie was nowhere in sight. On the off chance the people behind the counter actually knew something worthwhile, he

approached the cash register as if he were a customer. After ordering a small cup of the House Blend, Slade said, “Hey, is Millie working tonight?”

The barista’s eyebrows furrowed as if she really had to think about the question. “Mmmm,” she started as she chewed her bottom lip, “she was supposed to work today, but she never showed up.”

Slade felt his chest tighten. He knew it wasn’t going to be a best-case scenario. He attempted to calm himself before he asked his next question. “Well, I was supposed to meet her here this evening. Did anyone talk to her today? Was she sick or something?”

“I don’t know. We told Manny, he’s the owner, and he said he’d check on her. He didn’t give us an update. At least, he didn’t tell me anything. Sorry,” she said. She made eye contact with the customer behind him, which was a polite way of telling him she was done giving out information.

Slade grabbed his coffee and made his way to the door.

“Sarah, can you come here a minute?” a male voice called from the kitchen area.

“I’ll be right there Manny,” Sarah responded.

Slade’s ears perked up after hearing the exchange. If Manny was the one checking on Millie, maybe Manny was the one Slade should be talking to now. Slade turned before he reached the door and located an empty table that would give him full view of the counter and the kitchen behind it. Before he questioned Manny, he wanted to observe him for a little while. He remembered Millie saying only nice things about the man, but he wanted to get a reading on him himself.

Sarah finished with the customer she was helping and then went in the back to talk to Manny. Slade couldn't see everything going on in the back because there was only a small opening in the wall that separated the counter from the kitchen. Manny was standing with his back to Slade so he could only see the back of his head. Sarah stopped a little to Manny's side provided Slade with a good shot of her profile. Slade had to concentrate to block out the surrounding noise of customer chatter, clinking glass, and coffee machinery. Soon he was able to hone in on the conversation between Manny and his employee.

"I heard a customer ask about Millie. What did he want?" Manny asked.

"He just wanted to know if Millie was at work," Sarah answered.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him she didn't come into work today and that you were going to call and check on her. Did you?"

"Did I what?" Manny asked.

"Did you check on Millie? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, yes, she is just a little under the weather. Her medicine put her to sleep and she forgot to call in sick."

"Oh, good. I was hoping it wasn't anything bad. You never know with some people though. Sometimes people just up and quit a job without telling anyone," Sarah said. "Was that all, Manny?"

"Mmmhmmm," Manny mumbled.

Sarah gave him a strange look and walked out front to reclaim her post at the counter.

Now, Slade knew he had to sneak in the back way and see what was going on. Manny was definitely involved in whatever was keeping Millie from meeting him because Slade knew Millie wasn't at home sick. That meant Manny was a liar.

Slade slowly stood up from his table and walked to the trashcan by the door. After depositing his coffee cup in the bin, he slipped out the front door and back onto the sidewalk. Without a backwards glance, he left Where 'Ya Bean and walked to the side of building so he could slip around to the back entrance of the coffee shop. The challenge was going to be getting inside. He knew Millie had a key to the coffee shop and that normally the back entrance was kept locked. Slade needed to find a way to break in without causing a commotion. He wanted to get a jump on Manny and maintain the upper hand throughout their interaction.

Slade patted the outside of his jacket in the hopes his lock picking tools were still in his pocket after using them during the Stallings' case. He didn't remember taking them out and was glad he thought of them before doing something drastic like busting the door down or breaking the locking mechanism. Thankfully, the picks were in his inside jacket pocket. He retrieved them while he surveyed the area to make sure he wasn't going to break into a building in front of a witness. Satisfied he was alone, Slade went to work on the lock. Manny wasn't worried about security if the quality of his lock was any indication. In a few expert moves, Slade had the door unlocked. He propped the door open with his foot while he put away his tools and then slowly opened it wide enough to slip through making as little noise as possible.

Slade found himself in a storage room lined with shelves and covered in boxes. There was a small path that led from the back door to a small hallway and then

eventually to the front of the coffee shop. Before Slade continued forward, he opened his senses to the area around him in order to determine if Millie was in the building. He assumed Manny had an office in this part of the building and hoped to figure out where it was before he charged forward as well. It didn't take long for him to come to the conclusion that Millie was definitely close. Her scent was fairly fresh which meant she had been there earlier – proof positive Manny was lying about Millie being sick and not coming to work.

Slade made his way through the storage room and toward the hallway not really having a plan in mind. He decided to locate Manny's office and take a look in there. If there were something Manny wanted to hide it would be in there. As he left the storage room, Slade noticed there were doors on both sides of the hallway. On the right there were two doors to choose from, one labeled as a restroom for employees only and the other had an industrial-looking placard stating it was filled with supplies. By the process of elimination that only left one choice for Manny's office – the door on his left.

Slade moved silently down the hallway and eased to the left side of the hall toward the door. Once he reached the door he concentrated on what he could discover inside. He picked up the distinct smell of blood and it took everything he had not to bust in immediately. Pictures of Millie battered and bloody flashed through his mind. If anything happened to her he didn't know what he would do. He could also make out muffled sounds coming from inside – perhaps the scraping of a chair against the floor, a deep rumble of a voice, and possibly the tinkling of a chain. He knew it would be too much to ask that Manny not be inside, but Slade assumed the deep, muffled voice

coming from inside was him. He was either talking on the telephone or someone was inside with him. A ball of tension in the pit of his stomach told him, if Manny were talking to anyone in his office, it would be Millie.

Slade didn't know any other way to approach the situation other than open the door and get inside as quickly as possible. He knew he could move fast enough to surprise Manny, but not knowing if, in fact, Millie was inside or in what shape she was in, forced him to consider other possibilities. Slade ran through options in his head. The smart move might be to wait in the storage room until Manny left the office and then go inside to look around. Not knowing when Manny would leave was a problem. He could stay in his office for the rest of the night, but Millie might need him right now. Another alternative would be to cause a commotion in the front of the coffee shop to force Manny out of his office, but that brought up more questions. Would he cause the distraction himself, should he pay a stranger to do it? Slade knew he didn't have the patience for any kind of elaborate plan. The thought of Millie pushed him into action even though it might not be the best decision.

After taking a deep breath, Slade listened at the door again before he turned the doorknob. Hearing nothing, he quickly threw open the door. His fears were realized when he saw Millie chained to a desk in a chair at the back of the room. Her eyes were open, but she didn't appear to be lucid, but there didn't appear to be any blood on her and he breathed a sigh of relief. It was physically painful to take his eyes off of her, but he had to survey the rest of the room and figure out where the danger was or they could both end up immobilized.

When his eyes reached the other side of the room it took him a minute to realize what he was looking at. It was clear the scent of blood was coming from the person sprawled on the couch. Whoever it was was so covered in dried blood there was only a patch or two of unstained skin. The dirty brown hair hung down in front of the unknown girl's face. As bad as he felt for the girl, he was relieved to know it wasn't Millie bleeding inside the office.

Knowing someone else was in the room, Slade turned around to look behind him. Manny stood completely still in the corner beside the door. It was one of the creepiest things he had ever seen. Manny's eyes were reduced to slits as he glared at Slade. His mouth seemed to sneer, but even that didn't seem to be the right word to describe the look he gave Slade. Slade didn't feel fear, but he realized he wasn't going to be dealing with someone who was playing with a full deck. *This could get very dangerous, very fast.* Slade thought.

"Hello, Manny. We haven't formally been introduced, but my name is Slade and I'm a very good friend of Millie's. Is there a reason you have her chained to your desk?"

A low rumble came from Manny's chest. Slade returned Manny's stare and waited to see if he was going to actually speak, but as more time passed, it appeared all he was prepared to do was maintain the same deep growl he started as soon as Slade entered the room.

"Now Manny. Aren't you going to speak to me? It seems a little rude to just stand there and stare. Especially when there is a beautiful woman in the room in need of our assistance. Do you know where the key is so we can unlock her?" he asked.

Manny's right arm started twitching and Slade hoped it was a sign of some progress in the conversation. He didn't want to turn his back on Manny, but, at the same time, he wanted to position himself closer to Millie. Slade tentatively took a step back while keeping his eye on Manny at the same time.

"Do think you will be able to release her before she dies?" Manny spat.

Slade froze. *Before she dies? What did he do to her?* He had to fight the urge to turn and run directly to her, but knew as soon as he did, Manny would take advantage and come after him. Slade decided the best way to play his part would be to act nonchalant. He didn't want to give Manny additional ammunition to use against him. Manny already knew Slade cared for Millie or he wouldn't be here in the first place. If Manny knew Slade would do anything to save her he would definitely have the upper hand.

"Well, I sure hope I can. It would be a shame to allow someone as beautiful as Millie to die, don't you think?" As hard as it was, Slade pasted a smile on his face as he looked at Manny before taking another step back. "And, while we're on the subject, care to tell me what happened to the unfortunate girl on your couch?"

"Remy turned into a liability instead of an asset."

Remy? I hope Millie didn't have to watch him kill her, he thought. "So, about those chains. Aren't those a bit overkill?"

"She wasn't kidding when she said you knew nothing about Faerie," Manny snorted. Slade didn't think it was possible for him to look even creepier, but the amusement on Manny's face distorted his sneer into something maniacal.

Slade had to fight off the feelings of inadequacy because he knew he didn't know enough about the faeries to be of any technical help to Millie - he would have to rely on his bite and brawn. "Well, we all can't be geniuses," said Slade as he moved another step closer to Millie. He didn't know what was wrong with her, but assumed from Manny's comment she was in bad shape. He remembered what Millie looked like when he first entered the office – dazed, drugged, confused. Had Manny given Millie something to subdue her?

"Go ahead, I won't stop you. Check on her if you want," said Manny.

Slade didn't turn his back on Manny, but he did increase his speed as he backstepped toward Millie's chair. He crouched beside her and ran his hand up her arm. As soon as he touched her, Millie's eyes seemed to come into focus. She let out a tiny sound, almost like a whimper, and rolled her eyes over to look at him.

"Hey, beautiful. Can you tell me what's wrong?" he asked hopefully.

"I-I-I..." she attempted to answer.

"You can do it. What do you need me to do?"

He watched as Millie swallowed and felt terrible about how painful it was for her to complete such a simple action.

"I-Iron," Millie finally said.

Slade's eyes immediately went to the chains holding her to the desk. There was a cuff around one of her wrists and another around her neck. No wonder it was so hard to swallow. Iron must cause faeries to feel pain and could eventually kill them if what Manny said was true. No wonder swallowing was so hard – as small as Millie was, the

cuff covered her entire neck. Slade didn't think Millie could tilt her head up or down even if she wanted to.

Slade looked Millie directly in the eye and nodded. "Don't worry, I'll get the chains off," he promised.

His eyes went back to Manny and he wasn't surprised to see he had moved closer to them. Manny was in the center of the room, but still staring at Slade like a dosed up mental patient. "Are you going to give me the key or am I going to have to take it from you? Either way, these chains are coming off of her," Slade said indicating Millie.

Manny let out something that sounded like a laugh before he answered. "Oh, I'm not giving to you the key, that is a fact. Millie deserves to die for what she did to the Queen. Her powers will soon drain away and take her life with them."

Slade stood up and placed himself in front of Millie. "I'm the one who killed the Queen so if you have a problem with anyone it should be me."

"She deserves to die for bringing a filthy blood sucker like you into contact with the Queen and allowing it to happen. The thought of her with you is sickening. If she hadn't involved herself with you the Queen would still be alive. She is a stupid girl. She could have had anything. The Queen was prepared to offer her power – power any other faerie would have given undying fealty for."

"The Queen said nothing of giving Millie anything but a life of servitude once she returned to the Realm," replied Slade.

"No one really gave her a chance, did they?" said Manny.

“What is your connection to the Realm?” asked Slade. Manny appeared to be human – he didn’t give off the scent of a paranormal and he definitely didn’t smell like the few faeries he’d been around.

“Does it matter?”

“Probably not, but for curiosity’s sake, why don’t you humor me?”

“I’m a faerie,” Manny said. Slade noticed a hint of smugness in his tone.

“A faerie, huh? Why don’t you look like a faerie, or better yet, smell like one?”

“I’ve lived among the humans too long and lost my powers long ago. Exactly what would happen to Millie if she were allowed to live amongst them. The Queen was offering her something only a handful of faeries before her have received. Stupid girl.”

“Why don’t we just let her go and we can all talk about this like reasonable people. I’ve heard the way Millie has talked about you. She loved working for you. You have always been nice to her and I can’t imagine you’d want to hurt her like you are.” Slade tried to reason with him.

Millie let out of gasp of pain and Slade spun around to look at her. Her eyes were closed and squinted in pain. He had no idea what to expect from this process of draining her life from her using iron.

“How long have you had her chained like this?” he asked Manny.

“It has been hours. She probably doesn’t have long left by now.”

Slade felt his blood boil and wanted to rip Manny limb from limb.

“I can see by the look on your face you want to kill me, but let’s think about this for a moment. Yes, I’m aware you are the one who killed the Queen, but I hold Millie responsible for that. You were only doing what you felt was necessary in order to

protect her - what comes natural to a killer such as yourself. If you leave this room now and never come back, I'll forget I've ever met you and we can both continue with our lives. If you don't leave, while you may get the better of me, you probably won't save Millie in time and you'll have the wrath of the new Faerie leader coming down on you even more than you could possibly imagine. You have no idea how connected I am," Manny said.

"Are you finished explaining your importance in the world? If so, just let me say, I couldn't care less how you are connected and what kind of vengeance and retribution will follow me if I kill you. If Millie dies – you die. Simple as that."

"It seems we are at an impasse."

Slade turned to Millie once again to check on her. He reached out and stroked her hair and she stirred just enough to show she was aware of his touch. "Slade," she whispered.

Slade crouched beside her again. "Yes?" He could see she was struggling to speak. He wondered if iron was to her as silver was to him. If so, he was amazed she could form words at all.

"Don't do anything stupid."

"Me?" he laughed. "You must be confusing me with someone else. I would never do anything stupid." Slade thought he saw Millie's mouth twitch with the beginning of a smile.

"Sweet, huh?" said Manny. "She is such a thoughtful girl, until it came to her Queen, of course."

“Would you just shut up,” yelled Slade. “I’m going to get you out of here, don’t you worry,” he said to Millie in a much softer voice.

“If only Millie would have gone back with the Queen. She would have been able to have everything she ever wanted - power, life, love.”

Still looking at Millie, Slade said, “The Queen wanted to take Millie back and force her to work for the Court for the rest of her life. You have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Millie had to go back to the Realm voluntarily in order for the Queen to bestow power to her. If she had returned, Millie would have had enough power to be able to maintain life among humans, even though she probably wouldn’t have wanted to after realizing what life would be like for her in the Realm after the Queen’s generosity.”

Slade felt a twinge of guilt, but tried to keep it off of his face. Millie could have had everything if she’d just gone back with the Queen, but there was no way for them to know. They thought she was going back to a world of slavery. “Well, there isn’t anything we can do about it now, I suppose. The Queen is dead after all.”

“But, the Queen’s predecessor isn’t. The one who takes her place will have the power to bestow the same gift to Millie should he or she find it pleasing to do so. Perhaps we can come to an agreement. You leave without inflicting any bodily harm on me and I’ll allow Millie to live. Whenever the new ruler becomes known I’ll make contact and pass her along to the Realm. Come on, be smart – give Millie the chance to survive and reach a level of power she never would have on her own. Even if you were able to release her from the chains after killing me, she would lose her powers and be no

better than the lowly humans she lives around within a year. Do you really think she'd enjoy a life like that?"

Slade knew Millie would tell him to kill Manny and release her, but what if? What if the new ruler of the Realm could provide Millie with the power to live with humans and still maintain her unique powers? But, Manny wanted to be the one in charge. He wanted to keep Millie under his control until the new leadership came forward and things stabilized in the Faerie Realm. Slade didn't like that idea and he knew Millie wouldn't. Slade turned to Millie once again, squatted in front of her, and whispered, "I want to kill him, Millie. I don't want him to be in a place of power over you."

Millie's opened her eyes, looked him straight in the face, and nodded. Slade had no doubt Millie just gave her approval.

Before he thought about it anymore, he stood and turned around in one fluid motion. The look on Manny's face was a mixture of surprise and fear and, if he were completely truthful about it, Slade would have to admit it caused him joy to see a weasel like him squirm.

"Hey, w-w-wait!" Manny stammered.

"I'm sorry, Manny, but Millie has spent enough time locked up in chains - especially ones causing her pain. I'm done playing with you. If you won't hand over the key willingly, I'll take it by force and most likely kill you for the trouble you've caused."

Slade stalked toward his prey, hands repeatedly opening and closing into fists. Manny responded by shuffling backwards. It was almost comical to see him lose his

balance and fight to stay upright. “Manny, don’t make this any harder than it has to be. The more you make me work, the worse I’ll make it for you.” Slade reached Manny, grabbed him by the shirt, and effortlessly lifted him off the ground.

“I-I-I’ll give you to key. Here – take it!” Manny said as he frantically tried to reach into his pocket to dig out the key to unlock Millie’s chains. Manny held the key out in front of him like someone holding a dead mouse.

Slade kept Manny in the air with one hand and used his other to snatch the key away from Manny. “Thank you very much, Manny. That wasn’t hard at all, was it?” Slade let go of Manny’s shirt and allowed him to fall to the ground. He put the key in his pocket so he would have both hands free again. He didn’t want to give Manny the chance to escape while he was busy freeing Millie so he had to decide what to do with him. Killing him would be so easy – the anger coursing through his veins because of what Manny had done to Millie fueled the flame of his anger. On a typical day he wouldn’t consider himself a monster, but was this a typical day? Could he be of use some other way?

Slade reached down to pull Manny up on his feet and dragged him across the room to the couch where Remy’s slowly decaying corpse slumped. Panic appeared in Manny’s eyes the closer they got to the couch. “What’s wrong, Manny? Don’t you want to see your handy work up close?”

Manny couldn’t catch his breath. “P-P-Please,” he cried.

Tears ran down Manny’s face as Slade pulled him to a stop so he could look him in the eyes. “You know you deserve to die, don’t you?”

Manny seemed close to hyperventilating – his sobs had turned to coughs, making it difficult to catch his breath. Slade put his hands around Manny’s neck and started to squeeze.

“No, Please don’t! I can help you. I still know people in the Realm. I can help Millie get back home, I promise.”

Slade continued to put pressure on Manny’s neck to cut off his air supply and soon, his struggling slowed. Manny’s eyes got heavy as he started losing consciousness and Slade continued to maintain his grip. When Manny finally passed out, Slade pushed him so he’d land on the couch next to Remy’s body. Before he walked away, Slade put his fingers to Manny’s neck and felt for his pulse. Satisfied he was still alive, Slade turned and moved quickly to Millie’s side.

“Millie, I’m going to release you now. I don’t know what to expect when this iron comes off of you, but if it is anything like what silver would do to me, I’m sorry.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead before putting the key in the lock on the cuff around her neck. Millie stirred ever so slightly as his lips left her skin.

The cuff clinked open and Millie let out a cry that broke Slade’s heart. He didn’t know if he should remove the cuff quickly or work it off of her neck slowly. He decided to look at the skin under the cuff before he made his decision and hoped seeing what the iron did to her would help him decide. “Oh, Millie,” Slade whispered when he saw angry skin that resembled raw meat - he almost changed his mind about leaving Manny alive.

“Okay, Millie. I’m going to take the cuff off from both sides at once. I’ll do it as quickly as possibly, I promise.” He reached to Millie’s neck and placed his hands

firmly on each end of the cuff and took a minute to mentally prepare himself for the pain he was going to inflict on her. He wished he were the one in this situation instead of her. He was about to begin the process of removing the torture device when he realized she would probably scream when it was ripped from her skin. His thoughts then went to the people still in the coffee shop, both employees and customers. He wasn't ready for anyone to come to the office yet so he needed to find a way to muffle Millie's sounds.

"Millie," he spoke calmly at her side. "There are still people in the building so we have to find a way to muffle any sounds you make, okay?" Her eyes fluttered open and looked in his direction. He was satisfied she was aware enough to understand. Slade's mind raced as he attempted to figure out what to do. The only thing he could really think of was to put his wallet in her mouth and allow her to bite it when she needed to scream. Slade reached into his back pants pocket to get it out. He made sure it wasn't too thick, gave it a quick brush off to remove some lint, and using his free hand to open her mouth, slid the wallet in between her teeth. *Those lovely lips – they should be accepting his mouth instead of his wallet*, he thought bitterly.

Slade made one final check to be sure she was biting down before he put his hands on the cuff again. Figuring he couldn't delay any longer, Slade firmly grasped the edges and started the process of pushing them apart, both opening it and removing it from her skin at the same time. Millie's eyes rolled back in her head as she emitted a high-pitched squeal.

"Shhh, shhh, I know it hurts Millie, but we'll be finished it just a second," Slade tried to comfort her.

Once the cuff was opened as far as it would go, the only skin still attached was that at the nape of her neck. Slade leaned forward and placed his lips on Millie's forehead and kissed her while he ripped the cuff away. Tears were rolling down Millie's cheeks when he bent his head to look at her – seeing them caused his heart to break into a million pieces.

“That was the hard one,” he said. “Let's get your wrist undone.”

He didn't know how she managed, but Millie gave an almost imperceptible nod of assent. Admiration for Millie made him bend down, take the wallet out of her mouth, and kiss her tenderly. He felt a hand touch the arm he had braced on her chair. Startled, he broke the kiss to look down and saw it was her hand on his skin. Slade felt a smile form on his lips and looked back at Millie. Her eyes were still bright with tears, but he could see relief in them too. He bent down again and gave her another quick kiss. “I'm so glad I found you,” he said.

Slade found the key for the cuffs again and unlocked the one on her wrist. He was about to go through the same procedure to remove it when he felt Millie's hand again.

“Wallet,” she croaked.

Slade smiled and shook his head as he reached for the wallet and put it between her teeth once more. Even injured she was able to function. *What a wonderful woman.*

The removal of the wrist cuff was much easier than the one on the neck had been. The skin on the wrist was not as tender for one thing, but it also covered a much smaller area of skin. He made short work of getting Millie free of the contraption and soon all the chains and cuffs lay in a pool at her feet. He removed the wallet from her

mouth and returned it to its home in his pocket. However, he couldn't help but notice the well-defined teeth marks marking the surface of the leather before he put it away.

Slade wanted to get her out of the building as quickly as possible and decided to wait to doctor her skin until they reached her apartment. After he reached down to place one arm along her back and the other under her knees he lifted her out of the chair and cradled her against his chest. Relief flowed through him at the thought of having her safe and in his arms. He didn't know what he would have done if something had happened to her. He'd rather her decide to back to the Realm than lose her forever.

Slade turned toward the door was ready to leave, but, at the last minute, decided to check on Manny. He'd hate for him to get away after all of the trouble he'd caused. The couch was a grisly scene – Remy's blood covered corpse next to an unconscious Manny. He was glad to be finished with this ordeal. Slade looked to make sure Millie was okay before freeing one of his arms to locate Manny's pulse. He could see Manny was still breathing, but he wanted to verify he was still out cold.

“Manny, you're dead. The moment you put your hands on Millie, you sealed your fate. I hope you've enjoyed the life you've led because you are finished making memories.”

Slade didn't feel any change in Manny's heart rate, which confirmed he was still out. He had a plan and it required Manny to remain in the office for a little while longer – it didn't require him to be conscious.

Slade strode to the door and listened for a moment to make sure he wouldn't run into anyone as he left. Hearing only silence, he opened the door, made sure it would

lock when closed, and, after stepping through, firmly pulled it shut behind him. Slade left the way he entered and welcomed the fresh air as he stepped into the night.

Slade placed Millie down on her couch as gently as he could then went straight to the kitchen to turn on the hot water and find a bowl and towel. He let the water get as hot as he could stand it, knowing it would cool down fast once he got in the living room and started using it to clean Millie's wounds. He kneeled on the floor in front of her, dipped the towel in the water, and wrung the excess back into the bowl. Carefully, he dabbed the wound around her neck and then moved to her wrist, rewetting the towel when necessary. The blood from the injuries didn't flow freely – it was more like it oozed and soon, the water in the bowl was tinged pink.

Millie didn't stir as Slade finished the preliminary cleaning and was still lifeless when he left her side to return his supplies to the kitchen. Slade wanted to put aid her healing, but he had no idea what medicine he should administer. He walked through the living room and glanced toward the couch to make sure Millie was okay before continuing to the bathroom. He had no idea what to expect when he opened the medicine cabinet above the sink. At first he felt embarrassed looking at her private possessions. As his eyes traveled over the hygiene items he found the usual toothbrush, toothpaste, and other feminine products along with several bottles of different herbal supplements from a nearby health store. Browsing through the bottles, he saw bee pollen, chlorophyll, and dandelion root capsules, but when his eyes landed on Vitamin E and Aloe Vera capsules he knew he hit the jackpot. Slade grabbed the bottles and

went back to the kitchen for another bowl. He dreaded the time it was going to take to puncture all of the tablets to squirt them into the bowl.

He decided to look through all her cabinets to make sure Millie didn't have anything else he could use for a homemade ointment. Slade couldn't believe his luck when he opened the cabinet under the sink and found a large bottle of Aloe Vera gel. "Hallelujah," he said.

He took off the lid to the Aloe Vera and poured it into a small bowl. Since he wasn't going to have to spend so much time on the Aloe Vera capsules he went ahead and cut open a few Vitamin Es and mixed them in for good measure. Millie was going to need all the moisture she could get. Slade figured the best way to apply the soothing salve would be to use his finger. He didn't want to use anything that would cause an infection and he figured a cloth would be too abrasive. Slade went to the sink and washed his hands with soap and hot water and shook his hands dry.

He didn't want to wake Millie, but knew he would need to ask her to move in order to doctor the back of her neck. He was thankful her hair was short so loose strands wouldn't aggravate the burn as it healed. He waited to disturb her until he was set up and ready to start applying the medicine.

"Millie," he whispered next to her ear. "I need you to sit up so I can get some Aloe Vera on your burn." He reached out to touch her face and brush back her hair as he continued to call her name to slowly rouse her.

Something resembling a groan finally came from her lips. "I'm so tired," she said.

“I know you are, but you will feel much better as soon as we get this on your neck.” Slade said as he reached out and gently pulled Millie into a sitting position. Even in the state she was in, she was beautiful. Again he realized how devastated he would have been if he hadn’t found and released her from Manny. “Can you lift your head for me – look straight ahead?” He helped her raise her head enough so he could have clear access to the burn in the front of her neck.

Slade made sure he was looking into her eyes and said, “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

Slade scooped out a small amount of the Aloe Vera/Vitamin E mixture onto his fingers. Leaning forward, he gently applied it to part of the burn. Millie’s first reaction to the salve was to jerk back and away from his hand.

“It’s cold,” she said sounding surprised.

“Does it hurt though?”

“I don’t think it is going to make it any worse. Let’s keep going.”

“Excellent,” he said dipping his fingers into the bowl again.

Slade continued worked his way around both sides of her neck before he asked her to lean forward so he could reach her nape. He walked around to the back of the couch and leaned over it so he could reach without forcing her to move any more than was necessary. Soon he started hearing soft sighs of relief coming from her instead of feeling her flinch every time he touched applied more salve. His started feeling better about his course of treatment as soon as he acted like she was feeling better.

“That’s all for your neck area for now so let’s do your wrist and then you can relax for a little while.” Slade moved around to the front of the couch and knelt in front

of her once again. He dipped his fingers in the medicine and covered the wound on her wrist with the balm. A quick examination of Millie's expression revealed that, while she still looked tired, at least the look of pain had left her face.

"I think you are supposed to keep a burn covered until the raw skin is healed. I don't suppose you have any gauze in your apartment do you?"

Millie let out a slight laugh, as she answered, "No."

"Do you feel up to staying by yourself while I run to the drug store to get some?"

"Of course."

"Okay, I won't be gone long."

"Don't worry, Slade. I'll be okay for the short time you'll be gone," Millie said, leaning forward with her head in her hands.

"I'll take your keys so I can let myself in when I get back. Just sit and rest."

Slade ran down the four flights of stairs and walked out of the apartment building feeling good for the first time since Millie didn't show up for the meeting this evening. Now that Millie was on the road to recovery, he allowed himself to wonder about Manny.

Shortly after he and Millie left the coffee shop, he stopped at a pay phone to call the police. He reported, anonymously of course, of seeing a dead body in Where 'Ya Bean. He said he saw the body in the owner's office with the owner passed out next to it. He had to believe the police would do what they were supposed to do and check out the anonymous tip. He told himself if they police didn't arrive within ten minutes he'd leave and take Millie home and not think about the possibility of Manny escaping. He

made sure to stand in a dark area of the alley next to the coffee shop and, while keeping a close look at the time, held Millie tight against his chest, whispering words of assurance in her ear.

He wanted to give a shout of encouragement to the police officers when he saw them roll up the street and pull to a stop directly in front of the coffee shop. It didn't take long for them to enter the building and since only about five minutes had passed, he decided to wait and see if they would leave escorting Manny out to the car. After another few minutes passed, Slade heard sirens scream from down the street and knew the police had at least found Remy's body. Two additional police cruisers screeched to a halt outside Where 'Ya Bean and Slade watched as more officers went inside.

He felt like his time was running out. He wouldn't be able to stand in the alley unnoticed forever and was about to leave when he heard the door to the coffee shop open and then someone reciting the Miranda Warning. Slade watched as Manny was half dragged to a police cruiser and placed inside the back seat. Satisfied, he turned and sped toward Millie's apartment.

He couldn't imagine a better ending to the nightmare that was this evening. Millie was home safe and recovering, Slade had a little more time with her until she would be well enough to go to the Realm is she wanted to, and Manny would be behind bars for a long time and wouldn't cause trouble anymore.

It didn't take long in the drug store. He bought several packages of sterile gauze, some surgical tape, and just on a whim, a couple of packages of organic, honey-filled candy he thought Millie would like. He thought they might be soothing to her throat.

He didn't waste anytime getting back to Millie. It was so late the streets were almost deserted so he raced full speed the whole way. He did the same with the four flights of stairs, only slowing down long enough to dig the key from his pocket so he could let himself inside.

He didn't know what to expect when he got inside. Would Millie still be on the couch where he left her or would she be stubborn and be up and about. He remembered he left a little mess in the kitchen and beside the couch. God he hoped she wasn't cleaning up his mess. Seeing her doing that would make him feel like a total jackass.

Tentatively, he opened the door and peeked inside. She was nowhere to be seen, but he did notice the bowl he used for the ointment was gone from beside the couch. His eyes immediately looked to the kitchen, praying she would be in there washing the dishes he had dirtied. She wasn't in there either, which made him happy. He was happier, still, when he noticed everything was still out on the counters. At least she hadn't done the dishes.

He tried not to automatically think the worst. She could be anywhere else in the apartment. Just because she wasn't where he could see her didn't mean something terrible had happened to her, AGAIN! As he shut the door behind him he heard the flush of the toilet and watched as Millie walked out of the bathroom. She had changed her clothes and now wore loose fitting pajama pants and a short camisole top revealing a small area of her mid-section. He felt like he was frozen in place – she was so beautiful he couldn't take his eyes off of her.

She ran her fingers through her spiky, damp hair and gave him one of the sexiest smiles he had ever seen. "I'm glad you're back."

“You seem to be feeling better,” he said.

“I am, but you might be upset with me when you find out what I did while you were away.”

“I’m just glad you didn’t clean up my mess.”

“I was getting to that next,” she teased. “No, really. I felt so dirty. Sitting in that room for so long with Remy. I couldn’t take it anymore. I could smell her corpse all over me so I took a shower.”

“No problem. I figured we’d need to reapply the ointment before we covered the wound with gauze anyway. Get me a pair of scissors and meet me at the couch.”

When Millie sat down, Slade put the bag of candy in her lap. “Here, work on one of these while I start on your wrist.”

Millie looked up at him with a huge smile on her face. “Thank you. I love honey.”

Chapter 58 – Millie

“Are you ready?” Slade asked.

“Yes, just get it over with. You know I hate this part.”

Millie sat on the commode in the bathroom with Slade hovering over her. He preferred to remove the gauze in here so he would be able to put the soiled bandages directly in the trashcan. She couldn't really complain since he was the one doing all the work, but sitting on the toilet was awkward and, truthfully, kind of embarrassing.

Slade had applied yards and yards of gauze to her wounds over the last few days while she healed and she always dreaded the removal process. Granted, it had been getting easier the more the skin healed, but no matter how easy Slade tried to be when he pulled off the old gauze, there was always a patch that seemed to stick causing tears to burn her eyes as she bit down hard on her lips, praying for the process to be over soon. Now, just knowing what was about to happen caused her to cringe.

“It will be okay,” Slade said.

“Yeah, yeah,” she pouted while she rolled her eyes.

Slade slide his thumb back and forth across her cheek before he peeled back the end of the gauze. She appreciated the tenderness he showed when he took on the role of doctor. She knew he enjoyed being able to help her and intended to allow him to continue doing it until she was fully healed. There was no way she would be able to wrap her own neck as good as he did.

“So, are you ready to talk about it,” he asked.

“About what?” she asked, as if she had no idea what he was talking about.

“Millie, it’s been almost a week. We should talk about it before the events go stale in our minds.”

“How could I forget?”

“I think there could be some selective memory loss if we aren’t careful.”

“Are you accusing me of – Ouch,” she squealed as the gauze pulled away too quickly when she turned to look at Slade in the face. She couldn’t help but notice the smirk on Slade’s face as she gently rubbed the pain away. “Are you accusing me of forgetting on purpose?” she finished.

“That is exactly what I’m accusing you of.”

“Hmm,” she all she said in reply.

“Millie, there are several things we need to discuss and I don’t know if time is on our side. First, and probably most important, there is the Queen’s death and how you expect that to impact your life. Second, is the Queen’s vague remark about your lineage and the apparent plans she had for you at Court, and third, and most recent, is the call from Manny’s lawyer you’ve been putting off for two days.”

“I know, Slade. You are wrong if you assume I haven’t been thinking about these things just because I haven’t been talking about them. As far as the Queen’s death, I don’t know what it means for me. My lineage? Well, there is no way to know what she meant by that unless I go back to the Realm and find someone who knows what she was talking about. The lawyer? I’ve been putting him off because I don’t want to talk to Manny and I’m afraid that’s what he wants.”

“Then, you just say no when he asks.”

“I know, it’s so easy.”

“I’m not saying it’s easy. I’m saying it will be better when you’ve dealt with it. I’m saying I want you to feel better. I’m saying I’ll be here with you when you call him – if you want.”

Slade’s hands stopped moving as he finished his sentence and caused Millie to look up. His eyes were bright with intensity and seemed begging her to understand what he was trying to say to her.

Millie looked directly into his eyes and nodded. “I understand and I know you’re right. I’ll go call the lawyer when we are done here.”

Slade didn’t say anything as he started to work with the gauze again.

He must’ve though she’d change her mind because he finished the wrap faster than ever before. “Well, all done,” he said as he stepped in front of the sink, washed his hands, and put all the materials under the bathroom sink.

Millie stood up from the commode and walked out of the bathroom and into the living room. She walked over to the couch and plopped down harder than she intended to – she didn’t want to give Slade the impression she was pouting again. Millie turned her eyes to the end table beside her and located the scratch paper with the lawyer’s number scrawled on it. She reached for it at the same time she dug in her jeans pocket for her cell phone. Taking a deep breath, she dialed the number and listened to it ring on the other end.

“Rogers, Hamilton, Beech, and McKinney how may I direct your call?” answered a too perky receptionist.

“Hello, my name is Millie Willowglitter. I’m returning Mr. Beech’s call.”

“Oh, yes, right away. Hold for just a moment please.”

Millie listened to the mechanical music on the line as she waited for Mr. Beech to pick up the call. She couldn't help but feel nervous and started to wish she'd never placed the call. She rested her head on the back of the couch and closed her eyes. *Calm down, Millie. You don't have to go see him just because he asks.* She opened her eyes to find Slade standing off to the side and leaning on the kitchen bar.

No one would be able to look at Slade and consider him plain. He was gorgeous and extremely thrilled he wanted to spend so much time with her. At times she felt guilty. What in the world did she do to deserve such a loyal friend? Millie smiled at Slade and patted the couch cushion next to her hoping he'd accept her invitation.

Slade's face changed expressions immediately when as it seemed to dawn on him what she wanted. A smile spread across his face as he pushed away from the bar and confidently strode toward her.

Millie felt Slade's weight next to her and automatically leaned against him. She took the phone away from her ear, switched the speaker on, and put it on her lap where they would both be able to hear the lawyer, if Mr. Beech ever decided to pick up the line.

She felt Slade's hand cover hers. She immediately turned her palm up so she could intertwine their fingers – having him next to her was a relief.

"This is Mr. Beech. Sorry to keep you waiting. Am I speaking to Millicent?" a gruff voice asked.

"Yes, this is Millie," she replied.

"Excellent. I've been attempting to get you on the phone for several days. It's a good thing you returned my call when you did. Tomorrow would have been too late."

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Didn’t Manny tell you what to expect in the case of his incapacitation?”

“Umm, no,” she answered, clearly confused. She couldn’t help looking at Slade to see what his reaction was to the Mr. Beech’s statement. She was happy to see he seemed just as confused as she was.

“I see, well, where to start? Manny Rains retained me several years ago. I assisted him in both business and personal legal matters. Approximately seven months ago, Manny contacted me for a meeting. He instructed me, at that time, to sign the ownership of Where ‘Ya Bean over to you with the stipulation he would continue management until which time he was unable to perform the job. With his current legal issue, he is most definitely unable to continue the management of the business. During our most recent visit, he asked me to call and inform you the legal change is, indeed, official. I have some papers for you to sign at my office. Will tomorrow at 11:00 am be okay for you?”

Millie felt Slade’s hand squeeze hers. “Millie,” he whispered.

“Miss Willowglitter?” Mr. Beech asked.

“I’m here. Tomorrow will be fine. Thank you Mr. Beech.”

“Excellent, I’ll have my secretary pencil you in. Until tomorrow then.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Beech,” she said as she ended the call. She turned to Slade and asked, “What do you think about that?”

“I’m definitely surprised. I never expected that was the reason the lawyer was contacting you. I assumed, like you, Manny wanted you to visit him in jail. More importantly though, what do you think?”

“I don’t know yet. I love the coffee shop and had a lot of the responsibilities of running the place already so I can’t imagine it would be too different than what I’m already used to, but at the same time, wow. What do I know about running a business?”

“What you don’t know now, you’ll learn,” he said.

Millie put her head on Slade’s arm. “I feel so much better and you don’t have to say ‘I told you so’ because I know I shouldn’t have avoided the phone call. It was childish.”

“I’m not going to say anything of the sort,” Slade said raising his hands to show his innocence.

“Unfortunately, my two remaining issues won’t be as easy. The only way to find out what the Queen was talking about in terms of my lineage is to actually return to the Realm. In doing so, I will be able to see what life is like without the Queen. A phone call isn’t going to result in the answer for us this time.”

“You’re right. Are you going to go?” Slade asked.

Millie didn’t want to turn to look him in the eye. She knew what she would see. His eyes would search hers for a sign of her decision while attempting to remain neutral. She knew he wouldn’t want her to go. He would be afraid she wouldn’t come back and for all she knew, she might not. Life in the Realm wasn’t all bad. There were a lot of things she enjoyed about her life when she was little, but now she’d have to live without Izzy. What would she do while she searched for her answers? Go back to the kitchens of Court? Live on her own as a rogue? A part of her wanted to go back and sort everything out, but another part wanted to stay in the human world with Slade and all the other luxuries of city life.

“I don’t know if I could go back,” she said. “You were there when the Queen said I would lose my ability to return and only she could make it possible.”

“You also told me what Manny said about you lasting the longest out of any other faerie that had come to the human world. When was the last time you used one of your powers?”

Millie didn’t have to think long – the night was burned forever in her memory. “The night you were poisoned by the assassin’s blood. I had to use glamour to make myself invisible to the human eye when I transported all the blood back to the apartment.”

“That wasn’t very long ago, Millie. I’m sure you still have some juice left,” Slade said jokingly.

“You’re probably right.”

“Do you want to test it?”

Did she? She didn’t know. Sure, it would be good to know, but what if she didn’t have anything left? Did she really want to know returning to the Realm wasn’t even a possibility?

“Come on, Millie. Let’s test it. You can’t make an educated decision if you don’t have all the information.”

“Grrrrrr, I know,” she said, her voice escalating.

She felt Slade’s arm snake around her and pull her in for a hug. Together, they sat quietly on the couch. It seemed Slade was done trying to convince her.

Millie didn't realize she'd dropped off to sleep until she was awakened by Slade kiss. "It's late. I thought you might want to go to bed since you have to get up and meet with the lawyer tomorrow."

"Aren't you going with me?" she asked.

"No, I'm not."

"Why not?" she asked.

"You have a lot to think about. Tomorrow you can get up and go talk to the lawyer to find out the specifics about your new business opportunity, which will help you decide what to do about the Realm. I'll support any decision you make."

Millie knew she didn't need Slade with her, but that didn't mean she didn't want him. She fought back the tears threatening to break free. "Okay, thanks for everything you've done for me these last few days. I don't think I could have taken pulling the gauze off of my own neck," she said with a weak smile.

"My pleasure," he said.

"You don't have to leave now, do you?"

"It would probably be best."

"Stay until I fall asleep?"

He hesitated before he answered. "Sure."

Millie stood up from the couch and walked into her bedroom to gather her nightclothes. Soon she was in the bathroom getting ready for bed, trying to decide what she was going to do. She figured she could talk Slade into coming with her tomorrow if she really tried, but she also knew she shouldn't. She didn't want to manipulate Slade.

Millie also knew she was going to have to go to the Realm eventually and probably would sooner than later. It would only get harder the longer she stayed.

Freshly showered, Millie left the bathroom and found Slade sitting on her bed. She couldn't stop her heart from pounding and her pulse racing at the sight of him casually leaned back on his elbows. His hungry eyes immediately flew to her face and caused her to suck in a breath. For a moment, she caught his eyes slip down her neck to where her pulse was beating. Could he smell her blood? Hear her blood pulsing through her veins? *Probably*, she thought.

Millie walked slowly into her bedroom, approached the bed, and took Slade's hand as he held it out to her. He pulled her to stand between his legs and wrapped her in his arms. His face tilted up to look at her and he looked like he wanted to say something, but instead he placed his cheek against her belly and hugged her close. Millie put her hands on his head and ran her fingers through his hair. She felt him shiver against her. She leaned down and kissed his head and felt herself being pulled to his lap. He positioned her so she was straddling him. They held on to each other tightly, neither wanting to be the one to let go first.

Millie pulled her head back so she could see Slade's face and was surprised to see his eyes closed. She gently placed a kiss on each eyelid and worked her way down until she found his lips. Gentleness soon turned to playfulness as she licked and nipped at his lips. Playfulness turned to frenzy as their mouths fused. The sounds of their kissing seemed to spur Slade on even more and she didn't want him to stop. His hands kneaded her back and shoulders as he pulled her deeper and deeper into the kiss. Millie

couldn't help pushing herself against his body even harder and knew he was fighting to stay in control. She could tell he wanted more – just like she did.

Slade broke the kiss first as he trailed his lips down her neck. Millie's head fell back as she moaned with pleasure. His tongue felt a trail of fire on her skin. Her breathing sped up, her pulse quickened, her hands flew over his body.

“No,” Slade yelled as he pulled her away.

Breathing hard, Millie said, “What's wrong?”

“You don't need me clouding your mind with complications right now.”

Millie climbed off of Slade's lap and immediately had to reach out for support. With one hand on his knee to hold her steady, she looked him directly in the eye and said, “You don't know what I need, Slade. Why don't you let me worry about myself for a change? I'm not a child so stop treating me like one.”

Wide-eyed, Slade stared at her. Faster than her eyes could follow him, he stood from the bed and headed for the door of the bedroom. *Oh My Gosh. He is going to leave. I can't believe it, that son of a...* Without even thinking about what she was doing, Millie put out a burst of power and sped toward the door and blocked his escape. The shock on Slade's face was comical. He didn't expect her to come after him, for one thing, but for another, he didn't expect her to use her powers to increase her speed. She didn't expect that either, but, hey, whatever worked. “Where do you think you're going?” she asked him.

“I-I-I was leaving.”

“I can see that. I guess the more important question is why. Why were you leaving?”

He bowed his head. She realized he didn't have an answer. He felt guilty or scared of what was happening and just wanted to escape. "Slade, look at me."

He raised his head to look at her and she saw moisture in his eyes. Millie reached up and wiped away the tear from his eye with one hand and reached for his elbow with the other. With her anger under control, she led him back toward the bed. When the backs of her legs touched the mattress she crawled up on her knees and continued backwards until Slade had no choice but to get on his knees and follow her across the bed. When she reached the middle of the bed, she stopped and pulled him close to her, gently placing kisses on the skin she could reach. She kissed his arms, his neck, his hands.

"Millie," he whispered. "I want you so much."

"Kiss me."

When he hesitated, Millie dropped from her knees and sat on the bed. Before he could do anything about it, she pulled Slade on top of her and kissed him with an intensity she didn't know she could feel.

Slade's hands roamed her body as hers roamed his. She tugged at his shirt in an attempt to pull it over his head and growled with frustration when she couldn't get a good enough grip on it. Slade raised himself up on one arm and used his other to remove his own shirt. Millie smiled up at him, raised herself up on her arms, and kissed his chest – being sure to tease his nipple with her tongue.

Slade pushed her back to the bed and grabbed her shirt. He didn't bother pulling it over her head – instead, he gripped it at the neck and ripped it off to reveal her soft and pale skin underneath. Excitement rushed through her body and she could see Slade

was wild with desire. Millie reached for Slade's belt to unfasten it so she could slide his pants down his legs. Before she even finished, he was reaching for her pajama bottoms. Soon, nothing was between them.

The coolness of his skin was a relief - fire was burning her up from the inside out. Slade trailed kisses along her face and neck pulling squeaks and moans from her body. Millie put her hands on his face so she could look him in the eye. When she knew she had all of his attention she smiled at him. She poured all of her feelings into that smile, hoping he would understand what she wanted. She was welcoming him in every way.

Slade returned her smile and bent down to place a kiss on her lips. Millie thought she was going to melt. Even though this kiss didn't have the feel of desperation as some of the others they'd shared that night, she knew it was packed with even more meaning. Slade's kissed trailed down to her cheek and moved along her jaw line. Millie felt herself writhing underneath him – demanding closeness. Slade answered her demands.

Millie's breath was taken away when she felt the sharpness of Slade's fangs on the tender skin of her neck. For a moment, she didn't know what he planned to do, but then he started intermingling kisses with the slide of his fangs; she realized this was pleasurable for him. To show him she was okay with what he was doing and that she enjoyed the slight sting of the fangs, she let out a moan and pushed against his body with hers. She wasn't afraid of him and there was no need to worry about him biting her since they discovered he was immune to the toxins of faerie blood. She wanted everything he was willing to give and wanted him to know it. Millie reached up to and

put her hand behind his head. She curled her fingers through his hair and pulled him down to her neck.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes.”

She felt Slade run his hands over her body to make sure she was ready for him then quickly returned to the job of kissing her. She wasn't afraid when she felt his lips creep down her neck. She wasn't afraid when she felt him settle more firmly between her legs. She wasn't afraid when she felt the pierce of his fangs deep in her neck. She wasn't afraid when she felt her body respond to his as she rose to meet him halfway.

The only thing she was afraid of was how this felt like goodbye.

Epilogue

Millie was late because she couldn't find the shoes she wanted to wear. "Where could they be?" she asked herself. In a place as small as hers, there didn't seem to be any way something could get lost. She always kept her living space tidy and it was unusual to find something out of place. What was it about shoes that made them so hard to keep up with?

Didn't I just wear them yesterday? she thought. *Where did I take them off?* She dropped to her knees in front of the couch and bent over to run her hand underneath. "Ah ha!" she yelled as she pulled them out of their hiding place. Millie sat on the edge of the coffee table in order to slip on the shoes and when she was completely dressed, grabbed her keys from the kitchen table and left her apartment.

Millie didn't know what to expect when she got to the park. Slade told her to meet him at their spot at 10:00 PM, but didn't know what he had planned. She might not have been running late if she hadn't stayed at Where 'Ya Bean so long, but she had a lot to catch up on in the office before she felt comfortable about leaving. One of the employees quit while she was gone so she spent part of her time looking through applications the coffee shop had on file so she could call people in for interviews starting tomorrow, but most of her time was spent going over the inventory. She needed to place several big orders first thing in the morning and needed to know exactly what they needed. By the time she reached her apartment it was already 9:30 PM and she wanted to shower and change before she met Slade. *Oh well*, she thought. *He would get used to it.*

Running late made Millie think about time in general. Since returning from the Realm, Millie discovered a decrease in her abilities. She was able to return home and discovered things pretty much as she expected. The only person she had been close to in the Realm was Izzy and with her gone, there just wasn't anyone left. The nostalgia she expected to feel when she visited her old living space never surfaced – she felt more like a visitor than someone who belonged.

The Queen's death hadn't seemed to have a lot of impact on the faeries in the Realm. It was easy to see morale was high amongst the inhabitants and the feeling of fear that used to waft on the air had been replaced with one of cheerfulness. It was rumored the law requiring sixteen-year-olds to serve the Court had been abolished by the new ruler and after a few days in the Realm it seemed the rumor was true. Millie attempted to gain an audience with the new Queen, but was refused admittance. The Queen was a young Faery by the name of Brisa Willowglitter – odd they shared the same family name. She'd never met anyone else with the name and was curious, not only about the Queen's plans for the Realm, but to inquire about her heritage – none of the common faeries seemed to know anything specific about their new ruler. Eventually, Millie ran out of things to keep her in the Realm and decided to return to the human world – a week was plenty of time to make peace with the decision to never return to the Realm again – it wasn't her home anymore.

A week didn't seem like enough time to pass for such a major change in her life though. A week she was in the Realm – using all the abilities of a faerie without any complications. Now, after returning to the city, it seemed she could almost feel her power drain from her by the minute. She didn't know what had changed between the

first time she came to live among the humans and this time. She'd tested her powers, off and on, a little everyday since she'd been back with varying degrees of success. Sometimes she could use glamour to hide herself from others and sometimes she couldn't. The invisibility glamour didn't bother her very much – rarely did she do anything requiring her to disappear, but the speed – the speed is what she missed. Running late wouldn't be a problem right now if she could run like she was used to. Just for the heck of it, Millie tried to feel the inner strength she was used to feeling whenever she called forth one of her powers. She broke into a slow jog and prepared her mind for the faerie speed she wanted to feel burst from her muscles and – nothing.

Millie continued forward at a lope, even though it was something a human could do, and turned her mind to Slade. The night they spent together before she returned to the Realm was the most exciting and blissful nights she'd ever experienced. She knew she was lucky to have someone like Slade willing to support her in whatever decision she made – even if that decision meant she was leaving him. He was gone by the time she woke up the next morning. She knew he slipped out without waking her to make it easier on her when she left and she loved him even more for that kindness.

Millie hadn't been home five minutes before she called Slade to tell him she was back for good. It didn't take him much over that to get to her apartment. The reunion was dizzying. She knew she was finally home in her tiny apartment, in the busy city, and in the arms of a vampire.

Millie rounded the corner and saw Slade leaning against a tree. A slow smile appeared on his face like always.

“Sorry I'm late,” Millie said.

“That’s okay, my beauty. I’m used to it and even learned to plan for it.” As if on cue, a string quartet stepped from behind the trees and played the most beautiful music she had ever heard. Slade led Millie to a blanket where a picnic was set up. He handed her a glass and poured wine for them both.

“What’s the occasion?” she asked.

“The one month anniversary of owning the coffee shop,” he answered.

“I hardly think that is worth a string quartet and a moonlight picnic,” she said as she picked up a baby carrot to crunch.

“Well, if that isn’t enough, how about this?” Slade took her wine glass and replaced it with a small velvet box.

Millie coughed as she choked on a small piece of carrot. She knew they were definitely getting more serious as the days went by, but she never expected jewelry. Millie wiped the moisture from the carrot on her pants and opened the box to reveal the most beautiful, gold band she had ever seen. Delicately carved plant vines covered the band and she couldn’t imagine a more perfect choice would have been possible. Millie felt her eyes fill with tears and looked into Slade’s expectant face. “It is gorgeous,” she said.

Slade pulled her into his strong arms and kissed her tears away. “Will you do me the honor of spending the rest of my life with me?”

“I’d love to, but...”

“But what?”

“You know I won’t live as long as you will – especially with my powers draining away.”

Millie watched as Slade took the ring from the box and slipped it on her finger.

“I can’t live my life without you,” he admitted. The intensity in his eyes was sobering. “Millie, if there was a way to stay with me forever would you do it?”

Millie felt her eyes widen, “You mean there’s a way?”

“I’m not for sure, but I called Roman a few days ago and he seems to think you could benefit from vampire blood - extended life is one of the benefits and you would probably gain the other vampire abilities as well, like speed. Since you are, technically, still faerie it would be an experiment, but would you be willing to try?”

“When?”

“I’d feel better if Roman was with us when we exchanged blood – just in case. Roman is in Alabama taking care of some business, but would be glad to help us if we decide to go through with it.”

“Let’s go,” Millie said. “I’d love to see another part of the country and, hey, I am the boss after all. I have some business I need to take care of tomorrow like orders and scheduling, but after that I saw we go.”

Slade stood and put out his hand for Millie. She accepted and allowed him to lead her closer to the quartet where the music still played. He pulled her tight against his chest as they started swaying in each other’s arms.

Millie pulled back to look up at Slade. “We will come back won’t we?”

“Of course we will. We’ll go wherever you want. If you want to make your home here we will.”

Millie smiled at the thought of having it all as she listened to Slade tell her everything they would do.

“We can maintain a permanent residence here, in the city, and take frequent vacations to other places you choose whenever you want to get away.”

Millie could feel Slade’s hand gently rubbing her back as he continued to talk about their future.

“We can see a different sight every night – you’ll never experience monotony again, unless, of course, you choose to.”

Millie looked up at Slade and smiled. “I love you,” she told him.

“I love you, too. I will do everything within my power to make you happy. If there is anything you want all you have to do is ask.”

“Well...”

“What is it, Millie?”

“Come closer and I’ll tell you,” she said. Millie placed her lips against Slade’s neck and teased his skin with her tongue. She felt him shiver in her arms as she gently applied pressure to his neck with her teeth.

“Is that what you want, my love?”

“Mmm hmm,” she answered.

“Anything for you, my love,” he said. Slade slowly turned so his back was to the quartet and returned Millie’s kisses with some of his own, starting at her lips and trailing them down her neck.

Millie felt her pulse rise in anticipation of what was to come. She felt Slade’s fangs scrape against her neck and couldn’t stop the moan come from her throat. Taking it as a sign of her readiness, Slade placed one last kiss on her neck before sliding his fangs deep into her soft skin. Soon, his moan matched hers as he slowly drank her in.

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