



Hollow's
TROUBLE

N.J. NIELSEN

HOLLOW'S TROUBLE

Creed Larson was a criminal—a bloody good one, even if he did say so himself. He and his foster siblings have one last heist before they change their ways and stand on the right side of the law. That was until he came up against Holland Vandiver IV.

Holland Vandiver—Hollow to his friends—is tired of the life he was living. Tired of waiting for his heart's blood to finally turn up. The only key to finding his mate is a stupid gaudy necklace he's forced to display in hopes of drawing his intended mate near. He never expected that mate to come in the form of a thief—even if said thief was as sexy as hell.

When their worlds collide, trouble soon follows. Together they have to work to stop the world from ending, but first they need to figure out exactly who the enemy is.

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

HOLLOW'S TROUBLE

By N.J. Nielsen

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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HOLLOW'S TROUBLE

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Photo Description

The guy is a vampire. He looks stunning and has exquisite taste in clothing. He's standing on a balcony (maybe) and is either just putting on or removing his outer coat.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Get this, I'm no romantic. I don't even believe in love. Hell, I don't even have time to think about those sappy things. Love? Ha, not for me. But the thing is all of it went to hell because of him. Okay let me be clear, this is how it went down. Me and my gang was at this fancy party. Why? Well, me, I'm what you call a thief. We steal things. Precious pricey things. And we do it with such class you won't even notice it.

Anyhow, we wanted to steal this diamond necklace. It was so damn pricey I thought it would be the job for ages. I knew if it went right we could be legends among thieves. What I didn't know was, well, honestly it turned out that I knew almost nothing.

Like, first, there was a guy at this party who was insanely good looking and all that stuff. But strange thing was I was so attracted to him I couldn't concentrate on the mission. I almost missed seeing the necklace his date was wearing.

Second, it felt like I knew him from somewhere, like from another life, and somehow I knew he was a vampire too.

Third, there's someone/something else out there trying to get the necklace from his date.

Fourth, suddenly girl with the necklace went missing, and he got wounded.

Fifth, him being hurt made me hurt too, that emotion felt so alien to me, but I knew it was love.

Sincerely,

DareDevil

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: demon ancestry, vampires, enemies, thieves, magic users, soulmates/bonded, family, prophecies

Content Warnings: graphic violence

Word Count: 22,366

HOLLOW'S TROUBLE

By N.J. Nielsen

Chapter One

Creed Larson was a thief. A bloody good one, even if he did say so himself. He'd been a part of the elusive Conrad gang for the last fifteen years. They had taken him in and taught him everything he'd ever need to know in the ways of thievery.

At the age of fifteen Creed had come to learn exactly what it meant to be a Larson and the price he had to bear. The family stories he'd always believed were just that—stories—were turning out to be much more. The more he learned about his family legacy, the more he realised his life was going to change. He'd not long had his thirtieth birthday when his part in the Larson Legacy had apparently been activated.

Since his birthday four months ago, Creed had the constant gnawing feeling he was being watched. He also believed whoever was out there wasn't even remotely friendly in any way, shape, or form. In fact, the sense he was getting was that his watcher would be more than happy to see him dead—and dead was something Creed was definitely trying to avoid at all costs.

"Creed, are you even listening to what's going on here?" Ethan Conrad glared at him from across the room. "Tomorrow night is all about you, and you don't even seem to have your head in the game."

"Sorry," Creed said sheepishly as he forced himself to concentrate on what was about to be played out. His foster brother was right. Tomorrow night was going to be life altering if they could pull off the heist without a hitch.

Ethan didn't seem to be able to let it go. "Are you getting that hinky feeling again? Because you know there's no way whoever it is could possibly have watchers within these walls." He shook his head. "It just isn't possible. We've searched and searched again and found nothing."

All the same, Creed knew that it *was* possible. He may not have been able to figure out how it was being done—he just knew that it was. "Something's out there and it's going to strike the ball at the same time we are. More to the point, I think they are going to strike at me before I can take possession of the damn jewel. I mean, like they want to take me out of the running so they can claim it as their own."

"Are you sure?" Eliza asked from where she stood beside her two brothers. "We've known for a long time now that there was something different about

you, and I'm not saying you're lying, or that you're wrong, but if it were me out there I'd wait until after we're successful, and then try to take the item from us. It'd make more sense to wait."

Ellery, the third in the Conrad gang, leant forwards and stated, "You mean let us do all the hard work first before they reap the reward."

Creed studied his foster siblings. Ethan was the oldest, at thirty-one, and was the head honcho of their gang. Eliza was the middle child and was twenty-nine. She was their moral compass, so to speak, and had been since before she was even in the gang. Ellery brought up the rear. He was twenty-five and the most cunning out of the siblings. He had a way of getting things done when everyone else thought they were impossible.

Actually Creed himself was the reason they were doing this last heist. They surely didn't need the money, as they had more set aside than they could ever use in one lifetime. When they hit the Swan Ball it was going to be for one reason only. To reclaim the necklace that had once been the centre of the Larson Jewels and a major part in the Larson Legacy.

According to the story passed down through the family, the jewel, which had once been whole, and had since been turned into a lavish woman's necklace, held the power to save the world—if you could believe that. Creed never did until Ellery became obsessed by the story and began researching everything he could about the Larson family's history. As the facts unfolded, it wasn't looking too pretty. Ellery confirmed something Creed himself had been trying to push from his mind: no male family member in the Larson lineage ever lived past his thirty-first birthday.

Ellery also found a message among the family history—a message Creed had come to know by heart: *The Larson son who holds the jewel will bring forth his eternal soul. The one meant to stand by him and guide him through all that should unfold. Should the jewel ever leave the hands of the Larsons, each and every son will die in his thirtieth year until the jewel is once more safely within their grasp. Should the enemy gain control of the jewel, a darkness so evil will descend upon the earth until all in existence are dead.*

What it all meant he didn't know. All he knew for sure was that he was the last of the males in his family—the last Larson son. It was now up to him to reclaim what had been taken from them—stolen away and kept in secret until now. Ellery had finally put all the missing pieces together and tracked down the current whereabouts of the necklace in question, and like any family, the Conrad siblings decided he needed their help in getting the damn thing back.

Who was he kidding—he probably did.

He had learned many years ago that they were stronger when they took on the world together rather than when they went it alone, and this was no exception. Ever since they'd hooked up together, they had always sat down and masterminded their plans—right down to the last detail, no matter how insignificant it might be. Eliza's motto had always been "Better to be overprepared than underprepared and wind up dead." It was a good motto as far as mottos went and had always kept the four of them safe.

Creed came back to the present when Eliza walked over and snapped her fingers directly in his face. "Sunshine, get your head out of the clouds. We're not done planning yet."

"I was just trying to figure out if they will go after the necklace before we have a chance, or like you said, let us do the hard work and take it from us. I mean what do we even know about this Holland Vandiver? Are we sure he's even still in possession of the damn thing?"

Ellery snorted derisively. "After all this time are you questioning my researching abilities? Have I ever failed in finding the information needed?"

"No," Creed answered honestly. "We're just a bit vague on how the necklace came to him."

Ellery pulled up a file on his tablet, and it appeared on the overhead screen they usually used when planning any job they were undertaking. A black-and-white picture of a young man no older than Creed himself showed in the centre of the screen. In Creed's opinion the guy was absolutely striking. As far as he could see, his skin held not one blemish, not even a freckle. His stare was piercing and Creed couldn't help but wonder what colour his eyes were. Even his nose and mouth were perfectly aligned. Holland had stubble along his jawline and his lighter hair was worn in a more modern-day style where the back and sides were shaved, and the top was left longer and brushed to the side and back.

Creed was far different in looks from the stunning creature on the screen before him. Creed's hair was worn longer and, more often than not, pulled back into a bun to keep it out of his face. He was going to cut it off at one point a few years ago, and Eliza threatened to nut him if he ever went through with it. Not saying that he was afraid of her, but better safe than sorry. His blue eyes stood out amid the darkness of his midnight-black hair. Creed also had a beard, but his was more free range, or as Ethan told him, he had the "Ned Kelly" look

about him. For some reason the visual Ellery gave always amused Creed, considering what line of work the four of them were in. Back in the day, Ned had been a bushranger. And in these modern times they could be considered in the same line of business, yet instead of waylaying people on the open road, they did it in a more social setting and so skilfully that their victims didn't even know they'd been robbed until after the four of them had departed the scene.

Snapping back to attention, Creed listened as Ellery gave them all another rundown on Holland Vandiver.

"Holland Vandiver VI is a businessman. His work is situated in and around real estate and stocks. I get the feeling there's more to that, but the harder I dug the more walls seemed to get thrown up in front of me. Either Holland is exactly who he says he is, or someone is trying damn hard to keep his life very private and so far under the radar that it is impossible to find it all. In every photo I have for the Vandiver family line, the men all look similar. At first glance they could be mistaken for brothers—it wasn't until I dug deeper that I realised they weren't."

"Could he be something other than human?" Eliza asked. "I mean, we know Creed is something more, so why couldn't this guy be as well?"

Creed wondered if it were a possibility. During the digging into his family, Ellery had learned that once, many eons ago, there were more than just humans who walked the world. Apparently demons had lived and had since died out. Not that Creed believed he was a demon—he wasn't evil for one thing. And he didn't seem to have any special powers. Actually that wasn't quite true. He had the ability to heal a lot faster than most people, and his intuition was a lot stronger than anyone else he knew. But cut him and he still bled the same as a human. Mind you, he'd never once had a cold, or gotten a headache, well, not that he could remember at least.

"If he's not human, then what is he? Do you think he could be a demon?" Creed asked.

"To be honest, I don't know, and I've never come across anything that has even hinted at the Vandivers as being anything other than completely human." Ellery sighed. "I've been researching this guy for six months and he comes up squeaky clean—a little too clean if you ask me."

"Tell us the rest, El," Eliza demanded.

With a nod, Ellery continued. "As far as I can tell the necklace has been handed down through the Vandiver family. If I had to guess, I would say that

they might have been the ones who stole the original jewel from your family. More recently I read in the social pages Holland will be in attendance at the Swan Ball this year. If I remember correctly, and I always do, his date for the evening is none other than the up-and-coming starlet Helena Synn, who will reportedly be wearing the necklace in question.”

“Okay.” Ethan started pacing in front of the screen. “We’ve done a job like this a million and one times before. I want you to go into this as if it’s our first time. No getting slack because we are good at what we do. Holland Vandiver is shrouded in a lot of mystery, which throws an unknown into the mix. And if he is anything other than human, he’s going to be a lot harder to get past. If at any time it hits the fan, I want us all to walk away and regroup. We won’t give up, but we don’t want to do anything stupid to get ourselves killed or placed in jail for the unforeseeable future.”

Creed hid his grin as Ethan’s speech went on. This was basically the same pep talk he gave them each and every time they were about to start a new job. The words might vary a little, yet the gist was always the same—keep your mind on the bloody job, get in, get out, get home in one piece, and with the whole gang present and accounted for.

Chapter Two

Holland Vandiver—Hollow to his close circle of friends, not that there were many these days—was tired. Tired of living alone and tired of waiting for his heart's blood to come into his life. He gazed at his reflection in the mirror and hoped tonight would be the night everything he'd been waiting for came to fruition. For close to a millennia he'd been biding his time on this earth and waiting. With each and every year that passed, he was beginning to become more and more disheartened.

Back before humans were the majority on the earth, the world was shared by demons and vampires alike. They didn't even realise the humans were a threat until both species were nearly wiped from their very existence. Once upon a time, there were millions of each race. Now, however, the humans had taken control and killed all but a few hundred from the demon and the vampire lines. Those who survived had taken great pains to keep themselves hidden. Out there somewhere among the unsuspecting humans there were still those with the knowledge of what else walks the earth. Those who were still under a blood vow to eradicate them. If Hollow could avoid that outcome he would.

In his family, they had a prophecy of sorts: "When the last of the chosen demon line comes into his year of death, he will seek out the Vandiver that holds his soul. Together they will be stronger and keep the sun from going dark." Okay, so maybe it didn't really make sense, but Hollow could only hope that this would be the year—not that he wanted to see the chosen demon race die out. His mother had told him that the stones in the necklace given into his care were what would finally bring him his heart's blood. For every stupid ball and gala he attended, his mission was to parade around some human woman for whom he held absolutely no interest, in the hopes that someone would recognise the damn jewellery. Of late his close friends—the ones who knew what it was—had started to refer to the necklace as Hollow's Trouble, because ever since it had been placed into his hands so long ago, it had brought nothing but trouble and heartache into his life.

Tonight was turning out to be no different.

Helena was beautiful in her own right, but she was selfish, self-centred, and had designs on the Vandiver wealth. Hollow had seen through her the moment she locked gazes with him. He knew their meeting wasn't purely coincidental. The conniving witch had done her homework. Only problem was, as close as

she thought she was getting to having access to his money, the more wrong she was. After tonight he would gently cast her aside. For one thing, she did absolutely nothing for him. His tastes ran more to the muscular side. If it wasn't for the stupid necklace, his companion for the evening would definitely be of the male persuasion. At least in this day and age it wasn't so frowned upon.

Hollow pasted a false smile on his face as he took one last look at himself in the mirror before he walked out of the lavish men's room and rejoined the ball that was currently in full swing. For some reason, tonight there was friction in the air. Something Hollow couldn't quite put his finger on, but regardless thought he should know what it was. He would have to keep his eyes and ears open.

"Holland, darling, there you are. I wanted to introduce you to our host for the evening." The smile Helena wore told him that the woman was already coming up with a plan B. If things didn't work out with him, next he'd hear she would be on the arm of the elderly but very single Alexander Swan. In reality he couldn't care less. She could be with anyone she wanted as long as she didn't think she had a hope in hell of keeping his necklace. All the other trinkets, yes, but not the necklace. He still needed that.

Extending his hand, he smiled. "Nice to meet you, Mr Swan."

"Call me Alexander. I think when you have as much money as we do, we can forgo the formalities and use our Christian names, don't you?"

"I believe you are right, Alexander." Hollow also noted that Alexander was slowly extricating himself from Helena's clutches. Maybe he also saw her for the money-grubber that she was.

They stood there for a moment exchanging pleasantries when the hair on the back of Hollow's neck stood on end. Somewhere in this room, someone was watching him—actually there was more than one person. As casually as he could, he let his gaze drift over the crowd. There were four of them: three men and one woman. Three of them looked so similar they could be nothing but family. The fourth, however, was breathtaking. The stranger's blue-eyed gaze searched the crowded room, and for a moment their gazes locked until the other man turned away. Hollow wished he could ditch his date and find out exactly who the man was, but his sense of self-worth told him not to let the necklace stray too far from his side.

Placing his hand on the small of Helena's back, he directed her across the room to where his best friends stood. Both Rose and Timothy were of his

coven. Besides him, they were the very last of the Vandiver Coven, and they protected each other with their lives. Leaning close to Rose he whispered subvocally so none would hear, “Keep an eye on the necklace. I don’t trust her. I need to check something out, and she would only get in the way.”

“Do you need Tim to go with you?” she asked just as quietly.

He shook his head minutely. “This is something I have to do on my own. There are three people in this room that look like siblings. They’ve been watching me, so be aware.”

“I’ll let Tim know.”

Turning his attention to Helena, he said, “I’ll be back in a minute. I need to speak with a friend of mine for but a moment. Rose will keep you company, my dear.”

Even though she didn’t look happy about being ditched again, she nodded. The truth was, Hollow couldn’t wait for the night to be over so he didn’t have to see her again. At least in his heart he knew he’d never led her on in any way. They had met through a mutual friend when he had asked her to this event. Every day since then, she’d been trying to insert herself fully into his life, and that was never going to happen. He couldn’t see himself settling with a human who he would outlive, not when he knew he had a demon out there waiting for him to claim. A human would hate him as they aged and he did not. One trait demons and vampires both had was they aged until their thirtieth year, then they stayed that way until the day of their death. Only if the human was his heart’s blood would their lifespan slow to match his, but that option wasn’t even a possibility. Hollow never saw the sense of leading any human on. Not saying that he hadn’t taken lovers over the years, because he had, and with both sexes. Now he just believed his heart’s blood was a male—it was like a gnawing feeling in the pit of his gut that told him when he met his heart’s blood he was going to be getting more than he ever bargained for.

Funnily enough, as he followed his person of interest, he likened it to a game of cat and mouse, as if his intended prey was leading him somewhere. He smiled as he watched the stranger walk around the corner and out of sight. When he followed, he wasn’t surprised that he was grabbed and shoved up against the wall in a small alcove.

“Why are you following me?” the stranger asked.

“Why are you watching me?” Hollow countered with a smirk.

Noise from the outer room washed over them as a group neared, and Hollow was a little shocked when the stranger leant in and pressed their mouths together. The man's beard was softer than he thought it would be. Also the stranger's blood sang to Hollow. Hollow lifted his hands and held loosely to the stranger's sides. When the stranger went to pull away after the crowd had passed them by, Hollow reached up and cupped his hand to the guy's neck and held him close. The moment the guy went to protest, Hollow swooped in and thrust his tongue into the other man's mouth. Needing to taste him more than he ever thought possible. The stranger fought him for but a moment before he succumbed to the nature of the kiss and pressed the hard lines of his body up against Hollow.

Never before had Hollow had the wish to completely lose himself in another person as he did right now. When the kiss finally ended, he spoke. "My name is Holland Vandiver, but my friends call me Hollow."

The stranger's breath came in quick panted gulps before he seemed to find his own voice. "I'm Creed Larson."

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind that name sounded familiar, like it should have meant something to Hollow. It was going to be an insatiable itch upon his memory until he recalled exactly why.

"Well, Creed Larson, where do we go from here?" Hollow was going to give Creed a chance to tell him the truth, or possibly lie through his teeth. Either way Hollow would know, as one of the more useful traits of a vampire was being able to detect when they were being lied to.

Creed seemed to think about it for a moment before he finally answered. "You have something that belongs to my family, and I want it back."

And then it clicked. The necklace—the Larson Legacy.

Hollow knew who stood in front of him. "You want the necklace, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Am I permitted to ask why?" Hollow prodded, and again he hoped he was given the truth.

"Without it I will die."

As bullshit as that sounded, Hollow knew it was the truth. Hollow also knew the man standing before him was of demon descent and was without a

doubt his heart's blood. There was no way in hell he was going to let his mate die. There was more to this story, and he needed answers, and there was only one way to get them.

"Come with me." He didn't even give Creed a chance to answer as he clasped hands with him and led him through the throng of people. He needed to get back to Rose and Timothy, and fast. The strange friction he'd felt earlier had ratcheted up a notch, and he knew it was time to depart, but they weren't leaving without the necklace.

Once he made it to where the others stood, he reluctantly let go of Creed, reached out, and removed the necklace from around a protesting Helena's slender neck. Without second-guessing himself, he turned and placed the necklace around Creed's throat. "We need to leave. Call your friends and let's get the hell out of here before whatever is watching us decides to step in."

"You can feel it too." Creed seemed to be more than a little shocked.

Hollow once more grabbed a hold of Creed's hand. "We need to go now. If you want your friends to stay safe, they need to come with us."

"Fine." Creed raised his hand and made a series of gestures that obviously meant something to the other three because only seconds passed before the trio joined them.

"Helena, I'm sure you'll be able to find your own way home from here. Something important has come up and I have to leave and attend to it." He knew he was never going to see her again, so he didn't care that he was being rude. He didn't even stop to hear her protests as he started towards the door, pulling Creed behind him. He knew the rest would follow or they'd get left behind.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" one of the siblings with Creed asked as Hollow led everyone outside to their waiting car.

Smiling widely and showing off his fangs, he stated, "There's nothing wrong with me at all. Now get in the goddamn car."

Chapter Three

As soon as they climbed into the back of the waiting limo, Creed's eyes widened as he fully saw the fangs in Hollow's mouth. Curiosity got the better of him. "So are you a demon? When Ellery was looking some stuff up about my family we learned demons were once real, but they've since died out."

"No, I'm not a demon," Hollow replied. He hesitated a moment before adding, "But you are."

A small amount of panic filled Creed, yet he wasn't going to show it to these strangers he still knew nothing about. "Yeah, we were beginning to think that I might have some demon blood in me somewhere," Creed answered truthfully. "I mean, there are some abilities I have that aren't completely human."

"Not some—all. Demons are born, not made. The Larson family is from a very old demon clan," Hollow explained. "If I'm not mistaken, you are descended from one of the founding families."

Ellery sat forwards in his seat and interjected, "How do you know all this? If you say you aren't a demon, then how can you possibly know? I see the wicked set of chompers you have, so I gather you're not human."

"I know this because the Vandiver line is just as old, except you're right, I'm not a demon. If you had done a thorough job in your research, you would have realised that aside from humans and demons, vampires also coexisted to walk on the earth," Hollow explained further.

"You're a vampire? Does that mean you drink blood? What does it taste like?" Eliza asked. Typical, she was always full of questions.

"Yes, I'm a vampire, as are Rose and Timothy. Yes, we drink blood. We also consume human foods and beverages. Blood tastes like blood. Haven't you ever nicked your finger on a knife and licked away the blood?"

While Hollow answered an endless barrage of questions from the Conrad siblings, it gave Creed some much needed time to study Hollow. The guy was even more perfect in full colour and in the flesh. A nudge at his side had him turning to see Rose, who smiled at him with just a hint of her fangs showing.

Leaning closer to him, she whispered subvocally, "If you keep watching Hollow that way, we'll all drown in the scent of your arousal. For vampires and demons, our sense of smell is great."

Creed's face flamed with heat as he tried to curb his wayward cock that was rapidly trying to take an interest in Hollow. It got even worse when Hollow's heated green-eyed gaze locked with his and sent all his blood rushing to pool in his groin.

"You're not helping," Rose stated as she glared at Hollow.

Hollow smiled at her and stated, "He's my heart's blood, Rose."

"Really?" Rose asked.

"Yes. Really."

The way they were talking something important was being said, and Creed was at a loss for what it was. "What's does it mean? What's your heart's blood?"

"*You* are my heart's blood, Creed." Hollow seemed to think on it for a moment. "I suppose a human might call you my soulmate. In your case, a demon would say I'm your eternal soul."

Shock slammed through Creed. He touched the necklace around his throat as the Larson family message flashed through his mind, and he whispered the words out loud. "The Larson son who holds the jewel will bring forth his eternal soul, the one meant to stand by him and guide him through all that should unfold. Should the jewel ever leave the hands of the Larsons, each and every son will die in his thirtieth year until the jewel is once more safely within their grasp. Should the enemy gain control of the jewel, an evil darkness will descend upon the earth until all in existence are dead."

"What did you just say?" Hollow asked, seemingly a little dazed by what Creed had quoted.

Creed hadn't even realised he'd spoken aloud until Hollow asked him the question. "It's something that has been passed down through each generation of my family. Why?"

A shiver of knowing filled Creed when, with a slight shake in his voice, Hollow recited, "When the last of the chosen demon line comes into his year of death, he will seek out the Vandiver that holds his soul. Together they will be strong and keep the sun from going dark." Hollow appeared slightly disorientated or something akin to it before he softly added, "That's what's been passed down through my family."

Silence so thick it was almost choking hung in the air for what seemed like an eternity before Ethan finally spoke.

“Well, I suppose technically this could be classed as the year of your death, Creed. We all know that the Larson men in your family have never lived to see their thirty-first birthday,” Ethan said matter-of-factly. “Maybe this meeting tonight was meant to be. At least we didn’t have to steal the necklace like we thought we would.”

As much as he wanted to believe Ethan was correct, Creed had to ask, “What about the other ones out there watching? What are we meant to do about them? Who the hell are they? And what the hell do they want?”

“That’s simple enough to answer.” Timothy, who had up until now remained silent, held up his hand and ticked off on his fingers as he spoke, “One: They want the necklace to kill the sun. I’m not sure if that should be taken literally or metaphorically. Two: If Hollow is vampire and you are demon, then I’m going to hazard a guess and say the third interested party are of human descent, and quite possibly a part of the group of hunters who have been killing off our kind since the world first started to spin. Three: I think we need to join forces and take them out before they kill us all.”

The weight of that statement was all-consuming. Creed had hoped that after tonight he and the Conrad siblings could move away from what they were and start over. They had accrued enough wealth to live anywhere and any way they wanted. *Why is it when you think you have life licked, it drips all over you?*

Creed didn’t want to know the answer, and yet he still asked, “So what happens next?”

“Next I suggest we work together. It’s obvious that our two families were chosen way back in the beginning of time to fight against this”—Hollow fluttered his hands—“whatever this is. We have to stand together to shield the world from darkness.”

“Evil darkness.” Ellery cracked up laughing. “Why do I get the feeling we are about to foray into a very bad horror flick. Everyone knows good always wins over evil. This should be a piece of cake—a walk in the park—or any other thing you can think of.”

“Easy-peasy,” Eliza threw in with a smirk.

“Not always,” Timothy stated frostily. “That’s merely a human belief. In reality the strongest side will win. Or better yet, the side who is most prepared for battle.”

Ellery paled. “Are you saying we are about to enter into a war?”

“Yes. One that is as old as time itself,” Timothy answered matter-of-factly.

Frustration filled Creed's head as they fell into another prolonged silence. He was terrified that what they were talking about was actually true. If it was, how in hell did the human populace end up becoming so much stronger than both the demon and vampires? Yet his immediate thought was they needed to keep the jewel safe. Keep it out of the hands of those who wanted to end it all.

It wasn't until the limo slowed down as they approached a formidable set of cast iron gates that Creed came back to the here and now. Somehow he had not heard a word since Timothy mentioned the possibility of war. A slight tingling sensation ghosted over his skin as the car pulled to a stop. He snapped his head around to stare at Hollow.

Before he could ask, Hollow spoke. “What you feel is the ward—spell, which has been set in place to guard our home. Just like in the stories you have read about vampires, we have the ability to deter people from entering our covens.”

“Does it work?” Creed asked.

“Mostly.”

What the fuck? “What do you mean by mostly?”

“I mean if you don't know about it, then you won't know what it is. You'll just suddenly find yourself going in a different direction. Like they see us, but don't register us. On the other hand, nonhumans and those few humans in the know sense it, and if they are strong enough, they can break the spell and enter,” Rose answered. “I know Creed felt it. Did any of the others?”

Ethan and Eliza shook their heads in the negative while Ellery nodded. “It was kind of like all my hairs were standing up on end.”

That was exactly the same sensation Creed himself had gotten. He also felt the whisper across his mind giving him the need to walk away. Reaching out, he touched Hollow and felt the urgency to leave dissipate.

“I did get the feeling we shouldn't be here,” Eliza spoke up.

“Me too.”

“That's exactly what you are supposed to feel. Mind you, I'm surprised you even felt that much. Most humans don't feel a thing.”

All three vampires concentrated on the Conrad siblings before Rose asked, “Are you sure you're human?”

Ellery snorted. “Well I don’t have the overwhelming urge to drink blood. So I guess that rules out us being vampire. In all the stuff I’ve looked up I’ve never heard of our family being of demon descent. As far as I know we are completely human.”

“Could they be in the direct line of the human hunters?” Timothy asked.

“Maybe,” Rose stated.

That didn’t make sense to Creed. “If they are descendants of the hunters, then why would they take me in and claim me as family?”

“Because we may be thieves, but we aren’t murderers,” Ethan answered. “I don’t know what others in our line have done, but for us family comes first, and Creed is part of our family.”

Right then and there Creed felt more loved than he ever had before in his life. Ethan had hit the nail on the head. They were a family in the strongest sense. The truth was he couldn’t have ever wished for a better group of people to belong to.

Chapter Four

Hollow's nerves ran rampant as he led Creed and his family into Vandiver Hall. Some part of him hoped Creed liked the place enough to want to stay. Even though they had only just met, some part of him didn't want Creed to go anywhere. Not that he was going to let the newcomers leave his home any time soon. At least not until they had some sort of plan set in place.

He couldn't help the sense of pride he had as the Conrad family took in their surroundings with a slight look of awe on their faces. Many of his belongings had been passed down through his family and held some special meaning. Hollow couldn't wait to share the story of his life with Creed.

"Your home is beautiful," Creed said beside him. "Beats some of the dives we have stayed in over the years."

Rose frowned for a moment before she asked, "Why would you live like that considering the type of work you're all in? I would think you would all be stinking rich. Why wouldn't you be living in the lap of luxury?"

Hollow was wondering the same thing and waited for one of them to answer. It didn't take Ellery long to do so.

"We decided it was better if we never called attention to ourselves. Rich people are always under the microscope in one way or another. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. By staying unassuming, we remained under the radar of the police. A place we were all quite happy to be."

"It kind of makes sense when you explain it like that," Rose conceded.

"We've always thought so," Eliza said as she joined the conversation.

While everyone was talking, Hollow grabbed Creed by the hand and showed him into the office he had set behind the main staircase. Most people wouldn't even know it was there without doing some searching. Timothy had been the one who came up with the idea of keeping the office hidden from all. The door was actually secreted within a panel on the wall.

"Welcome to my home office," Hollow said as he walked to the corner bar and poured them both a drink. "I hope scotch is okay."

"It's fine. Right now I think anything would do the job."

Ice clinked in the glass as Hollow turned and handed one of the glasses to Creed. He smiled as he watched Creed tugging on the ends of his beard. Hollow

had to wonder if it was a nervous gesture. Whatever it was, it sure was cute. Seriously, Hollow wanted to run his own fingers through the man's facial hair. Or better yet, be completely naked and have Creed trail his beard all over his body. The kiss earlier in the night had him craving more of the soft, scratchy touch. Never before had he been partial to facial hair, but Creed somehow did it justice.

"What's on your mind?" Hollow asked as he sat on the edge of his desk.

Creed sighed. "If I'm honest, then I'm freaking out a little. Tonight has kind of gone so far left of centre that I'm not actually sure what's going on. I mean, tonight was supposed to be get in—get the necklace—and get out. Something we've done a thousand times or more. We weren't supposed to readily jump into bed with the mark we were stealing from."

While he spoke, Hollow wondered if Creed even realised his fingers were stroking the necklace at his throat. "I think you are exactly where you are meant to be. Our whole lives were leading us to this very point in time."

Hollow was a little shocked when Creed burst out laughing. "Seriously? Yesterday I was nothing but a thief—a bloody good thief, mind you—but a thief nonetheless. Yesterday I was human, with a human family who took me in, and now they may have possibly been bred into this world just to wipe me out of existence. I've been told I'm a demon who is somehow linked to a vampire, and we both have some invisible person out there watching us." Creed shook his head. "Have I left anything out?"

"We were always destined to meet. I have been searching for you ever since the damn necklace was placed in my hands. I just didn't know I would have to wait until you were actually born. I don't care how we met, or who's after us. I just care that whatever happens, we face it together."

By the look on Creed's face, Hollow knew he'd have to do some more convincing before he would start to comprehend what Hollow already knew—the world was so much more than what they could completely see.

"How about just for the moment we forget about all the bad shit out there. How about I put the necklace back into its case and place it back into the safe?" When Creed hesitated in taking it off, Hollow added, "I'll even give you the code to the safe so you can get it any time you need."

"Why would you do that? We've only just met. How could you possibly trust me so much?" Creed questioned him.

He didn't even have to think about the answer, so instead he told what he believed was the truth. "You are my heart's blood... the one meant to be my mate. If I can't trust you, who can I trust?"

"How do you know I'm that person? Why should I just take your word for it?"

"You can take all the time you need in trusting me, but I'm already going to take my chances with trusting you. Like I said, I've been waiting a long time for your arrival."

"God I need to listen to some David Bowie right about now."

What the hell is Creed talking about? What does Bowie have to do with anything? "Why Bowie?"

Creed shrugged. "When I'm feeling stressed I like to listen to David Bowie. He relaxes me so all the bad shit just fades away, and after all this information influx I need to have something to help me relax."

"Any particular era?" Hollow said as he stood and walked to the cupboard that housed his sound system. It wasn't often he found someone who liked the same music as much as he did.

"Anything. I like it all."

As the first strains of the music filled the room, Hollow swore he could see Creed visibly relaxing. He would have to remember this for the future. Walking over, Hollow carefully undid the necklace and lifted it away from Creed. "You know Rose always called this thing Hollow's Trouble. She always thought it brought me nothing but heartache and worry."

"Did it?"

"In a way it did." Hollow studied the pale-blue gems. "In other ways it was a hope that someday I would find someone so I didn't have to be alone anymore."

"What do you mean alone?" Creed sat up in his chair.

"I guess you can say vampires aren't exactly able to make attachments with other people. Don't get me wrong. I'm very close with Timothy and Rose, but that's because we were all born into the same coven. We have a hard time forming connections with others, as we are forever waiting for our heart's blood."

Maybe telling Creed all of this straight up wasn't the best way to go about things, but if he was in the same place, he would want to know. Hollow was going to go with the whole assumption that Creed would want the truth. Any normal person would.

Something akin to curiosity settled on Creed's face. "So does that mean you couldn't even have sex?"

"I can have sex." Hollow rolled his eyes at the absurdity of the question. "And if you're a good boy I may even show you later on all the ways I can make your body fly." When Creed grinned at him, he added, "Sex wasn't the problem, and sometimes I even enjoyed it, but it soon became a chore. Something I just went through the paces of, until in the end I stopped. Trust me, sex without meaning gets boring really fast."

And wasn't Hollow glad that he never had to endure another bout of that sort of intimacy. Now that Creed was here, Hollow had to convince Creed to become his lover and complete their bonding. Not only because together they would stop the idiots out there who seemingly wanted them dead by any means possible, but because Creed wanted him just as much. Mates were a gift from their ancestors who still watched over them in the afterlife. The belief was that after they died they could guide a vampire's heart's blood to their kin. At least that was what legend spoke of. Whether it was true or not was anyone's guess.

"So are you planning on seducing me?" Creed's eyes twinkled in mirth, with maybe just a hint of desire. Well at least Hollow hoped it was desire.

"Oh I'm definitely planning on getting you into my bed at some stage. When I do, you will belong to me forever, and I don't plan on ever letting you go."

The sexual tension in the room amped up another couple of notches, making Hollow aware that Creed liked that idea a lot. Taking a moment to calm things down, Hollow quickly put the necklace into the safe, and as promised, he wrote down the combination and gave it to Creed. He never wanted Creed to doubt he was telling the truth when he said things. Still, once Creed took the piece of paper, his eyes widened fractionally in shock.

"You didn't really have to give me this."

"Yes. I did." Hollow reached out and took the empty glass from Creed's hand. "Come on, it's late. I will show you to a room where you can wash up, then get some rest."

“Is it your room?” Creed asked.

“It can be if you want it to.” Hollow’s heart was beating crazily out of control as they exited the room. He’d set the timer on the music so the system would turn itself off at the conclusion of the CD playing. He didn’t even give Creed the chance to reply as he led his hopefully soon-to-be lover upstairs. When he didn’t see or hear anyone else he assumed Rose and Timothy had shown the others to rooms for their use while they were here.

The deep chuckle emanating from Creed all but spurred him on as he led the way up to his bedroom. Hopefully Creed wouldn’t be viewing this as a one-off thing. Insta-love had never been high on anyone’s agenda, but when it came to a vampire’s heart’s blood, love was like a punch in the guts that stole your breath away. And that right there was the exact reaction Hollow had had when he’d first spotted Creed back at the ball, and Helena had instantly become a thing of the past.

Once inside the confines of his room Hollow shut the door and pushed Creed back up against the wall. Invading Creed’s personal space, Hollow swooped in and devoured Creed’s lips in what he hoped would be an all-consuming kiss. He wanted to show Creed just how good it could be between them. By the feel of the erection pressing against his own, he knew Creed was more than a little interested in where all this was heading.

Yet again the explosion of Creed’s taste in his mouth all but brought him to his knees. If left to his own devices, Hollow would happily spend the rest of his existence worshiping all things Creed. Now that he’d had a small sample he wanted so much more. And being more than human they would have many centuries left to discover all there is to know about each other. If they were lucky enough their bonding could take them to a whole new level of intimacy. Hollow could remember he’d read somewhere that mates—some mates, not all—could become as close as if they lived in each other’s skin. They would even be able to link their minds and speak that way. This was the kind of mate Hollow had always wanted.

A life mate that he could share everything with.

Chapter Five

Creed wanted to laugh at Hollow's antics. For some strange reason Hollow had broken the kiss and was now rubbing his cheeks against Creed's beard. This was going to be fun. It seemed the sexy as hell vampire liked his facial hair. Not many men he'd been with would've agreed. More than one potential boyfriend had asked him to shave, and that was the beginning of the end for them. Creed loved his beard. Still, he decided to test the waters.

"I was thinking that if you had a spare razor, I could shave."

The reaction wasn't long in coming. "Don't you dare. I forbid it." Hollow glared at him, even as his fingers fisted in Creed's beard. "Your beard is so sexy."

"In that case I'll keep it." One test had been passed with flying colours. If he was lucky, Hollow would pass each and every one of his other questions/tests. Not that he had any more right then and there. But if he did, he was sure Hollow would prove his worth.

"Is it too soon for me to tell you that I want you? I want to possess your body just as much as I want you to possess mine," Hollow said between kisses.

"I think it sounds just about perfect," Creed replied huskily as he reached between them and began the slow process of undoing the buttons on Hollow's dress shirt. He wanted this just as much as Hollow apparently did. "I think we need to get naked. This would work so much better if we were both naked right about now."

"Naked... better... yes."

Creed liked the fact that he had reduced Hollow to a mumbling hot mess. The intense look on the man's face had Creed's cock hardening further, until the damn thing ached with need. Lucky he was wearing black suit pants, or precum would no doubt already be showing. Just the nearness of Hollow was having an effect on Creed. His whole body was on high alert. Lust, or something akin to it, was ghosting over his skin at a rapid speed, and all sensation was racing straight to his groin.

The truth was he didn't care who fucked who just as long as there was some sort of fucking going on. Either way it was going to feel good. Creed had always enjoyed the touch of another man's hard body against his own. And

with each new part of Hollow that was revealed, Creed was in heaven. Hollow was exactly the sort of man Creed had always pursued.

“You are perfection personified,” Creed announced as Hollow was finally divested of his last article of clothing. The guy was absolutely breathtaking in every sense of the word. His skin was flawless, and Creed found himself needing to touch just to see if he was real. Was it his fault if his hand found its way straight to Hollow’s cock, and what a magnificent specimen of manhood it was. Creed couldn’t wait to have the damn thing pounding into his arse.

Hollow moaned against Creed’s throat when Creed brought their cocks together and held them in his hand and stroked them both. Not enough to get them off, but enough to slick them up without the aid of lube. Creed was looking forwards to going down on Hollow and making him come hard enough that Creed would have trouble drinking him down.

Yeah, that scenario was looking better and better.

“On the bed.” Creed reluctantly released his hold on his prize as he gently shoved Hollow towards the massive bed. “Naked and a bed is looking very good right now.”

“Yes.”

Creed *tsked* when Hollow grabbed his own cock and began to fondle himself. Creed quickly kicked out of his trousers. Not caring one iota where they landed on the floor. His sole focus was on the blow job he had every intention of performing. “Don’t touch. That right there belongs to me. I’m the one who’s going to play with it—not you.”

As soon as Hollow released his hold, Creed swept in and sucked the sexy-as-fuck cock into his mouth until it pressed against the back of his throat. Two quick swallows had him deep throating Hollow. When his hair fell into his vision, Creed realised Hollow had managed to take out his bun unnoticed. For that Creed was going to have to punish him. First he would make him come by blowing him, then not give Hollow time to recover as he fucked his lover stupid. His own dick was swollen in readiness and jumped in agreement.

Hollow moaned and squirmed, pressing his balls into Creed’s beard. Creed kept on sucking until Hollow screamed his name to the rooftops, and true to his word, he released Hollow and flipped him over on the bed. “We need lube. Please tell me you have lube.”

A hint of a blush crept over Hollow's naked body as he reached under his pillow and handed back a well-used tube of KY. Jealousy rocketed through Creed. "Were you planning on using this tonight with your date?"

Hollow looked back at him over his shoulder. "She would never have gotten anywhere near my bed. I never wanted her. I just needed someone to display that stupid necklace on."

Creed lubed up his fingers and played with Hollow's hole as he asked, "Why didn't you just get Rose to wear it?"

"Because—" Hollow gasped as Creed slowly pushed one finger into his tight chute. "—she got sick of playing my girlfriend. She wanted to be able to go home with whoever she wanted and not have everyone thinking we were an exclusive item."

"What about from now on?" Okay, so maybe it was a shitty call to ask Hollow this sort of stuff while in the throes of passion, but Creed wanted answers before he got himself in too deep.

A deep moan emanated from Hollow when Creed slid two more fingers in beside the first. "Feels so good... I don't need anyone now that I have you. If I need to attend something, you will be with me." He groaned again. "That's if you want."

"That's the perfect answer." He gently removed his fingers from the pleasurable task of stretching his lover. Creed lubed up his cock and pressed the head against Hollow's opening. This was his favourite part about sex: watching as the other person's body opened enough to allow him entry into their heated tightness. And the God's honest truth was Hollow was fucking perfect.

Creed found himself mesmerised by the sweat glistening down Hollow's spine and wanted badly to lean forwards and lick along its length. Yet the moment Hollow clenched tighter around him, Creed's body went in a whole different direction. Instead he grabbed a hold of Hollow's hips and pulled back enough to slam his way home, picking up speed with every thrust as he built to a punishing pace in their lovemaking. As hot as it was staring at Hollow's back, it wasn't enough. Frustration at not being able to see his lover's face had him pulling free and once more flipping Hollow until he was on his back. Hollow never even had time to complain before Creed had lifted his legs, lined himself up, and thrust deep in one quick move.

"Keep your eyes open and on me. I want to see you the second you come. I want to see you orgasm as you lose yourself in this," Creed said as he regained

the fast pace. His whole body was a mass of writhing emotions as his own release became imminent. The sounds of their bodies meeting in such a brutal way was drawing Creed closer and closer to the edge. Frictional heat ghosted over his naked form as his balls tightened against his body, though he was determined he wasn't going to come until Hollow had done so again. Sweat was sticking his unbound hair to wherever it touched his body, but right now he was so close that he couldn't have given a fuck if his hair had been on fire.

The moment Hollow stopped babbling long enough to scream Creed's name for a second time, Creed gave into his body's demands, and he came until he was sure his cum was going to start flowing back out of Hollow's chute while Creed was still buried deep inside of him.

Surprise ripped through him when Hollow managed to reach up and yank him down on top of him so he could claim Creed's mouth in a kiss. Not that Creed minded one damn bit. Kissing while still being joined in such an intimate way was more than a little erotic. Hell, give him a few more minutes, and Creed was sure he would be able to go again.

Creed wiggled a bit as Hollow ran his hands down his back and began to brush across Creed's hole. Pushing back just a fraction, he felt the tip of one finger slide in, and groaned long and hard at how right it felt. Yes, he definitely couldn't wait until it was his turn to take it up the arse, and he hoped like hell Hollow had no qualms about being just as rough as he'd taken Hollow moments before. Not that he wanted their lovemaking to be one ongoing harsh fuckfest, but on occasion he liked knowing he was man enough to take and dish it out. Other times he liked to take things slow and gentle.

One of these days, Creed was going to take great pleasure in tying Hollow down and torturing him to completion by caressing all his lover's exposed flesh with his beard. Creed knew without a doubt Hollow would get off on that. Maybe his lover would come without Creed ever having to touch his dick. Maybe he should test that theory out. When Hollow slipped his finger free, Creed broke the kiss and smiled down at the sexy vision beneath him.

"How about a shower before we fall asleep. Not that I mind being covered in our combined scents, but being stuck together by dry cum is going to be itchy as hell come morning," Creed said as he leant down and kissed Hollow on the forehead. By the look of disappointment on Hollow's face, Creed knew he was missing something important. "What's the matter? You look upset."

"I know it's too soon, but I was hoping you would have claimed me."

Deep down, confusion filled Creed. "Didn't I just do that?"

"Yes and no. You started the bonding with the sex, but to claim me you need to bite me here." He gestured to where his shoulder and neck met. "Bite me and swallow my blood. Then I do the same to you while we are connected this way." He finished by clamping his arse on Creed's cock, which was more than happy to take an interest in this conversation.

Without saying a word, Creed began to slowly rock in and out of Hollow once more, and as soon as he got it into his head that he was going to bite his lover hard enough to break the skin, his gums began to tingle. A sharp pain accosted him seconds before he lunged down and bit deep. Blood filled his mouth, and as he swallowed the warmth, he realised the taste wasn't too bad. Licking the wound, he was surprised to see Hollow's flesh mending itself. He didn't have time to comment before Hollow grabbed a handful of Creed's hair and yanked his head to the side, baring his throat. Lust hit him full force as soon as Hollow's fangs pierced his flesh, and once more Creed pounded deep as he fell over the edge and came.

Holy fuck! Sex had never been better.

Chapter Six

Dawn came way too early for Hollow's liking. With it came the feeling of dread Hollow had come to associate with the presence that had been keeping track of both him and Creed. The vibe he was getting was that whoever it was wasn't happy that he and Creed had found their way to each other, let alone completed their claiming bond.

Beside him Creed began to stir. Hollow slid his hand beneath the blanket to still Creed's movements. Creed froze under his touch as a heated flash of hatred swamped the room before the sensation disappeared in an instant.

"What the fuck was that?" Creed asked as he sat up.

"I need to talk to Rose and Timothy." Hollow jumped out of bed and quickly dressed. "There is no way that should have just happened. Our wards are too powerful."

Creed was close behind him as they dressed and left the room. Hollow headed straight downstairs to his office. The first thing he did was check the security monitor. The Conrad siblings soon entered the office and asked what was going on. Hollow wasn't surprised when Rose and Timothy turned up only a few minutes after he did.

"What's going on? I could feel your anger from the kitchen," Timothy said.

"Don't," Hollow stated when he saw Timothy giving Creed the evil eye. "Someone got through the wards. It seems our watcher has found a way to bypass our safeguards."

"That's not possible," Rose said as she came up to stand beside him at the monitor.

Hollow growled out, "It is possible. Whoever our enemy is, they now know Creed and I claimed each other."

"You claimed each other?" Ellery blurted out and then blushed over his outburst. "I guess congrats are in order then."

The whole situation seemed to be funny, and Hollow chuckled as Creed punched Ellery in the arm when the outspoken young man tried pulling Creed's collar away from his neck, trying to see the claiming mark.

"Ellery, knock it off," Ethan snapped.

“Don’t worry too much about it. At least he’s lightening the mood,” Hollow reassured the elder sibling.

Right now they needed to figure out how the hell the watcher was able to penetrate the wards shrouding their home. Turning his attention to Rose, who was busily tapping away at the keyboard, he asked, “Did they work their own way through our defences or did someone let them in?”

There were only a handful of people who worked at the household, and Hollow would be shocked if any of them had betrayed him. Their positions had been inherited through generations of the same families. All knew what they were and had sworn loyalty to not only him, but his coven as well.

“They got through themselves. Our people are loyal to you,” Rose said.

Timothy leant around Rose and added, “But I would have a chat with Derman. He designed our wards and would know exactly how to get around them.”

“Maybe he built a back door into the spell,” Ellery said as he came over to watch what Rose and Timothy were doing.

“What do you mean?” Timothy asked.

Ellery shrugged. “You know, like a hacker would enter someone’s program through a back door and take all the info they wanted. If you know where to look for one then they are pretty easy to use. I could probably hack into your systems within thirty minutes. It could be less, all depending on what program you’re using and how weak your passwords are.”

“Are you that good?” Hollow asked. It wasn’t often you came across a skilful hacker. There were always times they came in handy, especially during business transactions. “Would you consider taking a position within my business? If you’re as good as you say you are, then I could use someone with your skill set.”

“I’d need a better system than you have here. Even the one I have at home will need some upgrading if I take you up on your offer,” Ellery answered.

Hollow could scent the confidence coming off the man and knew he was telling the truth, or more so that he believed in his own abilities so much he didn’t think he could fail. “Would you be able to backtrack and find out who got through the ward?”

“If the magic is based on cyberprocessing, then yes. No matter how many times the guy reroutes his print, I’ll be able to backtrack him to the source.”

"If you're that good, then how come you didn't realise we were vampires when you did the search on us?" Rose asked.

Again Ellery shrugged. "I found out what I needed to know. That Hollow was attending the Swan Ball and that his date would be wearing the necklace. I did a minor history check on the family. I may be a thief, but that doesn't mean I can take without consequences. I preferred to get in and out without being detected. Admit it. Until I told you I'd researched you, none of you even knew I'd skimmed the surface of your computer system. If my job had called for the nitty-gritty then I could have gotten it all."

"A thief with morals," Hollow mused. The things you found out about someone when you took the time to talk to them. He would have to keep that in mind for future references, especially if he asked Ellery to look into someone he was contemplating doing business with. "Buy whatever you need. Money is no object. If you work for me, Timothy will set you up your own office space."

"Can it be hidden away like your office? I like the idea of my space being not as accessible to nosy people."

Ethan stepped forwards and spoke to his brother. "Are you thinking about taking a job with Hollow? If you are, we need to make plans."

"Why?" Rose asked.

"Because we come as a package deal," Eliza answered. "We would have been here regardless, seeing as Creed all but married Hollow. We're family now, and family looks after each other."

Hollow liked the sound of that. His coven had been so small for so long that having more people around felt like the right thing to do, even if they weren't of vampire descent. Sometimes families had a way of finding you, rather than being born into them.

While Timothy and Rose talked with the Conrad siblings and assigned them permanent rooms and a workspace, Hollow took the time to lead Creed from the room to the kitchen. "Let's get something to eat. I think we are going to have a very long couple of days ahead of us."

Creed nodded and clasped their hands together so their fingers were interlaced. "Aren't you worried about my family lobbying on your doorstep and setting up shop?"

Hollow could see the worry in Creed's eyes. He wanted to reassure his mate. "No. As Eliza said, we are all family now. I trust they would never do anything to place you in harm's way."

“Do you think Timothy could be right and they are descended from the first family? What if they really are meant to be the ones to kill us off?”

For a moment Hollow thought about how to answer. Instead he asked, “Look deep inside yourself. Do you ever see your family hurting you? Have they ever tried to harm you in the past?”

“No. They have backed me one hundred percent of the time I have been with them. Hell, they even put their own lives on hold while we sorted out this whole me-dying-at-thirty thing. We were getting away from being thieves. The Swan Ball was going to be our last heist. The necklace was going to be the turnaround point for us all.”

With his interest piqued, Hollow asked, “What would you have done afterwards?”

Creed sat at the kitchen counter as they entered the kitchen. Hollow quickly prepared a couple of omelettes as he once more prompted Creed to answer.

“We all have other skills than just stealing. Ellery really is as good as he claims to be on the computer. Eliza is a certified lab technician and is pretty up there with formulas and shit. Ethan has a very tactical mind. He can think his way out of any problem. He may not be certified in any particular job, because he’s raised Eliza and Ellery since he was fifteen, but the man is brilliant nonetheless,” Creed explained.

“And what about you? What were you planning on doing?”

Creed chuckled. “Well, if I wasn’t dead, I was planning on tracking down the big bad evil that wants to kill the world and stop them. I had planned on doing it alone, but you’ve met my family. They insisted on helping me. Family sticks together.”

Isn’t that the damn truth? Hollow knew without a doubt that when they faced off against the big bad evil, he would be standing right at Creed’s side where he was always destined to be.

Chapter Seven

As the days passed, Creed found himself falling into the routine of talking individually with each of the vampires and working on how best to integrate their coexistence. Being Hollow's mate smoothed the way somewhat, but Creed knew Rose and Timothy still didn't fully trust him or his family. Granted, that could be partly because of Ellery's smart mouth, an attitude that seemed to flow strongly through each of the Conrad siblings. Creed often saw the frustration on Timothy's face whenever he and Ellery clashed. Rose spent most of her time in conference with Ethan, seeing as she basically held the same position in Hollow's life.

Every day Ellery and Timothy assured them they were getting closer to finding the source of their problems. Creed knew once they tracked down the point of origin, they would be able to work out a way to go in and shut the person—or persons—responsible down. What Creed couldn't figure out is why they'd want to destroy the sun anyway. Even if it had been written metaphorically, why would you want to cast a shadow over the whole of humanity? Didn't they realise they would be killing off their own people? And if they did—didn't they care?

Walking through the house, he found Hollow sitting in the massive library poring through some ancient-looking tome. Creed thought maybe the one he was reading was the original edition. The way Hollow was wearing gloves as he turned each page with care made Creed think the book was worth a fortune.

"What are you doing?" Creed asked as he walked up and stood beside Hollow. He placed a hand on Hollow's shoulder as he leant closer to take a look. What he saw was nothing but gibberish to him.

"This is the story of our people. Of how we became what we are, and why we turned on each other. Back then we kept better records than historians of today ever knew about. The true copies were kept within our families and passed down through the ages." Hollow pointed to the passage he'd been studying. "Right here it tells me that the humans caused a great discord between the demon and vampire races, which resulted in an epic battle between our two species."

This kind of explained how the humans became a force to be reckoned with. "Have you ever come across anything pertaining to the necklace, or more so, the jewel that it once was?"

“Actually that’s what I’ve been in here doing. I recall reading something somewhere about how the jewel came about. So far all I have is bits and pieces.” Hollow sighed as he rubbed the tiredness from his eyes.

Creed placed a soft kiss against Hollow’s temple. “Then all we need to do is fit all the bits and pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. I’m sure once completed we’ll see the bigger picture.”

“I hope you’re right. Because at the moment my gut is telling me that the jewel is the epicentre of everything.” Hollow ran a hand through his hair, and Creed couldn’t help but smile at the mess it left behind.

“So far the only mentions I found are of the jewel once being owned by the humans. Somewhere along the line, the demons gained possession of it. I’m assuming that’s when it came to your family. Then, I know through my own history my family took it from yours.” Hollow looked frustrated as he turned to face Creed. “What I can’t figure out is why the thing is so damn important?”

A cough off to one side of the room had Creed turning to see one of the staff standing there. Usually the staff remained in the background, doing their jobs efficiently. But since being here they were more like ninjas—slipping in and doing their jobs without being seen—so for one of them to interact was a bit of a shock.

“If I may be permitted to speak, I can tell you the story that has been passed down in my family line.” The young woman smiled, but the look of determination in her eyes led Creed to believe she wasn’t about to tell them a heap of bullshit. There was also something within her demeanour that showed her loyalty to Hollow.

Hollow answered her. “Go ahead, Lila, I’m willing to listen to anything if it starts getting everything to fall into place.”

Creed nodded his own agreement as the woman came towards them and sat in one of the vacant chairs.

“What you should know is that all who serve in this house have been especially trained to do so. I assure you none of us take our jobs lightly. In fact we are each battle trained and ready to step in and defend this coven until our dying breath if needs be. I’m sure other covens are run in a similar fashion. We human employees have been taught how it was in the old days when we all lived together harmoniously. We believe in equality for all. Mind you, it helps that you also protect us and our families. You pay a fair wage and are willing to help us in any capacity needed.”

"You were going to tell us about the jewel," Hollow prompted after a while.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I have a tendency to ramble. From what my family was taught, the jewel did originate with the humans. One of the founding families dug it from the depths of the earth when they were building their estate. In its original form, the jewel was beautiful. The human who held it placed it on display in his great room, and the jewel soon became the envy of all who saw it. Some say the jewel brought a madness to the human's mind. The servants of Lord Synderman got together and formed a plan to save their beloved lord. They sent a kitchen hand with the jewel to the lair of the closest demon horde, not realising it was too late, as the madness had completely consumed their lord."

Creed had an inkling in the back of his mind and needed some clarification. "Do you know the name of the servant who took the jewel?"

"I don't know his family name, but his first name was Conrad. Why is that important?"

Hollow snapped his fingers as if knowing what Creed was thinking. His next words proved Creed right. "Do you think your family is descended from this thief?"

"Conrad wasn't a thief," Lila insisted. "In fact by most he was considered to be a hero. He only did the task our people all begged him to do."

"What was the name of the demon horde?" Hollow asked.

"As far as I know they were called the Larsone Clan."

Creed inhaled sharply. "My people."

"What do you mean?" Lila asked.

"My name is Creed Larson." Creed watched as something akin to awe filled Lila's features. "Then it's true the last of the demon line has come to claim his eternal soul."

"And that would be me," Hollow added with a flourish of his hand.

Lila paled. "Then that means all hell is going to break loose and destroy the world as we know it. We need to call in the others and fill them in on what's going on." Before Creed or Hollow could say anything, Lila jumped up and raced from the room.

"What the hell was that about?" Creed asked as he stared after her departing form. "And why do I get the feeling that the shit is about to hit the fan?"

“Because it probably is.” Hollow sighed. “I’d like just one day where things run smoothly. I wonder if Rose and Timothy know the staff are like their own army.”

“You and me both.” Creed let out a breath that he hadn’t even known he’d been holding. “Are you telling me you had no clue about your staff?”

Hollow closed the book he had out and placed it carefully back into position on the lined drawer where it was normally kept. “No, I guess I’m so used to the staff being here that they come second nature to me. Let’s go and tell the others what we just heard. Maybe they can make sense of it all.”

Creed followed behind Hollow, mainly so he could take the opportunity to stare at his mate’s arse. This was one part of Hollow’s body that Creed could happily watch for hours on end. The weirdness filling their lives of late should have, in reality, pushed a wedge between their mating, but instead it seemed to be drawing them even closer together. Which was probably something else that would set off their unknown assailant.

The office space set up for the Conrads’ use had just come into view when Lila raced up to them. “Give us twenty minutes and we’ll have everyone assembled. It’ll take that long for some people in the family to get here.”

That would just give Hollow and Creed time to fill in the others before a full-on meeting with the whole household got underway. Creed had to wonder just how many people knew about the Vandiver Coven, and what they were willing to do to protect it. For some reason Creed believed the employees who worked for Hollow, both present and past, knew far more than they were letting on, and he for one couldn’t wait to hear what it was.

Chapter Eight

“Fuck!” Rose swore loudly after Hollow and Creed had filled them in. The strange thing was Hollow knew exactly how his friend was feeling.

Hollow still was having some difficulty believing how everything he'd always thought was true was turning out to be so far from reality that he'd have to rewire his brain to take it all in. Better yet, he was slowly coming to realise that his coven consisted of more than just the last three vampires of his line. The knowledge that they weren't alone touched him more than he could say.

“Mr Vandiver, we're ready for you,” Lila said quietly from the doorway.

Hollow nodded and took a hold of Creed's hand in support as he followed Lila through the house to the old ballroom. Once there he was surprised by just how many humans were gathered, waiting. Some faces he instantly recognised as past employees, some were the younger generation. Others, while he knew they had never worked for him in any capacity, also held similarities in features such that he knew without a doubt they were relatives of his employees.

Lila was standing at the front of the group, her parents standing to either side of her. She indicated for everyone to sit down in the chairs that had been set up. A line of seven chairs faced towards a semicircle of twenty-three chairs. “As I told you before, we, the humans entrusted with the knowledge of your existence, have all sworn fealty to your coven. This is something we all did willingly, though I think I'll let my father take over now, as he is kind of the leader of us all.”

“Where would you like me to start?” Mark Fitzroy said as he leant forwards in his chair.

“The beginning would probably be a good place,” Hollow stated. He could feel the anxiety filling the room.

Mark nodded. “I know Lila explained to you how the stone was given over to the Larsons Demon Clan. Our people never saw young Conrad again. Though word came through that the mission had been accomplished, and Conrad had taken employment elsewhere. The rumour was he stayed with the demons until the day he died. He swore fealty to the Larsons Clan to watch over their members until their curse could be lifted.”

As fascinating as this was, Hollow wished Mark would get to the bones of the story. He needed to know how all this was relevant with what was

happening today. Hollow remained quiet as Mark Fitzroy continued on with the tale.

“What no one realised back then was Lord Synderman was so far gone in his madness, he was never able to recover from the loss of the stone. His kin came and took care of him as best they could, which means they locked him away and refused to let anyone else see the man. Each and every person born into the Synderman line eventually succumbed to the same madness.”

Ellery asked, “Was it hereditary or did something else cause the madness?”

Mark shrugged. “More than likely it was something predestined to happen to the Synderman line at one point or another. But our families believed the stone was the epicentre of all their problems. The stone was troubled—cursed if you will.”

“What happened to the family? Did the Synderman line die out?” Hollow asked, an idea forming in his head.

“No. To get away from the stigma of the Synderman name, the last two heirs took their families from the estate and fled. They changed their names and did everything they could to distance themselves from the troubled curse that had befallen their family.”

So many thoughts were running around inside his head that Hollow didn't know where to start, or what question to ask first? Thankfully others didn't have that problem.

“Please tell me you know the new identities Lord Synderman's descendants took?” Ellery asked. His fingers already flying over the laptop keyboard—hell, Hollow didn't even know he'd brought the device with him from the office.

Again Mark nodded. “From the records our family kept. The two brothers changed their family names to Synn and Derman. Together they made sure to keep their heritage, yet distance themselves at the same time.”

A pit formed in the centre of Hollow's gut. “Then I know where to start looking.”

His gaze met the worried faces of Rose and Timothy. Instantly knowing they realised the exact same thing he had. The maker of their security wards was Lance Derman. And his last date had been Helena Synn. More than likely the family was back together and trying to get their hands on the stone once more. He wondered if Helena knew how close she had been to the damn thing.

“Didn’t you say that Derman was the guy who did your wards for the house?” Ellery asked.

Ethan interrupted. “What I’d like to know is, if you are all descended from the people who served Lord Synderman, then how is it you are now working for the Vandiver Coven?”

Hollow mentally slapped himself—that was a very good question indeed.

“We followed the stone,” an elderly woman said from the far right. “Our families may have sworn loyalty to the Vandiver Coven, but before they came here, they had sworn another oath among themselves.”

“And just what was that oath?” Ethan asked.

“That the troubled stone would never ever enter into the hands of the Synderman family line. Like Mark said, maybe they were destined to all be mad as hatters, but the stone ignited such an evil inside of that family, our families have entrusted us to make sure the evil-that-was never rises again.”

Hollow had to wonder if his own ancestors knew about everything that had happened way back when. He was lost in his own thoughts when someone else in the group spoke up.

“It was our people who suggested to the Vandiver line that they take possession of the stone, unbeknown to them at the time that a new curse emerged every time the stone passed from one family to the other.”

Anger or something akin to it flashed in Creed’s eyes. “My family lost every male member when they turned thirty. I am the last of the Larsone Clan. By giving them the stone, you condemned them all to die.”

“That was not our intent,” another stated.

Everything he had been dreaming of for centuries was now upon him and was going down the shit chute faster than Hollow could blink. Reaching out he took his mate’s hand within his own and squeezed it gently in comfort.

“So what do we do now?” Rose asked. “If Derman has indeed left himself a way to gain entry into our home, we need to figure out another measure to secure this house. We—”

Lila interrupted. “We may have a solution for that problem.” She turned and gestured for a man Hollow had never seen before to speak.

“My name is Bronnick Hayes. I’m descended from the druids of old. My line is strong in the magical elements of our religion. I know it may seem

strange to most, but we've always followed the old ways—minus the blood sacrifices, that is. Some things were beyond barbaric and just plain unnecessary.”

Hollow shuddered inwardly. All three species could say there were things in their pasts that were beyond comprehension sometimes, especially with how brutal they were in nature. Right now he needed to know what Bronnick could do for him.

“What can you do to help?”

Bronnick chuckled, and it sounded as cold as ice. “I’m going to tear down what he has in place and put up my own special warning system. When his walls come down, he will feel it. The pain won’t cripple him for long, but it will let him know that you now have someone just as strong—if not stronger—than he is.”

Hollow sat and listened as each of those present recalled bits and pieces from the history of their family, especially if it pertained to Lord Synderman.

Chapter Nine

A little over a week later Creed stood off to one side of the room with Hollow as they, along with everyone else, watched and waited while Bronnick did his thing. The air was buzzing with electricity as Bronnick recited the spell to break down Derman's ward. All he hoped was Bronnick could have his own spell in place to keep people away before anyone attacked the house.

Hollow had also insisted that his human guards—or so Creed had been calling them—move into a hall that sat on the coven estate and prepare for what was coming. Bronnick had explained once the spell was broken and Derman realised what was happening, they would up their ante. Mark had agreed wholeheartedly with moving everyone to the Vandiver Hall, but not for the same reasons Hollow had. Hollow wanted to keep everyone safe, while Mark and his people were determined to keep Hollow and the stone safely out of the enemy's hands. Now that was something Creed also wanted, mind you. He just wanted to keep Hollow and everyone else there safe.

The air surrounding them shimmered and pulsed as Bronnick's magic seemed to battle with Derman's for dominance. Really, the display was a thing of pure beauty, and it was obvious Bronnick knew exactly what he was doing. Bronnick had explained that he needed everyone present at the time of the changeover for two reasons: Firstly, he needed his own magic to recognise and bond with those who would be living on the coven estate. Secondly, he would be drawing some of the power needed from everyone's energy. According to Bronnick, the procedure wouldn't harm anyone, but it would definitely make the spell so much stronger.

"It is done," Bronnick stated tiredly as he slumped down into a nearby chair. Lila immediately went over to lend her assistance.

"He's going to come at us stronger and faster isn't he?" Eliza asked the room in general.

Creed nodded. "Yes."

Sighing, Eliza rolled her neck as if trying to relieve some kink. "Then it's time to do what we do best."

"You want us to steal something now?" Ellery blurted out. "What? Why?"

"No, idiot. I want us to come up with a damn plan to keep everyone safe. Not that I'm doubting the witch's powers, but on the off chance the shit hits the fan, I don't want to be blindsided by the damn spray."

"I'm a druid. Not a witch."

"Whatevs," Eliza said as she turned on her heel and stormed from the room.

What the hell is this all about? Creed had never before seen Eliza blow someone off like she had just done to Bronnick. Usually she was Miss Cool, Calm, and Collected. Creed was starting to get a hinky feeling about the whole situation.

"I'll be back in a moment. I need to go talk with Eliza for a second," Creed whispered to Hollow before he followed the young woman he'd always classed as his sister out of the room. By the time he'd caught up to her, she was back in her office. "Talk to me. Why are you so angry? What's going on?"

Eliza frowned for a moment. "Our lives have changed so much in the last month. Ever since we started planning out the heist to retrieve the damn necklace, everything changed. We were supposed to do the job and get away. I had plans to be sitting on some sunny beach somewhere, sipping frou-frou drinks with one of those tiny stupid paper umbrellas. Instead, we're stuck here, and everything is all fucked up."

There was no way Creed could disagree with her. She was only telling the truth. Their whole world had spun off its axis when the past came reeling in to slam them all upside the head. Some part of Creed also believed it was a wake-up call they drastically needed.

"You're right. Things have changed, and if there was any way I could reach back into the past and change things so none of this was necessary, I would. I never even believed in the stupid Larson Legacy. Not until Ellery forced everything he'd found into my mind where it could fester. I would have died and been none the wiser just thinking it was bloody bad luck or something. But the thing is. *This* is happening for a reason. We can all either stand by until whatever happens comes to fruition, or we can try and turn things to our advantage. Make sure the right side wins."

Creed was frustrated with himself, figuring he wasn't explain this right. How was he supposed to explain it to someone else when he didn't quite understand it himself?

"I get what you're saying. I really do," Eliza stated softly. "Nobody wants the world to end. I just don't want us all to become murderers to achieve the end result we want."

"We won't become murderers," Creed chuckled. *What the fuck is she on about?*

Eliza tilted her head and stared at him with her are-you-for-real look. "You have to be bloody stupid if you think this is all going to end without someone dying in the process. No spell, no matter how strong the maker is, will prevent there from being at least some casualties. All wars have them."

Again she was right, and Creed knew it. His gut twisted in anguish as he prayed like hell they didn't lose anybody on their side. Even the people he'd only just met were quickly becoming like extended family to him.

"I'm not stupid, Eliza. I know war is a horrible thing. I'm probably being overly optimistic by hoping we can find a solution before it comes to bloodshed. You know what I'm like around all that gore." He said the last jokingly, and it had the right effect.

Eliza threw her head back and laughed. "Our luck someone gets hurt in the heat of the battle, and the mighty Creed Larson—demon extraordinaire—passes out the second the red stuff starts flowing."

"Are you saying my mate has a weak stomach?" Hollow said from the doorway. The smile on his face showed he wasn't angry.

"Your mate may be as tough as a brick shithouse, but he turns into a swooning damsel at the sight of blood. He's been that way for as long as I've known him," she answered.

Creed could see the curiosity and mirth in Hollow's eyes. It must be funny as fuck for a vampire to find out his mate is squeamish around blood. Hell, he was probably the laughing stock of the whole demon world right about now.

"Hollow's afraid of spiders," Rose stated as she walked into the room followed by Timothy and Eliza's brothers.

A flush crossed Hollow's beautiful face, but it quickly dissipated. "That would be because those freaky little buggers have eight legs and are fast as fuck."

"Don't worry, my love, I'll save you from the creepy crawlies that venture your way." Creed smiled, something he felt like he hadn't done enough of since this whole saga started playing out.

Come what may, Creed knew when all was said and done he wanted to spend the rest of his life making the people who mattered in his life happy. Somehow it felt like they were all along on this crazy-arsed ride that had no safe end in sight. Eliza had been right when she said they needed to start planning shit out. If they went at this like they did each time they were setting up a heist, Creed knew they would come up with something workable. This was

something Ethan was brilliant at. He had a way of thinking things through so that they all fell neatly into place and went off without a hitch.

The voices in the room became a white noise to Creed's ear as a thought crossed his mind and made itself at home. "I know you said there are other covens out there, but what about demon clans? I'm wondering if they would be willing to join the fight if they knew the existence of the world was at stake."

The three vampires in the room stilled and stared at him, and in a weird way it was freaking him out. Did the covens and clans not intermingle? That notion seemed kind of idiotic in the grand scheme of things. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No. You said something right," Rose stated. "We're just kicking ourselves that we didn't think of it first. The covens around the world have dwindled down to only a hundred or so vampires still alive. And more often than not we keep to ourselves."

"That seems like a bloody stupid idea. You would think with so few remaining you would be jumping at the chance to help each other out," Ellery interjected.

"You would think that, but we are a stodgy lot that are set in our ways," Hollow supplied.

"Then it's time you pulled the sticks out of your proverbial arses and started communicating. Other covens may have more news on the Synderman line. Maybe they are even having their own troubles with the humans," Ellery pointed out.

It was obvious now, yet Creed didn't think the vampires would have ever considered the thought of interacting with other covens. "Why don't you ask Mark? I bet they might keep in contact with the employees at other covens. They seem to be aware enough to have eyes and ears all over the world. I mean, they have to be getting their information from somewhere."

"I'm on it," Timothy said before he left the room with Ellery hot on his heels.

For a fragment of a second Creed realised their lives were now forever changed, and he wished it could all go back to the way it once was. Once that fraction of a second passed by, Creed looked at Hollow and knew things were happening exactly as they needed to, and Creed was right where he needed to be.

Chapter Ten

The world kept on spinning, and Hollow was aware more than ever their lives were now fully engaged in the new path they were set upon. Weirdly, once they had made the initial contact with various covens, more and more information was trickling in, and Hollow was finally starting to see the bigger picture. It would seem their family wasn't the only one being sought after by the descendants of the Synderman line. And more than one coven had their security done by Lance Derman's company—a situation that would soon be rectified.

"What are you thinking so hard about?" Creed asked as he rolled over in their bed.

Hollow had spent the last couple of hours fully awake and staring at the ceiling as he tried to piece everything together. "I don't think the other side knows which coven has the stone, or stones, as the case now is. I think they are watching each coven in hopes of accidentally stumbling across the piece of information they need to give them the final clue."

"Wasn't Helena wearing the necklace at the ball? Wouldn't she have felt the power of the stones?"

"Not if she didn't know what she was looking for. What if they don't know my family had the stone broken up and set into jewellery? Helena might have been a scheming, money-hungry bitch, but she didn't seem like the sharpest crayon in the box. She relied more on her looks to get what she wanted than anything else. She may have been set in place to keep an eye on my coven, but personally she was after my wealth—not the necklace. In fact when I first offered it to her to wear, she didn't want to. She thought the necklace was too gaudy."

"What an idiot," Creed chuckled. "I wonder what she'd say if she knew just how close she'd been to the prize."

"Like I said, not the sharpest crayon in the box." Hollow sighed. "Mind you, Helena never appeared to be insane. Maybe the family trait for madness hadn't truly kicked in yet."

"They say you can never really spot the dangerous ones in the crowd. We just have to assume she knows exactly what her family is after. If we let our guard down, that's when they'll strike the hardest."

Hollow knew where Creed was coming from. He just wished they could sort this out any way other than fighting. If it came down to a war for dominance, then too many innocent people would become caught up in something they didn't fully understand.

"Let's get up. I'm sure Annaliese has breakfast under way." Now that Hollow knew his staff were more than mere staff, he was taking the time to get to know them on a more personal level. Annaliese was Lila's mother and had run his kitchens since her own mother had passed the responsibility onto her. In a strange sort of way, he realised his staff were more like squires in history who cared for and tended to their knight's needs—not that he really saw himself as a knight.

"Yeah, and I'm sure Ellery and Timothy have a whole fresh lot of information they want to share with us all. I swear to God those two get excited over the weirdest shit these days," Creed said as he climbed out of the bed.

Hollow was in total agreement with his mate. Every damn morning at breakfast it felt like they were all back in school as Ellery filled them in on what they'd found in the research. As important as it was for them to be up to date on all information, sometimes Hollow wished for a peaceful breakfast with regular family gossip rather than the in-depth details of the enemy. The more he learned about both the Derman and Synn lines, the more he came to realise the descendants of Lord Synderman were idiots. For some reason Hollow got the feeling both families were coming after the stone, not because they desperately wanted the thing back, but because it had been instilled in their very essence that they needed to reclaim what was once theirs. When he'd explained this to the others, Rose and Ethan had pointed out that was what made them all the more dangerous—wars for stupid reasons were usually the most brutal.

The kitchen was already alive with conversation as he and Creed made their way into the room. Breakfast had also become the time when the staff reported in on what news they had garnered from elsewhere.

"About time you got here," Rose snapped as Hollow and Creed took their seats at the table.

"Don't start on me, Rose. I haven't even had my first coffee yet," Hollow retorted.

"You don't even drink coffee."

"That's beside the point. Saying it that way sounds manlier than saying I haven't had my first green tea yet."

The others in the room snickered at the conversation, yet Hollow sighed in contentment as soon as Annaliese handed him his cup of tea and he'd taken his first sip. Every person had their vice, and his happened to be green tea.

"Okay, now that you have your precious tea, let's get this meeting underway," Ellery said as Mark came to the table and joined them. It seemed almost funny that the staff were so much more at home in his household. The strange thing was, Hollow didn't think he would change it one iota.

Mark started the meeting. His face was grim, and Hollow didn't think he was going to like whatever it was he was about to hear. "It would seem Helena must have finally figured out what the necklace was the night you both went to the Swan Ball. That or maybe you were into her more than she realised. She's under the impression you must care for her if you would leave her with so much other expensive jewellery and only take the horribly gaudy necklace. They were her words, not mine."

"How do you know this?" Hollow asked.

"Because she has been calling here at least once every hour. I'm not even sure the woman sleeps. She's like clockwork," Lila answered.

Hollow frowned; this was all news to him. "What does she want?"

"She just keeps demanding to speak with you. It's like she's obsessed with the need to get you on the line."

"Probably the crazy coming out in her," Ellery stated matter-of-factly.

More than likely he was right. Maybe he should just talk to the woman and get it over and done with—not that he was interested in her in any way other than her coming from the Synderman line.

"What are we going to do? Should I talk to her and find out what she wants?"

"As strange as this sounds, I think she wants you, or more so, access to your money. It would seem the younger generation isn't as hardcore about the stone as they should be." Mark carded his fingers through his hair. "I'm starting to believe they don't even know what the stone is for."

"All except one," Creed said as he joined the conversation. "The person we've both sensed watching us is malevolent in feel. That person knows exactly what the stone is and what it's capable of doing."

“Creed’s right. Whoever is watching us is evil. I’m going to hazard a guess and say this comes from the Derman side of the family line. Whoever it is out there is more calculating than some mere airheaded wannabe movie starlet with grandeurs of becoming the next Mrs Vandiver. And I can tell you that’s never going to happen.”

Reaching over, Hollow took hold of Creed’s hand and squeezed gently. He just wasn’t sure who he was trying to reassure more, Creed or himself.

“I think you should let slip to the tabloids that you are off the market and no longer in the running as the world’s most eligible bachelor. Maybe then she’ll get it through her head,” Rose said.

“I’m not going to put mine and Creed’s life on display just to get rid of some bimbo with more boobs than brains.”

Ellery flushed brightly. “Yeah, that story might have already left the presses and hit the newsstands.”

“What have you done?” Creed demanded.

“I may have rang Russ at the *Chronicle* and given him a heads-up. I also might have emailed him a picture or two to give the story some credit.”

Hollow should be angry. He knew he should be, but for some reason, right now it just seemed like too much energy. Instead he asked, “What pictures did you use?”

“I took one of you and Creed holding hands, and another one when you had come home from the ball. You were still fully dressed in your tux, but Creed had removed his jacket, his tie was undone and he was standing very close behind you. His hands were on your waist and he was just about to rest his cheek against your shoulder. They are quite tasteful even if I do say so myself. Do you wanna see them?”

Before Hollow could answer or Ellery had time to pull the pictures up on his phone, Lila dropped the morning edition of the paper on the table in front of him. There in all its glory was a huge photo of them both with the bold headline: ***Holland Vandiver Has Finally Been Caught***. Shit, talk about a misleading headline. He didn’t even read the story underneath before he was pushing the damn paper away.

Shaking his head at Ellery’s antics, he heard both cursing and snickering throughout the room, along with the distinct sound of Ellery having the back of

his head slapped, as Eliza growled, “I bet you came up with that idiotic title as well.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Ellery demanded.

And again Hollow shook his head—*Family!*

Chapter Eleven

The hardest part in this for Creed was trying to figure out how he could still sense Derman, who they'd gotten confirmation as the guy who was gunning for them and was still able to watch them. Not all the time, but every now and then he got the feeling Derman had eyes and maybe ears within the walls of the Vandiver Hall.

Their suspicion on who was heading the other side was brought out in the open when, three days ago, Derman had rung Hollow, demanding the stone be returned to his family. His mate had placed the call on loudspeaker so everyone could hear what was being said. It both shocked and saddened Creed to learn that Derman had been going around and systematically wiping out any demon clan he came across for their part in the whole theft of the jewel. He was pissed off that Derman thought he had every right to do what he was doing.

"What would happen if we destroyed the stone altogether? Would the world cease if we just got rid of the damn thing?" Creed asked the room at large. "I mean, Hollow and I have mated, and the stone is in my hands. Shouldn't that at least have some sway over the outcome? If the stone is destroyed, then wouldn't that stop it from ever falling into Derman's hands?"

"I don't think it works that way, love," Hollow said with a touch of weariness in his voice. "I wish it was as simple as destroying it and ending our troubles."

Ethan added his two cents worth. "You all know there is only one possible outcome. We need to cut the head off the hydra, so to speak, before it has a chance to throw all its power against us."

"You're talking about murdering a man," Eliza snapped.

"Yes I am," Ethan answered calmly. "I want to kill a man who would bring about the destruction of all we know if he ever gets his hands on the stone. He might not understand what he's doing, and I for one never want to give him the opportunity of finding out just how powerful he could be. I happen to like my damn life."

"I'm with Ethan on this one," Creed added. "It's now becoming kill or be killed. Bronnick tells me Derman makes a play against our shields every day. He might not be as strong as Bronnick, but I get the feeling he's a cunning bastard who is just biding his time until he finds Bronnick's weakness."

“He needs to be taken out before he has the chance to kill off any more demons. Hell, now that he knows for sure we are in possession of the stone, he might just wipe out all demons and vampires on principle, just as a show of his twisted might,” Mark said before turning to Hollow and adding, “We’ve sent word out telling all those who seek refuge to contact us so arrangements can be made to secrete them away from the world.”

“Do we even have a place where we can keep everyone safe?” Eliza asked.

Hollow nodded. “Yes, this isn’t the only property my family owns. Bronnick has had his brethren out securing the others so they may be used as safe houses until this all comes to an end.”

“And just what end do you think that will be?” Eliza asked.

This time Creed answered. “We’ll win of course.”

“How do you know that?” Eliza demanded.

Creed smiled at her. Hopefully it came off as comforting. “I know this because none of us are bat-shit crazy like he is. We can think more logically.”

“Besides,” Rose added, “we’re going to kick his arse before he even realises what hit him.” Her grin was feral and oddly reassuring at the same time. “He’s relying on his power to help his cause, where we, on the other hand, don’t fight fair. We’ve already sent people out to apprehend him and bring him here to us. Okay, more like they will call when they locate his current whereabouts, and I’ll go and collect him.”

Okay, so maybe Creed didn’t know that little fact, nor did he totally agree with what was about to happen. “Why in hell would you bring the man closer to the very thing he seeks?”

“Haven’t you ever heard the saying ‘keep your friends close but your enemies closer’? I figure it’s damn obvious. If Derman is here in our custody, there’s no way he can destroy the world.”

Somehow her logic seemed off by just a fraction. “Did you even listen to what came out of your mouth?” Creed asked.

Before Creed could say more, Hollow placed a hand on his shoulder and spoke. “I think she’s talking in code, love. What she’s really trying to say is she will bring him here and kill him with everyone being none the wiser as to what has happened.”

“When you go after him, I want to be there,” Creed demanded.

"As you wish." Rose smiled evilly.

A cold shiver raced the length of Creed's spine as he got a glimmer of just how vicious Rose could possibly be. "You do know how scary you are right now?"

"I never claimed to be anything but," she answered.

"Are you the scariest one in the house?" Ellery asked, in apparent curiosity.

"No. Hollow is the scariest one here, then me, and then Rose. Put us together and we are unstoppable," Timothy declared.

Creed had no reason to doubt the man, especially when most of the humans present were all nodding in agreement. Oddly, the fact that he was now mated to the scariest man in the room didn't sound that bad. Not that he ever wanted to be in the forefront when his mate's bad-arse attitude came out, nor did he ever want it to be aimed his way.

"And after Rose it would be Bronnick," Lila added. "He may not look strong, but his magical abilities place him in the same league as our resident vampires."

"What about demons. Aren't they just as vicious?" Ellery asked.

Now this was something Creed was interested in hearing the answer to. When everyone remained silent he asked, "What?"

"The fact is, and this makes the murders of the clans all the more fucked up, is that demons are by and large a peaceful people. The only known conflict the demons have ever been involved in is the one that occurred between the demons and vampires through human instigation, before the humans decided to prove themselves the most dominant species of all three. I'm not saying vampires and demons were without fault, but when we realised just how much the demons were pacifists, we were too late to join forces and take on the human forces. Instead we scattered and went into hiding to save our own arses," Rose explained in a full-on and long-winded way.

"Huh!" Ellery said aloud. "That explains so much about Creed. He always steers clear of the violence, which made it all the more weird when he sided with Ethan about killing Derman."

Creed blushed when everyone stared at him.

"Sometimes people just need to die," Timothy supplied as he nodded in Creed's direction.

Creed knew the man was giving him an out, and he was grateful for it. Before he could say anything, Rose's phone chirruped seconds before she answered it.

Looking straight at Hollow, she said, "They've found Derman. Are you coming with us or staying here?"

"I'm going with you of course. Derman has threatened my coven. I need to be there when he has his downfall. No one threatens my coven and gets away with it," Hollow all but snarled.

Creed started at the ferocity on his mate's face and could see why Timothy had said earlier that Hollow was the scariest among them. It took everything in him not to take a step back so he was out of reach. Taking a deep breath, he spoke. "I'm going too. This is aimed at the both of us, and I want to see it through to the end. I don't want to have the worry of this hanging over us for the rest of eternity."

Rose and Timothy nodded, and Creed wasn't surprised when all three Conrad siblings announced they were going along for the ride. Without saying the words, Creed knew—family sticks together, no matter what.

Chapter Twelve

Hollow couldn't believe how close Derman had set up shop to Vandiver Hall. It wasn't even a thirty-minute commute between the two. "Why the hell would he consider being this close to us? Was he trying to get caught?"

"His powers probably needed the proximity. I don't think Derman is magically capable of being far away from his ongoing spells," Bronnick explained from the back seat.

"What do you mean ongoing?" Ellery asked as they pulled up a block away from Derman's current residence.

Bronnick got out of the vehicle and leant against the bonnet as they waited for the other cars to pull up. "Spells come in various forms. One way is you cast a spell and it's done—set into place permanently until it is dissolved. Another way is you cast the spell, and then you need to keep topping it up to keep it going. This is more based on a spell where the caster—like Derman—is playing peek-a-boo with wherever he's supposed to be guarding."

"So he really was spying on us?" Creed asked.

"It would have been easier for him that way. Any mirror would have given him a gateway in. Think of it something like a two-way mirror: he could see you, but you wouldn't have seen him."

"Like in an interrogation room at a police station," Ellery chimed in.

"Exactly," Bronnick agreed.

When everyone had assembled, Rose and Ethan gave them all instructions on how they were going to hit Derman. Hollow wanted to go in hard and fast and forget about all the stealth bullshit, yet he could understand the need to have Bronnick take down any spell in their way. Less chance of anyone getting hurt.

The closer they got to the house where Derman was living, the more determined Hollow was that today everything was going to end. One way or the other they were going to find out who would be the victor, and God help the world if Derman came out on top.

Before the ward between them and their enemy fell, Hollow sensed Derman was watching them. The anger pouring off the man was tangible. Hollow realised, by the ease in which Bronnick was tearing the ward to shreds, that

Derman wasn't even trying to save his spells. No sooner had the wards of protection fallen when the truth hit him. There was more than just Derman in the house. It would seem that Derman had gathered all of his kin to him.

"Derman. Show yourself," Hollow yelled towards the front of the house. The silence hung in the air, yet Hollow knew the other man was watching and waiting for what Hollow was going to do next.

Hollow was a little shocked when Creed picked up a rock and hurled it through one of the stained-glass windows adorning the front of the house. A howl from inside brought a smile to Hollow's face. At least the first stone had been cast—so to speak—and by that sound of anguish they'd heard, someone had been on the receiving end of Creed's little present.

Creed bent and picked up another stone, but before he could chuck it, the broken window exploded, and a lean man with blood trickling from his scalp appeared. "You will pay for that, demon."

"You want me, come and get me," Creed snarled before he pegged the stone in his hand and hit the guy right between the eyes. It was funny when the guy's eyes rolled back in his head and he slowly crumpled to the ground.

Somewhere in the house, a high-pitched scream of rage let Hollow know Helena was inside and not happy about whoever had been knocked out. His feet were moving as soon as he saw her launch her petite form out the same window and land beside the crumpled form. Gone was the beautiful up-and-coming movie starlet, and now standing in her place was someone dressed in all black and weaponed up.

Hollow ducked as she flew through the air towards him, two short blades drawn and aimed at his throat as if her sole intent was separating his head from his shoulders. Before she could make contact, Creed had tackled her to the ground. Their collision had Creed cursing, and by the smell of blood, Hollow knew his mate had been wounded.

Fury raged through Hollow when he saw the hilt of a dagger imbedded in Creed's side. She was going to pay for hurting what was his. By the time he reached Creed's side, he was too late. He dropped to his knees as the distinct sound of his mate snapping her neck sounded loud.

"You did the right thing." Hollow grabbed Creed into a hard hug moments before Bronnick reached them and pulled the dagger free. The druid pressed the palm of his hand against the wound, and when he removed it, the flow of blood had stopped and the hole in Creed's side was a fine pink scar.

“You know Derman is using these people as cannon fodder, don’t you?” Bronnick whispered. “I’ve tried searching for his magical print, and it seems to be moving away from the dwelling.”

Hollow snapped his head up and stared at Bronnick. “He’s going after the necklace, isn’t he?”

“That would be my guess. I hope like hell wherever you have the necklace, it’s safe and well out of the reach of other people’s hands,” Bronnick said.

Getting to his feet, Hollow called for his force to fall back. “Derman is going after the stone. We need to get back to Vandiver Hall. We need to go home and protect our people.”

After grabbing his mate up into his arms, Hollow carried Creed back to where they’d left the car. Eliza was there and already fussing over Creed before Hollow could slide him into the back seat of the car. Creed was trying to push her away, and she wasn’t having any of it. When Creed looked towards him with desperation for help in his eyes, Hollow understood her worry, and instead mouthed at his mate, “Let her help.”

When he turned to move to the other side of the car, Hollow ran into Ethan. “If he breaches the hall, will he be able to get his hands on the necklace? We’ve gone through too much to ensure Creed lives to see his thirty-first birthday for him to up and die now.”

“Only two people have the combination to my safe; I’m one, and Creed is the other,” Hollow answered truthfully. Turning, he looked back the way they’d come and realised Rose and Timothy weren’t in sight. He knew they weren’t dead because, as the coven leader, he would have felt their deaths rip through him, should they have passed out of this world and into the next. “Where are Rose and Timothy?”

“They stayed behind to round up all the loose ends. I never believed how ruthless they could be until I saw them in action,” Ethan answered.

Hollow nodded before sliding into the other side of the car. He grabbed Creed’s hand as Eliza and Ethan jumped into the front seats and started the car. If Derman had truly breached Vandiver Hall, the idiot had signed his own death warrant. Hollow would take that son of a bitch down as fast as he could blink.

Hollow realised Creed had been right, Bronnick’s wards were still in place, yet there was a small opening, enough for someone to slide through. The front door of Vandiver Hall was blasted open, and one of the large wooden doors

was hanging by one hinge. The place itself was quiet—too quiet. Letting his senses roam through the building, he found himself drawn towards his office.

The room was darker than usual, and Hollow entered slowly, making sure he was ready for what was waiting. He never expected Derman to be sitting in one of the office chairs, nor did he like the fact that he had Lila kneeling on the floor, just in front of him, with a pistol pointed at the back of her head. Lila didn't look scared—she looked pissed off to the max. The left side of her face had a dark bruise forming. And her lip was split. When Hollow studied Derman, he saw the man had scratch marks on his face, so he knew at least Lila had fought hard before she was taken hostage.

"It's about damn time you figured out where I was. I thought I was going to have to wait here for hours, and that would have given me plenty of time to entertain your druid's whore." The manic gleam in Derman's eyes showed the man had well and truly lost the plot.

Hollow sensed the others standing in the hall just outside the door and away from Derman's view. "What do you want?" Hollow asked calmly.

"I want the stone of course. I want what belongs to my family."

"Why?"

"Why what?" Derman appeared confused.

"Why do you want the stone? What do you hope to gain by it?" Hollow asked. As he waited for the answer, Hollow studied the man he had once considered his friend.

"I want to restore my ancestor's good name. Lord Synderman was a great man who was well loved by all who knew him. I want to punish the people who were there at his downfall."

Hollow tilted his head to the side. He couldn't believe how stupid Derman was proving himself to be. "You do realise your ancestor was completely nuts, don't you? He was so far gone that his own servants helped to bring him down."

Deep hatred emanated from Derman, and he did exactly as Hollow had hoped. In a fit of fury, he pushed Lila out of his way before jumping to his feet. He brought the gun up and levelled it at Hollow's head. Hollow kept Derman focused solely on him as Lila got to her feet and quietly moved behind Derman and snapped the man's neck before he had time to depress his finger upon the trigger. The last emotion to cross Derman's face was a look of surprise, as if he couldn't believe he was being bested.

Before Derman's body had even hit the floor, the others flooded into the room with Creed at the lead. Hollow just had enough time to open his arms before Creed hurled himself into the embrace.

"It's over. I can't believe that it's over."

Hollow hugged his mate tightly and quickly led him from the room. Right now, in this moment, he needed to feel they were both alive. He needed to be buried balls deep inside his mate as they claimed each other once more, and by the speed with which Creed was walking, Hollow knew his mate needed the same thing.

Later—much later—he would find out from everyone exactly what had gone down. He would find out where the hell the rest of his staff was being held. He'd find out what Rose and Timothy had done when they remained behind, and how they'd cleaned up the site of the fight they had begun and quickly abandoned. He'd also find out how they disposed of Derman's body. But right now he had a mate to reacquaint himself with, and he didn't feel like sharing that moment with anyone. On the way, he nodded at Ethan and knew the elder Conrad sibling would make sure he and Creed were not disturbed.

He was finally going to find out what it felt like to have Creed's beard rubbed all over his body.

The End

Author Bio

NJ needs to write like she needs to breathe. It's an addiction she never intends to find a cure for. When you don't find NJ arguing with Vlad, her muse, or writing about the wonderful men in her stories, you'll find her reading work by other authors she greatly admires. NJ lives on five acres situated in the SE of Qld, Australia with her family, who all encourage her writing career even if she does occasionally call them by her characters' names, and her variety of pets. NJ thinks anyone who takes the time to read her stuff is totally awesome, and wants to thank you all.

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