

Shadowflame: Chapter One

Autumn that year came in like a lion and devoured the last few straggling moments of an endless, scorching summer. Storms swept through central Texas and scoured the world clean of dust and dried grass. The entire city seemed to come alive once the burden of heat was lifted.

The nights were already chilly the first week of October when the last known member of the Blackthorn gang sprinted in terror through the streets of Austin, searching for someone, anyone, who would shelter him.

Door after door slammed in his face. No one in the Shadow World was stupid enough to take him in . . . not tonight. Bars closed early, windows went dark, and the wind's icy fingers snatched all hope of escape from the city's empty streets. Only a fool would look outside tonight. Only a fool would get involved.

The Signet was on the hunt.

Desperate, he ran for the heavily populated areas of downtown, hoping to get lost in the mortal crowd, unaware that across the city his lower body temperature and preternatural speed were being tracked by a bank of computers that sent out his coordinates every five seconds. There was nowhere he could go now without a target flashing on his every move.

"Status report."

Faith's voice was fierce even through the digital ether. *"Rabbit is approaching the eastern corner of Fifth and Trinity. Move to intercept?"*

From her perch atop the restaurant across the intersection, the Queen of the Southern United States watched the streets with her eyes narrowed, sweeping the area with her senses. She stood

with one foot up on the low wall around the roof's perimeter and held her hair back out of her face with one hand. Her breath came in smoky clouds, slow and calm, as she waited, patient, unhurried.

Human traffic was high even for a Thursday. Their quarry had no doubt come this way precisely for that reason, believing that the Elite wouldn't want to cause a scene.

"Hold your position," she replied into her com just as a thin shape darted around the corner, weaving his way among the people on the sidewalk, trying not to look like he was on the run.

He crossed Trinity against the light, narrowly avoiding a bus, intent on reaching the side nearest her, which was far less busy, darker, and located conveniently near an underground access point. She let him cross and waited.

Finally, when he thought he might be safe and slowed his pace, she vaulted over the side of the building. The air rushed past her for two stories, and she twisted in midair to land, her boots striking the pavement solidly.

She straightened, tossing her hair back over her shoulders, the wind catching her coat and whipping it back to expose her throat. When the rabbit saw what was around her neck he froze and went ghostly white.

He spun around to run back the way he had come, but he was surrounded. Behind him Faith crossed her arms and smiled.

He faced Miranda an inch away from panic.

"Would you like to beg?" she asked.

Mindless survival instinct gripped him and he threw himself at her, snarling.

She laughed, stepped to the side, and caught him in the face with a fist. He landed sprawling with an animal cry of fear and pain and scrambled back to his feet, trying to gain some kind of advantage when there was none to gain. He took a swing at her, and she blocked it easily, twisting to punch him in the gut and again in the head.

He stumbled but didn't fall; he was no weakling, though it clearly surprised him that she

wasn't either. Obviously he hadn't listened to the whispers that had rolled slowly through the Shadow World like an oncoming storm for the past three months . . . or he'd heard the stories and dismissed them, as no mere woman could be so strong.

He was learning differently now. She ducked another hit, this one more reckless. His fear was beginning to show.

She liked that.

She spun around and kicked him in the head, and he went down but immediately forced himself back to his feet despite the blood flowing from his nose and mouth. He was clearly dazed, but desperation drove him to try again and again, only to be beaten back by a laughing Queen who hadn't even broken a sweat.

There were humans nearby, approaching from the east. Distractedly she bent her will toward them and gave them a mental nudge to turn left instead of right. By the time they realized they were headed in the wrong direction there would be nothing more to see.

She moved closer to the rabbit until she was only a few feet from him, allowing her power to swell around her. He let out a whimper and fell back.

"Kneel before your Queen," she hissed.

He dropped to his knees, sobbing incoherently in her shadow.

"A fine display from a man who killed two of my Elite during the war," she said. "You were a key player in the gang, Jackson. We know who you are and have a list of your crimes. You've eluded capture this long only because you hid like a coward while your friends died in your place. But not anymore."

At the sound of her sword being drawn from its sheath, Jackson fell down on his elbows, clapping his hands over the back of his neck. Now he decided to beg; he blamed the others in the gang, especially Ariana and Bethany Blackthorn, for forcing him to kill. He wasn't responsible, they were; he was only following orders.

She'd heard it all a dozen times in the last few months, and she knew every time, as she did

now, that it was a lie.

“You disappoint me,” she told him. “Worse? You bore me.” She kicked him again, this time in the side, so he instinctively moved his arms down to protect his stomach and left his neck exposed. With a single graceful swing she beheaded him and leapt back in time to avoid the gush of blood that bathed the sidewalk scarlet as his body toppled over.

Dark, grim satisfaction warmed her as the body twitched into stillness. The head had landed face up, its eyes gaping open in shock, mouth slack.

She leaned down, seized the edge of Jackson’s jacket, and used it to wipe her sword before sheathing the blade. She would need to clean it thoroughly when she got home; Sophie had taught her never to let a blade go to rest still bloodied . . . not to mention that the sword itself had once belonged to Sophie, and Miranda could practically hear the diminutive vampire’s acerbic voice every time she was tempted not to treat the weapon with the respect it was due.

She looked up at Faith, who was smiling ferally. “Cleanup on aisle three,” Miranda said.

Faith gestured to the rest of her team. They knew the procedure: Take the body and the head up on the roof of a nearby building where it would be exposed to the sun at dawn but not likely found by any passing mortal. Tap into the hydrant nearby to spray off the blood. Hopefully after tonight it would be the last time they’d have to go through the routine for a while.

She stood watching for a moment while they worked, and Faith joined her. “You’re getting disturbingly good at this kind of thing,” the Second said quietly. “I’m still not used to seeing it.”

Miranda smiled. “What’s even more disturbing is that I’m not disturbed at all.”

Faith shrugged. “I recall you saying that first night: This is your work now.”

The Queen thought back to the battle at the Haven and the long night of cleanup and casualties that had followed. Faith had wanted her to go and rest. She had declined and instead stepped into her role without hesitation, organizing the Elite to burn the dead and patch up the wounded, leaving the Prime to restore the network and deal with the damage to the building itself. It had been nearly sunrise before either of them had stood still.

“Where is our Lord and Master tonight?” Faith asked. “Shouldn’t he have been out here too?”

“No,” the Queen replied, eyes on Jackson’s headless corpse as two Elite maneuvered it onto a plastic sheet to carry it away. “He had an appointment. It’s best if I handle this anyway—I want my presence known.”

“I think you’ve succeeded there.” Faith nodded toward the scene. “We’ve got this if you need to go.”

“Good. I’ll see you back at the Haven. Have the night’s final report on the server before you code off shift.”

Faith bowed to her, as did the others. Miranda nodded, then turned and walked off into the darkness.

The standoff took place in a back corner booth at Kerbey Lane Café.

A woman with a shaved head and multiple facial piercings stared down a blue-eyed man in a long black coat as he drank a Corona with lime and she ate a plate of black bean nachos. Around them the café bustled as always, the patrons blessedly ignorant of what might be unfolding among them.

They could have been any two people—albeit an odd couple—on a date getting to know each other over Tex-Mex.

“So . . . you’re a vampire.”

He gave her a measured nod.

“And you’re officially the most badass vampire in Texas.”

“The Southern United States, yes.”

Kat stared at him hard, and he couldn’t help but be impressed; she wasn’t afraid of him, at least not yet. Most humans could feel something of what he was, and it made them uneasy. Either she couldn’t feel it, which made her as dumb as a bag of hammers, or she was strong enough to

stand her ground.

His money was on the latter.

He knew he could terrify her if he wanted to. All he had to do was let his shielding slip, or will his eyes to silver or his teeth to extend. He could fix her with a certain facial expression—that of a panther watching a deer from the tree overhead—and she would instinctively seek an escape, any escape.

He didn't do any of those things. This was too important for such childish play.

For the first time in a long time, David Solomon had something to prove besides how frightening he was.

“You turned my best friend into a vampire,” Kat said, her stare unwavering. “Why should I have anything to do with you?”

“Because you care about her,” he replied reasonably, “and you know that I'm not going away.”

“I know this story,” she told him. “Hot mysterious guy sweeps in right when she needs someone, isolates her from her life, pulls her into something dangerous. You know how those things end up? In bruises and hotline phone calls. Restraining orders. Best friends with concealed handgun permits showing up at the guy's house and shooting his balls off.”

He looked down at her messenger bag. “Let me guess . . . a Sig P232?”

“Not the point, Count Pretty Boy.” Her eyes narrowed. “Although, if I shot your balls off, would they grow back?”

David smiled. “I think you and I are going to get along fine, Kat.”

“Speak for yourself. Tell me what makes you the kind of guy that deserves Miranda.”

“I don't,” he said. “But she and I are bonded and will be so until our death. Nothing can change that now. She's stuck with me . . . and so are you, if you want to keep her friendship, and I sincerely hope you do.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s going to need you. In some ways she’s as old as I am, but in others still so young . . . she still has ties to the mortal world that she wants to hold on to. Whether that proves possible will depend on the kind of support she gets from that world, namely you.”

“Then you’re saying I’ll help keep her human.”

“No.” He sat forward, holding her gaze. “She isn’t human, Kat. She never will be again. One day she’ll watch you grow old and die, and she’ll stay the same, ageless, eternal, until someone murders us both. What she is, is your friend, and the fact that she wants to stay your friend despite the pain inherent in loving a mortal speaks very highly of you. You should be honored.”

Kat nodded slowly, almost smiling. “So should you.”

“I am.”

She nodded again, and then said, “You’re buying, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then let’s talk about dessert.”

Five minutes before curtain—just as her agent, Denise, was about to have a coronary—Miranda Grey strode into the club with her hair tangled from the wind and her eyes bright with the thrill of the hunt.

She could hear the crowd on the far side of the stage, one low murmur of three hundred voices, their collective expectation a living thing crawling up the walls. She took the flight of metal stairs up to the wings with a grin on her face and drank in their emotions on a single deep breath.

She gave Denise a thumbs-up. Denise made a forehead-wiping motion of exasperated relief in return. Flipping her hair back and shrugging her coat into the tech’s hands, Miranda turned toward the stage manager and nodded.

A hush fell as the house lights lowered and the spotlight trained on the mike and the single object behind it: her guitar, on a stand, gleaming black.

Applause erupted when they saw it.

Miranda smiled and walked out into the light.

There were three things that Miranda wanted after every show: blood, chocolate, and a hot shower.

Before she could have any of those, however, she had to get backstage and run the press gauntlet, then somehow sneak out the back to either drive herself or wait for Harlan to take her somewhere more private to hunt.

There were a great many vehicles at the Signet's disposal, but the one the Prime favored was the Town Car that Harlan piloted through the city streets; if he and the Queen needed to be in separate places or ran on different schedules, as often happened these days, they had to coordinate Harlan's trips or, as she preferred, she had to bring her own car into town.

Although David had serious misgivings about her being alone in the city, Miranda loved her car, and she loved taking the winding road that led up to the Haven through the Hill Country. She liked being independent. So most nights after she was finished at her gig and had found herself someone for dinner, she slid behind the wheel of her little silver Toyota and took Loop 360 out of town.

She was almost ready to escape the club's heat and noise when Denise knocked on the dressing room door and said, "Hey, do you have a minute?"

"Sure," Miranda called, double-checking that the mirror was still covered with a towel. "What's up?" she asked, gathering her sweaty hair back out of her face and securing it with a stretchy band.

Denise MacNeil was a strikingly beautiful black woman who radiated competence and confidence, two things that Miranda had discovered were vital for a woman in the music industry. Denise carried herself like a warrior, and in fact she reminded Miranda strongly of Faith, except instead of a sword Denise was armed with a briefcase and BlackBerry and hunted opportunities,

not lawbreakers. Miranda would have continued to play the bar circuit without much thought if Denise hadn't come along, but in the short time she'd been the Queen's agent she had already set the wheels in motion for a recording contract and doubled her bookings. It would have been easy for someone so ballsy to be a bitch, but Denise still had a warmth to her that seemed to bring her even greater respect.

"There's a woman here from the *Statesman* who wants an interview for their weekly entertainment supplement," Denise was saying. "Nothing drawn-out, just a few questions. Are you up for it?"

Miranda sighed. She had played hard, and worked hard, holding the audience's attention pretty easily, but it was still draining, and she hadn't fed tonight. Her teeth were starting to ache and her insides felt like they were drying out. She took a quick internal inventory and judged she had about half an hour before things got unpleasant. "Sure."

"Great. Also, don't forget next week we have a meeting with the guys over at the Bat Cave."

"Got it."

Denise grinned at her. "And one other thing. They have these weird little devices now that you can talk into so your voice comes out the other end—that way if you're going to show up, say, two minutes before curtain, you can keep your agent from pissing her designer pants."

Miranda smiled back. "Not once have I ever been late," she pointed out. "But I'll try not to cut it so close next time."

Denise shook her head and left, saying, "I've been in this business fifteen years and I've never adjusted my watch to Musician Standard Time."

Miranda closed her guitar into its case, running her hand along the Martin's gleaming neck. "That's Vampire Standard Time," she said quietly to the instrument, "but we won't tell her that."

A moment later, there was another knock, and a woman poked her head into the dressing room. "Ms. Grey?"

Miranda looked up from her phone, where she was checking to ensure there were no texts

waiting from the Haven, and gestured for the human to enter.

The reporter was completely average looking, with mousy brown hair in a rather severe cut with bangs and glasses that made her look like a librarian. She was wearing a nondescript suit a year or two out of style and was clearly nervous. “I’m Stacey Burnside with the *Austin American-Statesman*. Denise said you had a moment for me?”

“Come in,” Miranda said with a smile. Her Signet had come with a set of new and strange instincts, one of which was to put humans at ease whenever possible; she felt almost maternal toward them, especially the awkward young women so unsure of their place in the world who could barely make eye contact with the glamorous rising star who seemed to have it all. “Have a seat.”

Stacey almost knocked over the folding chair as she sat down and rummaged for her recorder. Miranda could sense the experience of an educated reporter—and Stacey was no amateur, she could feel that much—warring with awe.

Miranda got that a lot . . . at least, from humans. She was trying to get used to it.

“I won’t keep you long,” Stacey said, fiddling with her digital recorder until a red light came on. “We’re just doing a piece this week on emerging artists who do their recording here in Austin.”

“Well, I’m happy to support the local music scene,” Miranda told her, taking the other folding chair and crossing one leg over the other. She had her coat on, but her Signet peeked out from her collar, and she caught the young woman staring at it for a moment. That also happened a lot. Most of the time people had the same look on their faces: *Is that thing glowing?*

“Austin has been very good to me since I started performing,” the Queen added. “I’m hoping to work with the guys at the Bat Cave on my upcoming CD.”

Stacey pushed her glasses back on her nose. “That’s the studio founded by Grizzly Behr, the father of Mike Behr of Three Tequila Floor, right?”

“Yes.”

“I hear it’s impossible to get into the Bat Cave these days.”

Miranda smiled. “They were as excited about the prospect as I was.” The music business was all about influence . . . and Miranda had that in spades. There was no door that closed to her, no velvet rope to keep her out no matter how exclusive the club. The Signet held sway in every level of government and the Prime a hand in every game in town, legal or otherwise. It wouldn’t take much effort to have her first single on the *Billboard* charts the day it was released.

She didn’t want that. She had every intention of making it on her talent . . . but she wasn’t so naïve as to think the industry cared about talent as much as it cared about power. She was quite willing to kick down the door to success with one of her brand new knee-high boots.

“You recently debuted a new song, ‘Bleed,’” Stacey said. “Critics are having trouble categorizing it—what influences gave rise to its sound and lyrics?”

Miranda toyed with her com, considering her answer. “It’s a deeply personal song,” she replied. “The lyrics were some of the first I wrote after a particularly difficult time I had last year. I felt that the shift in tone, from pain to triumph, was something that would resonate with audiences. It definitely has the feel of an early Tori Amos track, but the studio version will have more electronic elements. The vision we have for the album as a whole is a lush, dark sound that still leaves room for the rawness of some of the lyrics.”

“You tend to play your personal life close to the vest. Recent rumors have you married—is there any truth to that?”

She smiled. “Yes, actually.” She held up her left hand, showing the platinum band around her finger. “I’ve been married for about two months.”

Stacey’s eyes lit up—a scoop! “Can you tell me anything about your husband?”

“Oh, I could tell you a lot of things, but he’s a very private person, as am I. I will say that meeting him absolutely changed my life, and that we make a perfect pair.”

“Do you live in the Austin area?”

“Yes.”

“In the city itself, or a suburb?”

Miranda chuckled. “In the area.” She checked her watch, rose, and said, “I’m sorry, but I do need to head home.”

“One more question, please, if that’s all right?”

She looked so eager Miranda couldn’t help herself. “Fire away,” she told the woman as she folded her chair and leaned it back against the wall. She tried to leave things tidy for the band that came in after her, though they rarely saw fit to return the favor.

Stacey reached into her bag again and dug around for something. “Um . . . hang on . . .”

Miranda refrained from rolling her eyes, but the gnawing feeling in her stomach was starting to become a serious issue. She was still learning to manage her hunger; unlike skipping a meal back when she was mortal, waiting too long to feed could impair her judgment and lead to unfortunate incidents . . . and had, more than once, the first few weeks. If David hadn’t insisted on hunting with her for a while she might have killed someone. She had an emergency pack in her car, kept safely on ice in the trunk, but her car was a block away and there were usually people milling around outside so she couldn’t just pop it open and slurp it down.

“Okay,” Stacey said, straightening. Miranda noticed she had something in her hand, something metal with the flash of wood—

“How stupid are you for being caught without a bodyguard?” Stacey asked, and lifted her hand.

Miranda’s body reacted before her brain could register what was happening; she threw herself backward as the gun went off, twisting sideways a split second before the stake bit hard into her shoulder. The impact threw her backward into the wall, and she snarled, springing forward toward the woman, who had already turned on her heel and bolted from the room.

Miranda missed Stacey by mere inches and flung herself after the woman, her vision gone scarlet with rage; Stacey sprinted through the narrow backstage passageway, knocking people over as she ran. Miranda snaked through the crowd, ignoring the pain and the feeling of blood

running down her torso. She heard gasps behind her as she closed the space between herself and the would-be assassin, but Stacey reached to the side and hauled a stack of speakers on wheels out behind her to block Miranda's path.

The Queen kicked them out of the way and resumed her pursuit, but by the time she burst out the backstage door there was no sign of Stacey, no sign of anyone; the alley was empty.

"Goddamn it!" Miranda snapped to the empty air.

Immediately, the alert on her com went off. "*Emergency team to Mel's Bar and Grill, code Alpha One!*" she heard Faith's voice command in broadsend-mode, then, "*Star-two, Star-two, Miranda, are you all right?*"

Miranda took a deep breath. "Star-three, this is Star-two, and I'm fine. I'm injured but not severely. A woman posing as a reporter staked me in the shoulder. She had some kind of spear gun. I lost her but I'm heading out to track her now—"

"Like hell you are," came a voice.

Miranda turned in time to see the shadows beyond the edge of the building grow dense and coalesce, the substance of the night twisting on itself, resolving into the shape of a man in black with a glowing stone at his throat.

The Prime was at her side in seconds, and the look on his face, though extremely attractive to her, would have made a human's blood run cold. "What happened?" he asked, taking hold of her shoulders.

When he saw the stake he hissed and his eyes went silver.

"It's not bad," she insisted. "If we hurry we can still—"

"You're hurt," he replied tersely. "That takes priority. Now, hold still, and brace yourself . . . take a deep breath in . . . now breathe out slowly . . ."

She did as he said, and on the out breath, he took hold of the stake and pulled it.

Miranda cried out; she felt the wood sliding through her muscles as if every splinter of the stake were jagged and tore the flesh around it. It was as if the wood left behind something oily

and poisonous that seeped into her body and stole her strength away.

Her vision swam, and she sagged into the Prime. “Oh, God . . .”

“Easy, beloved,” he said, considerably more gently. “Easy. Close your eyes . . . breathe.”

Miranda clamped her eyes shut and dragged her awareness to the feel of his hands on her arms, the sound of him breathing, the rhythm of his pulse that she could feel, always, beating in her own veins. She felt him drawing power up out of himself and feeding it along the connection between them, and her shoulder grew unbearably hot for a moment, then itched horribly before fading into numbness.

When she opened her eyes the wound was gone, though there was a gaping hole in her coat.

“Shit,” she murmured. “I love this coat.”

With that, she passed out, thankful he was there to catch her.

Faith managed, somehow, to keep David from tearing the building apart in search of the attacker, but it wasn't easy. The half-dozen Elite who reported to the scene were obviously frightened by his anger. Who wouldn't be? A black cloud of seething energy surrounded him as he stood cross-armed and watched the team sweep the club for evidence and another team followed the fading traces of the assassin's flight. The few humans who were aware of the situation had no idea what they were really dealing with, but they knew Miranda had been attacked and that her security personnel were handling it. The look on her husband's face was enough to keep everyone, human or otherwise, at a distance.

She joined the Prime once the team had things in hand and took her usual place at his side—his left, as the Queen's place was his right. The Queen herself was unconscious in the car.

“This is unacceptable,” David said darkly. “She is not to go anywhere without a bodyguard. Understood?”

“Fine by me, Sire, but you'll have a hard time convincing her of that.”

“I'll have her followed if I have to.”

Faith merely nodded. She had already learned not to take sides. “Aside from the stake itself, which we’ll bring in for analysis, there’s nothing,” the Second said. “No one has any recollection of what this woman looked like, except of course for the Queen. Somehow the bitch managed to convince Miranda she was human, and that’s . . . disturbing.”

“Agreed.”

“Best guess, she was a vampire with a hell of a shield, but there’s no way to know for sure.”

“Here’s a better question,” David said. “Forget what she was and let’s ask ourselves *who*.”

“Obviously it was a planned hit. She had fake press credentials and even a dummy phone number. I’ll put out feelers for anyone buying an ID by that name, but I doubt we’ll get anything.” Faith nodded to Elite 33, who was carrying Miranda’s bag and guitar out of the club to the car, and asked the Prime, “Didn’t the network register something was wrong?”

David’s expression went from dark to hellfire. “Interestingly enough, no. There wasn’t even a blip.”

“How did you know to call us here, then?”

“I felt the stake.” His eyes were fixed on the car at the end of the alley. “Either the attacker was human and faster on her feet than a Queen, or she was a vampire who somehow doesn’t show up on the network. I don’t like either of those possibilities, Faith. I’m counting on you to find this person and bring her to me.”

Faith didn’t mention how difficult, if not impossible, that would be. The Elite had expert trackers, but so far the team had come up empty-handed; this woman had vanished into the crowded city without leaving a single footprint or energy trace. Even the strongest psychic they had—Miranda—had lost her, though if she hadn’t been injured chances were the Queen could have hunted the woman down in minutes.

A planned attack. Specific, focused . . . which led Faith to believe that this Stacey had known exactly who and what she was trying to kill. The Shadow World was aptly named; very few humans knew of its existence, and few vampires would associate with the human world

enough to connect Miranda Grey the singer with Miranda the Queen. Even fewer vampires would be stupid enough to go up against the Signet after the example that had been made of the Blackthorn. Someone had known that Miranda would be alone—if she'd had even a standard Elite security detail the guards would have been right outside the door to block the assassin's escape.

Harlan appeared at the Prime's elbow. "Sire, the Queen is asking for you."

David nodded to Faith, who followed him to the car, where Miranda was sitting with the door open, looking disheveled and seriously pissed off.

The Queen's Signet was glowing brightly and there was dried blood all over her coat and jeans and some in her hair. Her heart-shaped face held a look even scarier than David's had.

She looked up at her mate and spoke very deliberately. "Blood. Shower. Chocolate. *Now.*"

David actually smiled, bowed, and said, "As you will it, my Lady. Harlan, start the car. Faith, finish up here and have a report on my server ASAP. I'd like you to drive the Queen's car back to the Haven yourself when you're done. I want a full patrol sweep of the city with a description of the suspect—have the description sent to APD as well, just for laughs. Also, inform the owner of this establishment that he will need to double security for all of her shows; money is no object. I want a short list of bodyguard candidates by morning."

"Yes, Sire."

He met her eyes. "This doesn't happen again, Second."

Faith bowed. "You have my assurance, Sire."

He gave her a nod, then got into the car with his Queen, and a moment later they were on their way back to the Haven.

Miranda wanted to punch someone, but she settled for sinking her teeth into someone's throat.

Blood, hot and salty-sweet, flowed into her mouth, filling the sandpaper emptiness in her belly and veins, soothing the need to claw and kill. She drank deeply, her hand wrapped around

the woman's neck to hold her still, her power wrapped around the woman's mind to keep her calm.

The girl was a jogger, very healthy, her heart rate up so her blood was fully oxygenated. She tasted faintly of coconut, meaning she'd probably had Thai at her most recent meal, and her skin had the warm scent of youth and raspberry body wash.

Miranda released her, holding her steady for a moment while her awareness returned but impressing strongly on her mind that nothing out of the ordinary had happened. She'd been out for a jog and tripped.

"Are you all right?" Miranda asked her, giving her voice silvery tones of concern.

The girl blinked. "Um . . . yeah. I guess I tripped."

"You should get home. It's late."

"Yeah. Thanks."

The girl pushed her earbuds back in place and started her iPod again; Miranda heard the Black-Eyed Peas as she ran away. The wound in her neck would close by morning, leaving what looked like twin mosquito bites, and those would be gone a few hours later. The stronger the vampire, the faster the bite healed; it was usually the young and weak who were discovered because they were unable—or too stupid—to cover their tracks.

Relief moved through Miranda's body and she sighed, rolling her head to the left and right before turning back to the car where her Prime was waiting for her.

She knew that look. He always got it when he watched her hunt.

Deliberately, Miranda licked her lips and smiled.

Prime and Queen stared at each other for a long moment before she walked back to the car, stepping into his arms and kissing him hard.

He made that purring noise she loved and pulled her against him, letting her suck on his tongue and dig her nails into his shoulders, the contact banishing the last of the lingering anger from the attack and replacing it with an entirely different kind of intensity.

Still, the events of the night had drained her, and she eventually drew back and laid her head on his chest, eyes closing.

“That was stupid,” she muttered.

He didn’t say anything, but of course she knew what he was thinking; he had protested her desire to go anywhere alone for months now, insisting that something like this would happen the second she let down her guard. She felt guilty—it wasn’t just her life she was gambling with by traipsing around the city by herself. If that stake had hit true, if her reflexes had been slower, they would both be dead now. And whoever it was, having failed, might very well try again.

“Let’s go home,” he said softly.

She nodded and sank back into the car, leaning on him after the door was shut and they were on their way again. “All right,” she said. “You win. Bodyguards it is. But they can ride in their own damn car.”

He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her head. “Deal.”

“Is this kind of thing going to happen a lot?”

“Oh, yes,” he replied, not reassuring her in the slightest. “My first year I had at least a dozen assassination attempts. Most of them were lone nutjobs or Auren’s old cronies. They waited until the transition was secure, a few months, before trying anything, thinking they’d lured me into complacency.”

“But you don’t travel with bodyguards now.”

“No . . . but I did for a long time. It takes a while to establish a reputation, Miranda. Right now you’re being tested in the eyes of our kind. They want to see how you handle yourself, how tough you are. The longer we stay in power, the fewer fools will try to take us down.”

She wriggled as close as she could, not caring that she was probably getting his clothes as filthy as hers. “Thank you for not saying ‘I told you so.’”

He shrugged. “I understand that you value your independence. I don’t want you to lose it. But now you see that we have to be careful. The more you’re in the public eye, the harder it will

be to keep your two lives from colliding. I want you to live the life you want to live for as long as you can, but you have to be realistic. Plus . . .” His voice darkened, and despite the words the sound caused a low current of electricity through her body. “Lone nutjob or not, I intend to find whoever hurt you and tear the skin from her bones with my bare hands.”

She looked up at him and said wryly, “You’re such a ball of sunshine, baby.”

As she’d hoped, he laughed and kissed her.

Miranda settled back against him and closed her eyes, the vibration of the car beneath her and the heartbeat at her ear lulling her as much as the thought of what she had to look forward to: a steamy, hot shower; a Snickers bar; and most important, a long morning spent in the arms of her Prime.

***Shadowflame*, book 2 of the Shadow World series, coming July 2011 from Ace Urban Fantasy.**

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