

Chapter One

Samantha stood in front of the large oval mirror ignoring the enormous crack that spread like long boney fingers down the left side of the old glass. A loud sigh escaped from deep within her chest. She didn't notice. She was focused on the reflection of her small, uninviting apartment looming in the background. Sam hated this place. That's why she rarely spent more than a few minutes here these days. She just couldn't stand to be alone anymore. She shook her head trying to stave off the gloom, picked up her brush and pulled her long red hair into a tight pony tail. She wasn't going to dwell on her lack of a social life or inadequate living arrangements tonight. She had more important things to do. It was futile anyway. She didn't have time to hang out in clubs or date some brainless jerk that only had one thing on his mind. She'd tried dating, but there were always so many questions when she went out alone late at night. Questions she couldn't answer. Until she reached her goal, she couldn't allow complications in her life. She wouldn't give up hunting for anyone, not even a guy. She glanced around, picked up her black ball cap and placed it securely on her head, pulling her large ponytail through the small hole in the back. Hunting was her life. She had accepted her fate long ago. There was no way she'd turn back now.

Sam adjusted her hat one more time making sure it was tight and secure. Then, she walked to the kitchen and retrieved two small transceivers from the table. She always carried the tiny devices when she left the apartment these days. They were almost perfect now, the slight alterations she'd made earlier would almost double their reception. Maybe she'd get a chance to test one out tonight. She didn't use them on many vampires but occasionally they came in handy. Like with Lilith. It was always best to have a couple on hand in case of an emergency. Sam casually glanced around the room again and frowned. It really was time to move to a better place. The apartment was small and felt dirty. No matter how many hours she spent cleaning the tiny space, she could never get the haze off the windows or the grime off the walls. It was sparsely furnished and extremely impersonal. She'd rented in the Bronx on purpose. When she first came to New York, she didn't know much about vampires and their habits. She believed they would hang out in slums and target prostitutes or the homeless. Sam had rented the rundown apartment because she thought she needed to live where she hunted. She'd been wrong. Vampires hung out everywhere and targeted anyone. They didn't seem to care if the people they killed would be missed or how the loss would impact their surviving family members.

Sam took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She was terribly lonely without her family. Work helped, but she missed the closeness she had shared with Michael growing up and the support her mother always gave her no matter what. She wasn't close to anyone like that now days. She hadn't been since their death. What would her brother be like today if he'd survived that violent attack? At twelve he had already developed such a strong, fun personality. He'd

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been so innocent. She immediately stopped herself. She wasn't going to dwell on that tonight. Thinking about Michael always made her depressed. She was happy and successful now. Being alone hadn't handicapped her. She'd done okay without her family's support. Her recent promotion to Executive Manager at D-Tech proved she could make it on her own just fine. Wasn't that what she had always wanted? She was only thirty-five but she'd already achieved her lifelong dream. Well, career wise anyway. Sam slowly settled onto the old couch, studying the awful pattern in disgust. She was definitely going to move. She needed a better place, a place she could personalize. Somewhere she could buy a nice couch and not worry about getting robbed blind. Her thoughts drifted to the Realtors' office she walked past every day on her way to the lab. Maybe she'd buy her own place this time. She could definitely afford it, especially after her recent promotion, and she wasn't going anywhere. She loved New York. Maybe it was time to put down roots.

Sam sighed as she laid her head against the back of the sofa. She didn't plan on hunting tonight, but she was so bored. If she hung out here, she'd just sink into a deeper depression. Her thoughts flashed back to work. Today had been so productive she didn't have any projects to bring home to keep her occupied. She was excited about the new transceivers, but she'd completed the draft proposal this morning. It was now in R&D's hands. Hopefully the work she'd been doing on the side to aid in her vampire hunting, would pay off in her pocketbook. Time would tell. The only other pressing issue at the lab was the droid line. D-Tech needed to increase production and fast. The orders were backing up. Sam had spent the entire afternoon brainstorming and developing a new production plan. She couldn't implement any of her changes until she got the okay from Alex though. After such a long stressful day, she needed a break from work anyway. She wanted the thrill of the chase. So, why was she procrastinating? Well, not anymore. She reached over and slid the transceivers into the pocket of her leather jacket, pushed into her boots, jumped to her feet then headed for the door. She paused long enough to lock up then left the apartment, anxious to start her evening out.

It was cool and dark outside, perfect weather for hunting vampires. The construction cranes and city lights sprinkled throughout the borough were somehow comforting. Sam hoped the growth would continue. Over the last couple years, several new residential buildings had replaced vacant lots throughout the neighborhood. The Bronx was slowly improving. It wasn't stable yet, but she hoped with time it would be productive again. As she walked casually down the sidewalk, her thoughts returned to Alex. Her current boss wasn't happy about her extracurricular activities. Sam liked Alex but she wasn't willing to stop making those monsters pay for what they did to her family, not even to make her boss happy. The more vampire's Sam killed, the better as far as she was concerned. Vampires had killed her parents and her brother, her uncle and his family and her maternal grandparents. Sam was alone in the world thanks to those blood sucking fiends. She didn't have any family left now at all. Her paternal grandparents had done their best to fill the void after her parents and brother were killed.

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Unfortunately, they died in a car crash a couple years ago leaving her completely alone. The closest thing she had to family was Luke Deveraux and he was dead now, too.

Sam stepped onto the subway out of habit. Her thoughts drifted back to that awful night. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop the scene from forming in her mind. Her mother had locked her in a small cupboard determined to save her life. But Sam still saw everything in vivid detail. Michael had already been discovered. There was no hope for him. Sam still hadn't found the vampire responsible for their deaths. Until she did, any vampire she encountered was going to pay for her loss. She would never forget those cold, violet eyes as they stared vacantly at the lifeless bodies of her family. One day she would find that killer and make him pay. She wouldn't stop hunting until she found him. He couldn't hide. His eyes would give him away. Most vampires had mystic green eyes similar to a cat's. The vampire that had killed her family had violet eyes. She'd never seen another vampire like him.

Sam shook off the old memories and concentrated on the night. She was surprised to realize she was already in downtown New York. When had she gotten off the subway? She took a deep breath and forced all thoughts from her mind, she needed to be alert. After one more calming breath she silently crept into the darkness of a nearby alley. There was no doubt in her mind, at least one vampire would be hiding in the shadows. There were always vampires back here. It was close to a busy club. If a vampire arrived at just the right time, they'd stumble onto a smorgasbord. In this secluded back street, vampires could feed as long as they wanted with very little effort or interruption. The thought enraged Sam. If she did her job right, no humans would die back here tonight.

Sam slid further into the shadows. She needed to get to the ladder that led up the fire escape before the vampires noticed her. A slight noise echoed through the darkness. It was a bone chilling sound that resonated from the abandoned space ahead. Sam froze. She wasn't going to make it. She quickly pulled her knife from the sheath on her belt and prepared for battle. It was best to avoid hand to hand with a vampire if possible. Most of them weren't very smart, but they were strong and fast. It was extremely difficult for a human to hold their own against a vampire in an even fight. Sam could usually get up high and take them out from a distance with her arrows, but occasionally she was forced to engage her enemy up close and personal. Unfortunately when that happened, she usually went home injured. She took another deep breath and focused on her surroundings. The night was not getting off to a good start. Maybe she should have stayed home after all. Oh well, too late now. She slowly pressed her back against the brick wall and waited.

A large vampire charged from the back of the alley. He was fast. Sam gave her shoulders a little shake and hoped for the best. She concentrated on the vampire, waiting for just the right moment to plunge her knife into his chest. She would only have one shot at this. If she missed, she was dead. Sam waited a second too long. Before she could shift away, the vampire reached out and latched onto her arm. It was like a vice grip. He began violently swinging her around

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the small space. Sam clung to the vampire with all her might, but she was having a hard time holding on. He was just too strong. If she lost her grip, she'd be flung against the wall for sure. The force would most likely knock her out and she'd be dead in seconds. She needed to act fast, but he was flopping her around like a rag doll. Sam heard a loud pop then grimaced as pain shot through her small body. She had to strike now and hope for the best.

Luckily her knife hit its mark. The vampire dissipated into thin air. Sam instantly fell to the ground with a thud. A slight breeze drifted down the alleyway scattering the remaining vampire dust in all directions. Sam tried to move her arm and gritted her teeth. She was in a lot of pain. The vampire had yanked on her arm with enough force to dislocate her left shoulder. She couldn't hunt like this. Almost as soon as her night had begun it was over. She took a deep breath as she slowly slid her body against the brick wall. She had to get out of this alley. She was too vulnerable here. Any minute another vampire could enter the dark hideout looking for food. This spot was too popular to stay vacant for long. She'd have to head for the hospital, again. Good thing Deveraux Industries had excellent insurance. She spent entirely too much time in the ER. Sam sighed and stumbled to her feet. She'd need to come up with a good story. The doctors were getting suspicious and they asked too many questions, especially that female doctor that was always so serious and intense. When she stared at Sam with those deep hazel eyes, it felt as though she had a direct window into Sam's soul. With any luck, that doctor would have the night off tonight.

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Sam sat in the small sterile emergency room tapping her foot against the metal bed frame as she impatiently waited for someone, anyone, to return. She hoped that nurse hadn't called the police. But even if she had, Sam would stick with her story. They couldn't prove she was lying. Timmy had been playing on the stairs with that truck this morning. Chances were good he had left it there. He always left his toys on the stairs. She didn't have a new bag of groceries, but it was too late to fix that mistake. They couldn't force her to show them her apartment, could they? No, she was pretty sure she didn't have to let them inside her home if she didn't want to. She was a victim, not a suspect. Sam looked up as metal rings clanged across the circular bar. A well-groomed woman brushed aside the white curtain and entered her small room. Sam groaned inwardly, it was that female doctor again. What was her name? She glanced at a small tag pinned to the tidy scrubs. Oh yeah, Dr. Quintana. This definitely was not her lucky night.

Sam conjured her most winning smile. Dr. Quintana wasn't moved. She was scowling openly and just stood there quietly studying Sam's face. Okay, fine. Sam could hold her own against this woman. She'd done it several times before. "This is kind of painful doc, how much longer before someone pops it back into place?" Sam asked.

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“I’ve requested a couple nurses. They should be joining us shortly.” Kylee Quintana paused. She knew Samantha hadn’t tripped on a truck left on the stairs by a neighboring child like she claimed. Someone had done this to her. Someone was assaulting this woman, Kylee just wished she could prove it. “We need to talk about your injuries,” she began.

“Okay, what do you want to know?” Sam said, trying to sound casual.

“What really happened to you tonight?” Kylee asked.

“I told that nurse already. I was carrying a sack of groceries home and tripped on a truck left on the stairs. I know better. There are so many kids in my apartment complex. They’re always leaving things on the steps. I should have watched where I was walking,” Sam explained.

Dr. Quintana sat in silence. She wanted Samantha to know she didn’t believe her, but she had to be careful. She could be in a lot of trouble if she accused a patient of lying.

Sam knew what the doctor was doing. She thought if she left an uncomfortable silence, Sam would confess. This doctor didn’t believe Sam, but she couldn’t prove her story was fabricated. Sam could wait her out. She wasn’t about to confess anything to this woman. If she told the good doctor what she thought she wanted to know, they’d lock Sam in the loony bin for sure. She just needed her shoulder fixed so she could get home and go to bed. Tonight had been a disaster and she was going to have to face Alex in the morning. Compared to her boss, dealing with the nosy doctor was a piece of cake.

“Okay fine, we’ll stick with that for now.” Dr. Quintana interrupted Sam’s thoughts. “I just want you to know you don’t have to deal with this alone.” Kylee pulled a business card from her pocket and held it out to Sam. “I know this detective personally. He can help. Whoever's doing this needs to be stopped.” Kylee paused waiting for Sam to take the card.

Sam hesitated then decided if she took the card, maybe the doctor would think she’d won. She slowly reached forward and accepted the information. Detective Rand McBride was boldly printed across the front. Sam shrugged, then winced and placed it in her jacket pocket.

“Think about calling him. He’s a good man. You’ve been here...,” Kylee glanced down at her notes, she didn’t need them but she didn’t want Samantha to know she’d taken a personal interest in her case. “You’ve been here five times in the last six months. That’s excessive. The injuries keep escalating.” Kylee looked pleadingly at her patient. “If you don’t get help, next time they might be wheeling you in here on a stretcher. Just think about it, that’s all I’m asking,” she pled.

Sam slowly gave the doctor a nod. Of course she wouldn’t talk to this detective, but the doctor didn’t need to know that. She’d just play along and get out of here. Next time she’d need

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to go to a different hospital. She should have thought of that before. Going to the same place every time was drawing attention to herself. Oh well, that was easily rectified.

Two men walked into the small room. “Hey, doc,” the largest one said enthusiastically. “I hear we get to pop a shoulder back in place tonight.” He glanced over at Sam and sobered. “Not exactly what I expected. It’s more fun when they’re men,” he whined. “New York has a lot of bar fights. I like hearing tough guys cry,” he grinned. “Fixing up a woman won’t be as entertaining.”

Dr. Quintana watched Samantha exit the hospital and disappear into the night. She wasn’t going to let this drop. She liked Sam. She wouldn’t let some guy abuse her this way. Kylee was afraid the attacks against Samantha would continue to escalate until the wounds were fatal. It had happened too many times before. She pondered her options. She had plenty of vacation leave saved up. Maybe it was time to use a little of it. If she pretended to take a break, the hospital administrator would stop nagging her about a private life. He was sure she was going to burn out any day now. If Kylee made up some exotic vacation plan, she could use that time off to follow Samantha. She needed to see what was going on, then she’d know how to help her patient. Kylee smiled inwardly. She’d fantasized about being a private investigator when she was younger. Once in college, she realized she was better suited to medicine. Maybe she’d start a bucket list and playing detective would be her first task. She glanced at her watch, just enough time to send her boss an email. He’d get her vacation request first thing in the morning. She slid Sam’s file under her jacket and slowly walked through the revolving door.