

Chapter One

Ariel sat perched on a large chair in front of the bank of security monitors. She was studying them for movement. At least when Dimitri did something, he did it right. If someone was in the forest, she would see them. Montgomery Incorporated was the best security company around. Installing cameras right into the trees had been brilliant. Nobody could come within 200 yards of the cabin without being recorded. It was twilight now, but with the sun falling below the horizon it was only a matter of minutes before darkness would settle over the entire area. Ariel glanced around the small security room. She'd left all of the interior lights off when she entered the cabin. She didn't want whoever or whatever was out there to know where she was hiding. She'd only caught a glimpse of movement as she exited her car, but that was enough to put her on alert. The security room had a small window but the blinds were shut. Very little light seeped into the room. It was going to be dark soon. Ariel hated small dark rooms. They reminded her of that room, the terrible cold room so long ago. She checked the monitors again, watching closely for the slightest movement. There it was again. A white streak ran across the screen. They couldn't be vampires, could they? Another light figure flew across the edge of the monitor. It was moving too fast to determine its identity. Could it be a vampire? Vampires couldn't go out in the sun, they would eventually burn to death if they tried. Ariel's gaze moved to the steel door, it was bolted shut. She should be safe here. The metal door would keep intruders at bay, too bad it couldn't lock out memories of her past. She'd just have to concentrate on something else.

Ariel remembered hearing about a group of vampires that tried to go out on an overcast day. They were fine as long as the sun didn't peak through the clouds. Direct sunlight would kill them. It would burn them to death, but not instantly. She'd heard it was a slow painful death. That experiment had been centuries ago. As far as she knew, nobody had tried it since. The consequence of failure was too severe. Would the shadows from the trees protect a vampire if they wanted to hide in the forest? Had Radek, the vampire King, become so desperate he was now sending his vampires out during the day? Ariel hoped that wasn't the case. It was bad enough fighting them after dark. But, if those things in the forest weren't vampires, what were they?

Movement crossed two separate monitors at the same time. So whatever was out there, it wasn't alone. She could be facing multiple attackers, again. The fear of the unknown was causing her imagination to kick into overdrive. It would be different this time, she had powers now. Ariel stood and began to pace the room. She had to keep moving. The memories were starting to flood her mind. She didn't want to relive that awful incident again. Not tonight. Not out here in this cabin in the middle of nowhere. She closed her eyes and began counting to ten.

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Bad idea, she could still see the dirty, grungy men standing over her naked body. The smell of whiskey was strong on their breaths. “No,” she said aloud. She wouldn’t go back there. It had happened so long ago. You would think the memory would fade with time and eventually go away completely. She owed her life to Dimitri. She’d been nineteen at the time, young and vulnerable. He’d shown up in the nick of time. If he’d been just a moment later, that day would have been so much worse.

Now, centuries later she was hiding away in this safe room Dimitri had built for Alex, the love of his life. Ariel stood next to the chair and prayed she really was safe. She hoped this room could withstand any attack from anyone. In a way, maybe Dimitri was saving her all over again. She wondered again if she should call him. Should she tell him what was happening? She knew if she called, he would rush over. Or, he would send a couple of the warriors. She took a couple slow, deep breaths. She was starting to panic, but was it from old memories or her current situation? She would not pull Dimitri away from Alex for old memories. He was enjoying a rare night off. She knew Alex would understand, but then she’d have to explain why she’d freaked out. She didn’t want to talk about that time in her life. Eventually she would tell Alex about it. They had already become such good friends. But, she hated to relive those memories. She wasn’t ready to talk about them again. The only one that knew about the incident besides her parents and Dimitri was her best friend Breena.

Ariel took a deep breath. She’d be okay if Breena were here. Breena always knew how to calm her down. She glanced back at the monitors. Yeah, they were still there. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on other things. Breena and Orin would be home soon. Try to think about that, she told herself. Ariel began to feel nauseous. No matter how hard she tried to forget, the musty stench of that rickety old house kept coming back to her. The ugly laughter that followed the crewed comments of those drunken men rang in her ears. She could hear them arguing as if they were here in this room, at this very moment. The Robert guy was yelling at the other three men. He insisted once they were finished with her, she would have to die. They couldn’t let her live, she would run to the police. He was afraid she could identify every one of them. Ariel had been so frightened and cold that morning. She just kept praying that somehow someone would help her. To this day she still didn’t know what happened to those men. Dimitri wouldn’t tell her.

Ariel slumped down against the wall. She began to weep. She felt like such a coward. Why couldn’t she forget those awful memories? She’d been terrified and abused, but Dimitri had saved her in time. Why after all these years, all her training, could she still be drawn back to that awful time in an instant? How could she be this weak? Put her up against 10 vampires, no problem. With just a small group of eight, they had battled hundreds of vampires on Bree and Orin’s front lawn. But put her in a small, dark space to face the unknown and she relived the horrors of her youth.

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Ariel realized she was shaking. She felt so cold and alone, tears running down her face. She picked up her phone again, debating. She really didn't want to bother Dimitri tonight. She started to slide the phone back into her pocket when it rang. Ariel looked at the display and sighed with relief. It was Dimitri, or Alex.

"Hello" Ariel said, trying to sound casual, like she wasn't in a panic about to crumble into a million pieces.

"What's wrong?" Dimitri demanded, clearly worried.

Ariel smiled a little. She never could fool Dimitri. "I'm okay. Really. I guess I'm just a big coward. You know how I get sometimes when I'm alone and I get nervous or frightened. I'm just over reacting again."

"Ariel, tell me what's frightened you." Dimitri said, compassion and understanding in his voice.

"It's probably nothing, I'm sure I'm just jumpy because of everything that's happened the past few months, but there's something out in the forest." Ariel admitted.

"What do you mean, something is out in the forest? Have you checked the monitors? Where are you?" Dimitri was on alert. He was a born leader. It was so like him to immediately take charge.

"I'm in this world class panic room you and Ty built. Perfect description, I guess. Once I got in here, I pretty much panicked. Anyway, I have checked the monitors. There is definitely something out in the forest. I just can't tell what it is. There are big white or gray figures flying across the screen too fast to identify. At first I only saw one at a time. Now I can tell there are at least two of them. It's still light outside. You don't think they could be vampires do you?"

"I doubt it. Radek is desperate, but I don't think he would risk sending vampires out during the day. Not even in the forest. Thomas is working tonight. He should be close to the cabin. I'm sending him over immediately. Don't leave that room for anything. Thomas can get in on his own. He still has a key to the cabin and he has the code for the safe room. You're lucky your landlord's working in the area. It's going to take longer for me and Alex to get there."

"Dimitri," Ariel interrupted. "I don't want you and Alex ruining your night off together. Don't drive all the way out here just to check on me. Thomas can handle whatever is going on here. Promise me you won't come out unless Thomas calls for backup after he arrives and checks things out."

Dimitri sighed. "Do you know when Breena and Orin will be home?"

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“Not exactly.” Ariel admitted. “They haven’t had a real night out in months. I didn’t press, they deserve this time alone together. Things have been difficult for them for a while. I’m not sure Alex knows what a great thing she did that night when she healed Breena. Those two can finally have the relationship they’ve always deserved. Between you and me, I was starting to worry about Orin. He was spending more time at the club than was healthy.

“You sound a little better. Are you going to be okay until Thomas gets there?” Dimitri asked sincerely worried about her.

“I think I will be now. Thanks Dimitri. You’re probably the only person who truly understands what I’m going through. You always know how to calm me down. I’m sorry I’ve been such a basket case about this for the last what... 357 years? I’m a lot better than I used to be. I haven’t had one of these attacks for decades.” She paused. “I always knew I owed you my life. Now I realize I also owe you my sanity.” Ariel was embarrassed, but knew Dimitri understood.

“You don’t owe me anything.” Dimitri said soberly. “You’re not the only one who’s had nightmares about that incident. Things could have been so much worse. Try to remember that. You survived. You’re strong and brave. Don’t ever think you’re a coward, Ariel. Anyone in that situation would have been shaken. I’m going to call Thomas now. Stay locked in that room until he gets there. It shouldn’t take him long but if you need to, call me back. I’ll talk to you until he arrives.”

“Thank you for everything Dimitri. I’ll be fine until Thomas gets here. Sorry for all the trouble. The last thing you and Alex need is me interrupting one of the few nights you have together. You’re supposed to be planning your wedding. Hey, by the way, why did you call me?” Ariel asked.

“I’m not sure. I just had this feeling I should check on you. It was something I couldn’t shake, so I finally made the call.” Dimitri admitted.

“Don’t tell me the mighty warrior leader has gone psychic. Queen superstars’ in for a challenge. Speaking of the queen, will you apologize to Alex for me?” Ariel said regretfully.

“Not psychic. Just in tune with those I care about. There’s no apology necessary. I’ve got to call Thomas now. We need to know what’s going on in that forest. Hang in there for just a little longer.” Dimitri hung up.

Ariel stayed on the floor. She could still see the monitors from her location and she just didn’t have the energy to get up. The gray figures, whatever they were, flew across the screen again. She wiped the moisture from her eyes and leaned her head against the wall. She was so lucky to have Dimitri in her life. They were close. She thought of him more as a brother than a

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friend. He'd always been there for her, no matter what. She'd looked up to him as a child and then loved and respected him once she became an adult.

Thank goodness her and Alex were such good friends. She would have been devastated if Alex had put a stop to her relationship with Dimitri. He'd been a part of her life for too many years. She was truly happy for Alex and Dimitri. They were so perfect for each other. Some of the women Dimitri dated in the past became jealous of his friendship with her. Not Alex, she accepted Ariel completely. Ariel didn't feel like she was losing Dimitri, she felt like she was gaining a sister. Maybe Alex understood the bond her and Dimitri shared because Alex and Thomas were so close. They weren't related by blood, either. Thomas' dad had married Alex's mother when they were children. Whatever the reason, Ariel was grateful for them both. If she could just hold on a few more minutes, Thomas would be here and everything would be okay.

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Victor set down his pen and rolled his shoulders. He'd just finished the club's payroll for the month. He was actually caught up on all his paperwork. He was grateful to Dimitri for giving him an extra night off. Things had been so busy the past couple months. He'd been relying on his staff too heavily. The little things were piling up. Jack, his manager, had come in last night sick as a dog. Victor was lucky to have someone that dedicated working for him. He immediately called Dimitri and explained the situation. Dimitri didn't hesitate, he gave Victor the night off and then offered an additional night if needed. The extra night gave Victor time to catch up on paperwork and complete payroll. No matter what happened, he was now covered for at least two weeks. Three if he needed it. All the warriors were hoping things would stay quiet for a little longer, but unfortunately you just never knew what was coming. It was a relief to know the club would be covered no matter what came his way.

Victor loved this club. He slowly stood and walked out of his serene office into the noise and lights of Bojan Taverns. As usual, it was packed. It felt good to create something that gave pleasure to so many people. The club was a huge success and had been for years. Victor knew how to create an atmosphere that allowed his patrons to relax, forget their troubles and have a good time. He couldn't have a better staff. Victor learned long ago if you took care of your people, they would take care of you. He casually glanced around the room taking in the scene before him. He grinned when he spotted Thomas sitting at the bar chatting with Rocky, Victor's best bartender. All the warriors stopped by frequently. They got along with most of his crew so it gave them a place to unwind. Everyone got along with Rocky. "Sorry, been waiting long?" Victor asked as he casually pulled Thomas' tab out from under his glass and tossed it in the garbage.

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“Hey I told you already, I pay my own way.” Thomas started for the garbage can.

“And I told you, none of the warriors pay for drinks in my club. Now, sit down before I sick Rocky on you.” He shot Rocky a conspiratorial smile. “Anyone steps behind that yellow line and Rocky will kick their ass. Including you, hotshot.” Victor gave Thomas a playful shove. Thomas lost his balance and fell back onto the stool laughing.

“Fine. But before we head out, I’m finishing my drink. Free beer always tastes better somehow.” Thomas jabbed Victor in the ribs with his elbow still laughing. “Thanks Vic, I appreciate the hospitality.”

“No problem. I drink enough at your house to make things even.” Victor admitted.

Just then Thomas’ phone rang. He looked at the display and then up at Victor. “This can’t be good. It’s Dimitri.” Thomas opened his phone. “Hello?”

“Thomas.” Dimitri started.

“You’ll have to speak up.” Thomas yelled. “We’re still at Victor’s club and it’s pretty wild tonight. Well, okay, it’s pretty wild every night but tonight it’s exceptionally loud. The live band is amazing.”

“Go outside.” Dimitri yelled impatiently into the phone. Alex laughed in the background. Dimitri hated talking to the warriors when they were hanging out at Victor’s club.

“Okay, I can probably hear you now.” Thomas said after a few seconds of silence. “What’s up?” He was now standing just outside the club’s back door. The night was cool, but pleasant.

“I need you to get over to the cabin as fast as you can. Ariel’s there alone. There’s someone or something in the forest. She said she can’t tell what it is from the images on the monitors. They’re large white or gray figures running through the woods. There are at least two of them. She’s pretty freaked out, so be gentle with her when you get there.” Dimitri finished hesitantly.

“I’ll take care of it. I’ll call you back when I have more information. She’s lucky we haven’t left Victor’s. We’re pretty close to the cabin. It shouldn’t take more than a half hour to get there.” Thomas hung up and turned around.

Victor was standing behind him. He’d pulled on his leather jacket and was waiting for answers. “What’s up?”

“I’m not sure. Ariel’s at the cabin alone. Dimitri says she can see something in the forest from the monitors in the safe room. Sounds like she’s kind of freaked out about it. We need to get over there right away. I don’t think they could be vampires. It’s just starting to get dark.

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They wouldn't have had enough time to get from their caves to the cabin already. What do you think it could be?" Thomas asked, truly perplexed.

"I have no idea. I can't think of any animal that could run fast enough those monitors wouldn't pick it up. Do you mind driving? I'm on the bike." Victor said apologetically.

"I don't mind. I'll get there faster than you anyway." Thomas smirked.

Victor laughed out loud. "Do I drive too slow for you, Thomas? Good to know. Next time, I'll make sure I speed it up a little."

"Sorry I said anything." Thomas groaned. "You already think your Mario Andretti." Thomas jumped in the car and started the engine. "If you go any faster, we'll be dead for sure."