

The Immortal
who Loved Me
LYNSAY SANDS



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One

Sherry was muttering to herself as she worked. She hated doing taxes. She hated paying them even more.

Snorting with disgust as she calculated the amount of money she'd have to pay this quarter, she saved the program and was about to shut off the computer when her office door burst open. Grumpy after her task, Sherry raised her head, ready to rip into the employee who had barged in without knocking. But, instead, the words caught in her throat and her eyes widened with surprise as she stared at the petite blond teenager who rushed in and slammed the door closed.

The kid didn't give her more than a passing glance as her gaze slid around the room to find the window overlooking the store. The office was eight steps up from the main floor, so it allowed for an eagle's view of everything. On spotting the window, the kid immediately dropped into a crouch, and then moved to

it to poke her head up and peer anxiously out over the store floor.

Sherry's eyebrows rose at the action, and she announced, "It's a one-way mirror. No one in the store can see you."

The girl glanced around and frowned at her. "Shhh."

"*Excuse me?*" Sherry said with a half laugh of disbelief at the sheer gall of the girl. Expression turning serious, she said grimly, "This is my office, kiddo. I suggest you explain your reason for being here, or get out."

Rather than put the kid in her place, the words merely drew a full-on scowl from her as she turned and then concentrated a pair of the most amazing eyes on Sherry. They were a strange silver-green and seemed almost to glow with intensity.

Caught by those beautiful and unusual eyes, Sherry allowed her to stare briefly, mostly because she was staring back, but then she arched her eyebrows. "Well? Are you just going to crouch there and gawk at me or explain yourself?"

Instead of answering, the girl frowned and asked, "Why can't I read you?"

A short disbelieving laugh slipped from Sherry, but when the girl simply stared at her with bewilderment, she said reasonably, "Maybe because I'm not a book."

That got no reaction from the girl. She still continued to stare at her, looking almost vexed. Tired of thinking of her as "the girl," Sherry asked abruptly, "What's your name?"

"Stephanie," the girl replied almost absently, eyeing

her now as if she were a bug under a microscope. That examination ended abruptly when a chime sounded from the speaker in the corner of Sherry's office. It announced that the front door of the store had been opened. Seeming to realize that, Stephanie whirled to peer out at the store again, and quickly dropped back to her haunches so that only the top of her head poked up over the bottom of the window ledge.

"I told you it's one-way," Sherry said with exasperation. "They can't see—"

"Shhh," Stephanie hissed without glancing around, simply raising a hand in her direction, palm up, demanding silence.

Despite herself, Sherry obeyed the silent order. There was just something about the girl, a sudden stillness and tension that had been present before, but now intensified. It made Sherry frown and glance past her to the store beyond the one-way mirror as four men walked into the shop.

Using the word "walked" was somewhat misleading. It was too normal, and had they just walked in she would have simply taken note of their entrance and then turned her attention back to the teenager in her office. But there was nothing normal about these men.

All four of the newcomers looked to be in their mid-twenties. They also all had longish, dirty blond hair. One wore it in a ponytail, another actually had it up in a bun, and a third man had gelled it into long pointy spokes that poked out of his head like a hedgehog. But the leader, or at least the man in the lead, had a full, matted mane that made her think of a lion.

Sensing trouble, Sherry watched the men. They each wore jeans that could have used a run through a washing machine. Their T-shirts weren't much better, and they didn't walk in so much as stalk in. There was just something predatory about them, an air that made her feel like a gazelle on the planes of the Serengeti and grateful they were on the other side of the mirror.

Unaware that she had stood and was slowly moving to the girl's side, Sherry watched with trepidation as the lead man raised his head and took a long, deep sniff of the air, scenting it like the predator he made her think of. He then nodded, lowered his head and glanced around to ask, "Where is the girl?"

Not surprisingly, the half a dozen customers in the store continued perusing the kitchenware they'd come in for, probably not even aware that he was addressing them or to what girl he was referring. Sherry doubted anyone but her employees had even noted the girl's entrance, and busy with customers as they were, even they may not have.

When nobody paid him any attention, the lead man scowled and cast a glance back toward his men. The last man, the one that resembled a hedgehog, still stood in the open store door. Now he entered fully and slammed it, sending the bells ringing madly. When the chimes fell silent, so was the shop. Every eye in the place was now on the foursome, and the air seemed charged with a sudden wariness that Sherry was not only aware of, but was experiencing herself.

"Thank you for your attention," the leader said pleasantly, moving forward again. After half a dozen steps,

he paused again, this time in front of one of her employees who had been helping a young woman who had a little girl clutching at her skirt.

Sherry sucked in a breath when the man's hand suddenly shot out to the side and snatched the mother by the front of her sweater. He wasn't even looking at her as he grabbed and jerked her forward. Only then did he turn his head toward her, his nose almost brushing hers as he demanded, "Where is the—"

Sherry found herself tensing further when he paused suddenly mid-question. She bit her lip, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end as he inhaled again, more deeply this time. Sherry didn't know why, but the action made her anxious for the woman, especially when he gave a pleasant little shiver as he released his breath at the end.

"You're pregnant," he announced, a smile growing on his lips. Dipping his head, he ran his nose along the woman's throat, inhaling deeply again. He then released a happy sounding little sigh and announced, "I love pregnant women almost as much as untreated diabetics. All those hormones pumping through the blood . . ." He pulled back to look her in the face as he said, "It's a powerful cocktail."

"Damn."

Sherry blinked and tore her gaze from the tableau below to glance to Stephanie, surprised to find she'd briefly forgotten about the girl.

"What?" Sherry asked, instinctively whispering this time. She didn't know who these people were, or what was going on, but all her inner alarm bells were ringing

in warning now. Something very bad was happening and she knew instinctively that it was only going to get worse.

Stephanie bit her lip and then glanced around. “Is there a back exit in this place?”

“That door leads to the alley behind the shops,” Sherry admitted quietly, gesturing to a door down another eight steps at the back of her office.

Sherry didn’t blame the kid for wanting to run. She wanted to herself, but couldn’t, not with her employees and customers out there at the mercy of the men presently filling her small shop. It was like four lions set among a pen full of lambs. Although she supposed that was the wrong analogy. Everyone knew the lioness did the hunting, not the lion. Wolves were probably a better descriptor for these men.

“You don’t happen to have a car parked out in the alley, do you?” Stephanie asked hopefully.

Sherry merely stared for a moment. She had heard the question but hadn’t seen the girl’s lips move. What—?

“Do you?” the teenager hissed, her lips moving this time.

“No. I take the subway,” Sherry admitted quietly. Most people did in the city, rather than pay exorbitant parking fees.

The girl sighed unhappily and then peered back to the drama taking place on the other side of the mirror.

Sherry followed her gaze. The leader now had the young mother pressed up against the checkout counter, her body bent back over it, but all he was doing at the

moment was sniffing her neck like a dog. It was weird, and might even have been funny if Sherry hadn't noted the knife he now retrieved from his pocket and flicked open at his side.

"Oh crap," she breathed.

"Yeah," Stephanie muttered. "A car would have made this so much easier."

"Made what easier?" Sherry asked in a distracted voice as she watched the man run the side of the blade lightly up the apparently pregnant woman's stomach toward her throat. The woman wasn't reacting at all. Her expression was blank, as were the expressions on the faces of the others in the store. Even her child simply stood there, blank-faced and unconcerned. The only people in the store with any expression at all were the leader and his men. The leader was smiling a soft almost sweet smile, while the three men who could have been his brothers were all grinning widely with what she would have said was anticipation.

"You better start running," Stephanie said grimly, moving to lock the door leading into the store.

"I'm not running anywhere," Sherry said, her words sharp despite her effort to keep her tone soft. "I'm calling the police."

"The police can't help them," the girl said grimly, striding over to pick up the heavy filing cabinet in the corner and carry it down the stairs to set in front of the door that opened to the store floor.

Sherry was so startled by the action that she just stared. The filing cabinet was a tall, four-drawer legal cabinet

stuffed full of paperwork and receipts. It weighed a ton. She doubted she could have pushed or dragged it across the floor, let alone lift it like it was an empty laundry basket as the girl had just done. She was trying to work out in her head how Stephanie had done that when movement below drew her attention back to the store floor. The leader had suddenly released the pregnant woman and stepped back.

Maybe he was going to leave. The vague hope had barely formed in her mind when he grabbed one of the mixing bowls off a nearby display and handed that and the knife to the pregnant woman and said pleasantly, "It's such a messy business and this is my favorite T-shirt. Why don't you do it? Bend forward over the counter, put the bowl on that stool there so it's under your throat, and slice your neck open so the blood flows into it."

"The crazy son of a—" Sherry began and then nearly bit her tongue off when the young mother, still with no expression on her face, did exactly as he'd suggested. She turned to bend over the counter, set the bowl on the clerk's stool behind it, positioned herself so her neck was over the bowl and slit her own throat.

"Damn," Sherry breathed with dismay, hardly able to believe the woman had just done that. "I'm calling the police."

"There's no time," Stephanie growled, catching her arm. "He's controlling those people. Can't you see that? Do you think that woman really wanted to slit her own throat?"

"But the police—"

“Even if they got here before Leonius is done, they’d just become part of the slaughter. The only way to save these people is to lead Leo and his boys away from here . . . and to do that I need to get their attention and then run like hell.”

“Then *we’ll* get their attention and *we’ll* run like hell,” Sherry said firmly as she hurried down the steps to unlock and open the back door. There was no way in hell she was letting the teenager handle the matter alone. She was just a kid, for heaven’s sake. Sherry had just spotted the door stopper to keep the door open when a loud crash made her turn sharply around. She was just in time to see her desk chair sail through the one-way mirror and out of sight. Stephanie had pitched it through.

Sherry hurried back to the top of the steps to look out onto the store floor. The chair hadn’t hit anyone, but the noise had definitely caught the attention of the men in the other room. No one else even glanced around, but all four men were now staring through the opening toward them.

Stephanie promptly flipped them the bird, then raced toward Sherry, shrieking, “Run!”

The shout had barely hit her ears when Stephanie was streaking past her, catching her arm in passing and nearly jerking her off her feet as she swung her around. In the next moment, she’d been dragged down the stairs and out the door. Stephanie must have kicked the stopper out of the way as they passed, because the door slammed closed behind them.

The girl was fast. Inhumanly fast. Sherry was moving

like she'd never moved before in her life. Adrenaline gave her a boost and her feet barely seemed to touch the ground, but the teenager was still nearly dragging her off her feet with her own speed. It was a short alley, yet they'd barely traveled up half of it when a loud crash drew her gaze over her shoulder to see the men charging out after them.

Sherry's heart leapt at the sight. Like the girl, they were also fast. Too fast. She would never outrun them. And she was just holding Stephanie back.

"Go!" she shouted, shaking her arm in an effort to break the girl's hold. "I'm just slowing you down. Leave me and run!"

Stephanie glanced toward the men gaining on them, looked forward again, and then did just that. She released her hold on Sherry and charged for the mouth of the alley.

Sherry was glad she had. It was what she'd told her to do, and at the same time being suddenly on her own with those hyenas nipping at her heels was heart-stoppingly terrifying. Despite her fear, or more likely because of it, Sherry managed to put on a little more speed herself, but it was like trying to outrun a sports car. Impossible. Sherry's only hope was that they'd bypass her to chase after the girl.

The moment she had the thought, Sherry began to worry that they would do just that. She couldn't leave the girl to their less than tender mercies without at least trying to slow them down or stop them. That thought in mind, she glanced around for something to help with

the effort. The only thing ahead of her in the narrow alley was a pair of garbage Dumpsters.

“Work with what you have,” she breathed, and changed direction, angling toward the large blue metal bins. Would she have time to grab one to push toward the men? Would she be strong enough? Did garbage Dumpsters have locks on their wheels, and if they did, were the wheels locked on these Dumpsters?

Sherry never got the answer to those questions because that’s when the gunshot rang out. She was sure she felt the bullet whiz past her ear, it was so close. At first she thought her pursuers were shooting either at her or the girl. It made her squint at the mouth of the alley some twenty feet ahead as she sought out the girl to see if she was all right. Her eyes widened incredulously when she spotted Stephanie in a shooter’s stance, gun pointed her way while a police officer stood beside her seeming oblivious to what was happening.

Even as she saw that, several more gunshots sounded. This time, though, Sherry heard a grunt from close behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, shocked to see the leader only three or four steps away, his arm extended, hand reaching for her. His fingers actually brushed the cloth of her blouse even as he began to tumble toward the ground.

There were three holes in his chest, Sherry saw as he fell, and his followers were skidding to a halt to help him. With the hope that she might get out of this after all, Sherry turned and ran like crazy. All she was thinking was that if she got to Stephanie and the officer

before one of the men gave chase again, she would be all right.

When Sherry reached Stephanie, the girl had lowered the weapon and was putting it back in the officer's holster, saying, "This never happened. You never saw us and you really should patrol farther up the road and stay away from here until the alley is empty."

Stephanie snapped the officer's holster closed on the gun as she finished speaking, and then the officer immediately turned and started up the road.

"What—?" Sherry began with amazement and then snapped her mouth closed as Stephanie grabbed her hand and began to run again, dragging her away from the alley mouth. Since Sherry was more than happy to get away from their pursuers, she went willingly, doing her best to keep up. But as soon as they reached the end of the street and had rounded the corner, she tugged at Stephanie's hand and gasped, "Wait . . . Stop . . . I can't . . . run any . . . more."

"We can't stop," Stephanie said firmly, dragging her up the road, though slowing to a jog at least. "Leo will be after us as soon as he recovers."

"That guy . . . you shot?" she gasped with amazement, still tugging on Stephanie's hand. Even a jog was too much for her labored lungs at the moment, and her words were breathless and choppy as she said, "He isn't . . . recovering . . . anytime soon. He has . . . three bullets . . . in his chest. His next stop . . . is the . . . hospital."

"He won't need a hospital," Stephanie assured her, not the least winded. She glanced around grimly as

they reached the end of the short street, and then suddenly pulled Sherry across the road toward a small pizza place on the opposite corner.

“Kid . . . he’ll need a . . . hospital,” Sherry assured her wearily, but allowed Stephanie to usher her into the restaurant. She even followed docilely as the girl dragged her to the tables along the side between the counter and the windowless wall until they reached the last table, one not likely to be seen from the street.

“Can I use your iPhone?” Stephanie asked as Sherry dropped to sit in a booth with her back to the front of the shop.

Sherry grimaced and wheezed, “I don’t have it. Or my purse either,” she added with a frown.

“Just catch your breath. I’ll get you a drink,” Stephanie said, and as quickly as that was gone.

Sherry pushed her hair back from her sweaty face, then closed her eyes on a sigh. The last few moments played through her head like cut scenes from a film; that poor woman slitting her own throat, the chair crashing through the window, the leader of the small gang of hoodlums reaching for her even as he fell from his wounds . . . his eyes, glowing and alien.

Sherry shook her head and covered her own eyes briefly, pressing on them in an effort to blot out the images. She wondered where her nice boring safe life had gone . . . and why she was sitting in a pizzeria like a well-behaved child when she should be calling the police, going back to check on her people and customers, and—

“Here.”

Sherry raised her head and sat back abruptly as Stephanie set a soda and a slice of pizza on the table in front of her. Sherry’s gaze slid from the two items to the identical items in front of Stephanie as the girl slid into the booth across from her.

“I didn’t know what you like so I got you a deluxe slice and Coke,” Stephanie explained, picking up her slice of pizza to chomp into the end of it.

Sherry gaped as she watched the girl chew and swallow with relish, and then asked with amazement, “How can you eat?”

“I’m hungry,” the girl said simply. “You should eat too.”

“I don’t eat carbs . . . or drink them. Coke is nothing but syrupy water,” Sherry said automatically, and then realizing how stupid those words were under the circumstances, she shook her head. “I don’t understand how you can act like this is all just—”

“Sugar is energy,” Stephanie interrupted. “And you need to keep up your energy in case we have to run again. So eat,” she ordered, sounding remarkably like the adult here.

That fact made Sherry scowl. “We should be calling the police.”

“Yeah, ’cause that cop at the mouth of the alley was so useful,” Stephanie said with dry disinterest before taking another bite of her pizza.

Unable to argue with that, Sherry frowned and then asked, “Speaking of that, what happened there?”

Stephanie arched an eyebrow, but was silent for a

moment as she finished chewing and swallowing. Then she sighed and said, “You obviously couldn’t outrun them, and I couldn’t leave you behind for them to catch, torture, and kill, so when I spotted the cop at the mouth of the alley, I ran ahead to grab his gun and shoot Leo to buy us some time. Fortunately, it worked.”

Sherry didn’t point out that she had been there and seen all that, instead she simply asked, “And the co— police officer, just let you take his gun?”

Stephanie shrugged. “I controlled him. He won’t remember any of it.”

“Which will really confuse him when he realizes his gun has been fired,” Sherry muttered, but her mind was on the girl’s claim that she’d controlled the cop. She wanted to laugh off the suggestion, but the man had looked as blank-faced as the woman who’d slit her own throat in the store. Stephanie had claimed Leo was controlling that woman too. So Leonius had controlled the woman, Stephanie had controlled the cop . . . How? That particular skill set was just not something Sherry knew humans to have.

“There they are.”

Sherry glanced around sharply and spotted the four men moving swiftly past the restaurant’s front window. She shrank down in her seat when one of them glanced through the window, but they didn’t slow or stop, so she guessed she hadn’t been seen. That wasn’t a surprise to her, considering they were in the dark back corner. What was surprising was the fact that the leader, Leo, as Stephanie called him, was up and walking around as if nothing had happened.

“Damn,” she breathed, staring at the man until the group moved out of sight.

“I told you being shot wouldn’t stop him,” Stephanie said solemnly.

“I know but . . . how?” she asked with bewilderment.

Stephanie was silent for a moment as she continued to eat her pizza, but after a couple of bites she set it down with resignation and reached for her pop. She took a pull on the drink, and then set that down too, to eye Sherry thoughtfully. After a moment she sighed. “I suppose I’m going to have to explain.”

“That would be nice,” Sherry said dryly.

Stephanie nodded. “Vampires exist. Although Leonius and his men are no-fangers, they still survive on blood so I suppose they’re still vampires. As am I, though I’m an Edentate.”

Sherry blinked as the words raced through her mind. No-fangers? Edentate? She had no idea what either of those were, so focused on the word she did recognize.

“Vampires?” she asked, not bothering to hide her disbelief. “Sweetie, I hate to tell you this, but vampires *do not* exist. Besides, vampires bite people, they don’t have them slit their own throats open and bleed into a bowl.”

“Uh-huh,” Stephanie didn’t look upset by her words. “So how do you explain his controlling that woman to make her slit her own throat? Or my controlling the cop?”

Sherry considered the question briefly and then suggested, “Hypnosis?”

Stephanie rolled her eyes. “Come on, you don’t seem

like a stupid woman. Leo didn't have time to hypnotize her, and I certainly didn't have time to hypnotize the cop." She scowled and then asked, "What's your name?"

"Sherry Carne," she answered. "And fine, maybe this Leo didn't hypnotize the woman in my store, but he did something and it wasn't because he's a vampire. Vampires have fangs and bite people."

"A minute ago you said there were no such things as vampires, now you're saying there are, but they have to have fangs?" Stephanie asked with amusement.

"Well . . ." Sherry frowned. "If you're going with the whole vampire thing to cover the real story, then at least be consistent. Vampires are dead, soulless creatures who crawl out of their coffins and bite people."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too," Stephanie said, sounding weary and much older than her years. Shrugging, she straightened her shoulders and added, "Turns out we're both wrong. Vampires aren't dead and soulless, and while most do have fangs, Leo and his little Leos are an aberrant strain. Like I said, they're called no-fangers. They don't age and they do need blood to survive, but they don't have the fangs to get it, so they cut their victims. They're also usually crazy. But not normal crazy, nutso crazy."

Sherry tilted her head slightly and eyed the girl. There was something about the way she'd passed on the information . . . It had been a lecturing tone, but there was something under the words, some emotion almost like shame, that she didn't understand.

"You don't believe me," Stephanie said with a shrug.

“That’s okay, but just let me tell you what’s going on. You can believe it or not as you like, but just remember it. It might save your life before we get out of this.”

Sherry was silent for a minute, considering the girl, but then decided there was no harm in listening. Besides, it gave her a good excuse to just sit there while she tried to find her second wind, so she leaned back in her seat with a nod. “Go ahead.”

Stephanie relaxed a little and even managed a small smile. “Right, just so we’re clear, I *am* claiming that vampires exist. There are some with fangs, some without, but both can read and control mortals. Leo and his little Leos—Two, Three, and Four—are one of the variety without fangs.”

“Two, Three, and Four?” Sherry asked.

Stephanie shrugged. “They probably aren’t Leo Two, Leo Three, and Leo Four, but he names all his sons after himself so they’re all Leos number something-or-other, so they just go by their number.”

“His sons?” Sherry asked with disbelief. “There is no way those men are his children. They all looked to be the same age.”

“Vampire, remember?” Stephanie said pointedly. “Vampires stop aging physically at around twenty-five.”

Sherry let her breath out on an exasperated sigh, finding it hard to swallow all of this, but she’d agreed to listen, so waved for her to continue.

“I grew up as normal and ignorant of what’s out there as you did, but Leo and some of his other sons kidnapped my sister and me from a grocery store parking

lot when I was fourteen,” Stephanie announced. Her mouth tightened and then she added, “We were eventually rescued, and Leo’s sons were caught and executed by the Rogue Hunters but—”

“Rogue Hunters?” Sherry interrupted.

“Cops for immortals, or vampires, as you would call them. They keep the other immortals in line,” she explained. “Anyway, I don’t know if it’s because of his sons getting killed or what, but for some reason, Leo became sort of obsessed with my sister and me. He wants to add us to his breeding stock.”

Sherry stared at her, silently processing, and then she cleared her throat and asked, “What do you mean he wants to add you to his breeding stock? Not . . . ?”

Stephanie nodded. “It’s how he got all the junior Leos. I doubt many of the mothers were willing.”

Sherry shook her head slightly. “You make it sound like he has a lot of them.”

“One of the sons who helped him kidnap my sister and I was Leo the 21st. According to him, he was one of the older sons,” Stephanie said with a shrug. “He claimed there were fifty or sixty of them, that there have been hundreds over the centuries, but some killed themselves, some were killed, and Leo killed several others when they refused to do what he wanted, or when they otherwise pissed him off.”

Sherry didn’t say anything. It was crazy, like a vampire soap opera or something. It couldn’t be true . . . could it?

“Anyway,” Stephanie continued, “like I say, Leo senior took a shine to my sister and me and said he’d

come after us, so Dani—my sister,” she added, “Dani and I have been hiding out and protected since.”

“Until today,” Sherry said.

Stephanie grimaced. “I was protected. I was with Drina and Katricia. They’re Rogue Hunters.”

“Vampire cops,” Sherry muttered.

“Immortal cops really, or Enforcers, but vampire cop will do. Just don’t use the term vampire in front of the other immortals. They can get testy about that,” Stephanie informed her, and then continued. “Drina and Katricia are both getting married so we went wedding dress shopping. I . . .” She sighed and grimaced. “I forgot something in the car and just nipped out quickly to get it, but . . .” Stephanie shook her head. “It was just my luck to pick a moment when Leo and his boys decided to walk down that street.”

She paused briefly and frowned before saying, “There haven’t been any reported sightings of Leo and his boys in Toronto since Dani and I were rescued. They cleared out and have been hanging south of the border for a long time. They were last spotted somewhere in the southern states. I never would’ve gone out to the car if I’d known they were in the area. I just . . .” She heaved out a deep sigh and then said, “Anyway, I spotted them before they saw me. I nipped into your store hoping they wouldn’t see me, but I guess they did.”

When Stephanie took another bite of pizza and began to chew, Sherry was left to wonder if she believed anything the girl had just said. Oddly enough, while Sherry had started out not believing, she found she now did. She

had no idea why. It was crazy. Vampires, mind control, reading thoughts, breeding stock . . .

Sherry pushed those thoughts away for now to switch to a subject that had been worrying her since leaving the store. "How long does the control last?"

Stephanie paused to peer at her briefly, and then understanding crossed her face and she assured her, "Not long. I mean, it can continue for a little bit after the vampire leaves their presence if they put a suggestion in their thoughts, but I'm sure Leo and the boys didn't get a chance to do that before chasing after us. The moment they left the building, your employees and customers probably snapped out of it and helped the woman who cut herself."

"If they could help her," Sherry said unhappily, picking up her slice of pizza and shifting it in her hands briefly before taking a bite. It was surprisingly good. Surprising because she wouldn't have expected anything to taste good at that point. She guessed the scare she'd just had, and surviving it, had awakened her taste buds or something. Whatever. It tasted good. Carbs or not.

"They could help her," Stephanie assured her. "She didn't cut deeply enough to hit the jugular. She's probably fine."

Sherry raised her eyebrows. "How do you know she didn't hit the jugular?"

"I gave her a mental nudge to stop her cutting too deep," Stephanie explained, and then grimaced and added, "Which Leo would have recognized right away. That's why we had to make our move when we did."

He would have used the people in the store against us, tortured them to make me come out. So I had to make sure he saw me leave and knew I wasn't there. It was the only way to be certain he'd leave them alone."

Sherry wasn't surprised at the claim that she'd given the woman a mental nudge not to cut too deep. After all, the girl had said she'd controlled the cop too. What *did* surprise her was that the girl had thought of the people in the store at all. Stephanie was a nice kid. There was still a possibility that she was crazy as a loon. Sherry was finding herself almost believing her tale, but it was a lot to swallow. So either Stephanie was a brave, thoughtful kid who had risked getting caught to save the pregnant mother, or she was a nutcase. A nutcase who was a damned good shot, Sherry thought. Stephanie had hit a moving target around her. Nice.

"So where did you learn to shoot like that?" Sherry asked quietly.

"Victor and D.J. take me to a shooting range every other day," she said. The names meant nothing to Sherry, so she was glad when the girl added, "Victor is . . . well he's sort of my adopted dad I guess." She said it quietly, her voice thickening, and then she rushed on, saying, "And D.J. is like the young, pain in the butt uncle who ruffles your hair and embarrasses you in public."

Sherry smiled faintly at the description. "And your real dad?"

"Alive, well, and mortal," Stephanie said casually, too casually, and she was avoiding her gaze. Picking at what was left of her pizza, she added, "He and Mom

think I'm dead." Before Sherry could respond, she added, "But Victor and Elvi took me in and look after me. Elvi lost her daughter so I'm a gift, she says, and they're great."

Great, but not her real parents, Sherry translated as the girl turned her head away and dashed quickly at her eyes. Deciding a change of topic might be good, she said, "So, the police can't help us here . . . but what about those Rogue Hunters of yours? We should find a phone and call them so they can hunt down this Leo and his men."

Sherry just couldn't call the man's followers his sons. It seemed impossible that they were his children. They all looked around the same age. Brothers would have been more believable. Realizing that Stephanie wasn't responding to the suggestion of calling in her Rogue Hunters, Sherry raised her eyebrows. "Don't you think?"

"What?" Stephanie asked. Her blank expression as she turned back to face her made it obvious she hadn't been listening.

Knowing the girl's thoughts had probably been with her birth parents, Sherry asked patiently, "Don't you think that we should call your Rogue Hunters?"

Stephanie shook her head and stared down at the pizza crust she'd been unconsciously tearing apart. The slump to her shoulders and defeated air about the girl were a bit alarming. Sherry had no idea what was going on exactly, but she did know this was no time for the girl to fall apart. Sitting back, she deliberately took on an annoyingly knowing air and said, "Oh, I get it."

Stephanie finally really looked at her, her attention caught. Eyebrows rising, she asked with interest, "What do you get?"

"You," Sherry said with a shrug. "I was a teenager once too."

Stephanie snorted. "Please. I don't know how many times I've heard that tired old line. Like you crusty old farts all think just because you were young back in ancient times that you know what life is like for me. You don't. You were young in . . . what? The sixties?"

"I wasn't even born in the sixties, thank you," Sherry said with amusement. "I'm only thirty-two."

"Whatever . . ." Stephanie waved that away. "You haven't got a clue about me."

"Hmmm. How about I tell you what I think and then you can tell me I'm wrong? If I am," Sherry added tauntingly.

Stephanie shrugged. "Whatever."

Sherry tilted her head and eyed her for a moment, and then said, "So, you were wedding dress shopping with this Drina and her friend?"

"Katricia," Stephanie supplied. "She's Drina's cousin, but also a Rogue Hunter. She's getting married too, to Teddy, who is the police chief in Port Henry where I live. We came to Toronto for a girls' weekend and dress shopping."

"Hmmm." Sherry considered that and then said, "And you say they let you go out to get something?"

Stephanie nodded, her gaze sliding away toward the front of the store and a frown flickering over her face.

Sherry suspected the girl was wondering where the

two women were. She was too. Surely they'd noticed Stephanie was missing by now? And if they were in the area, the gunshots should have drawn them. She let that go for now, though, and simply said, "Well, I'm sure the bit about their letting you go out to get something is a lie."

Stephanie glanced back to her sharply. "What makes you think that?"

"Kiddo, if these girls are Rogue Hunters, or vampire cops, and this Leo is after you, like you say, I'd guess they keep a short leash on you to keep you safe. They would not have let you wander off on your own. So, Drina was probably in a dressing room trying on a wedding dress, and Katricia was in there helping her with all the convoluted nonsense involved in putting one of those things on, or trying on one herself. You were probably sitting in the waiting area outside the dressing room feeling bored and neglected. No doubt you reached for your iPhone to either listen to music or watch a movie while you waited, and realized you'd left it in the car." Tilting her head, she added, "It's probably hooked up to the sound system in the car, which is why you forgot to grab it, so you thought you'd just slip out, get it and be back before they noticed."

"Unfortunately," she added, "you didn't get to the car before you spotted Leonius and his buddies and had to duck into my store for cover."

Stephanie didn't hide her surprise. "How did you know all of that?"

Sherry shrugged and reminded her, "You asked to use my iPhone earlier."

“So?” Stephanie asked.

“So, you don’t have yours on you, so couldn’t have made it to the car.”

“Maybe I don’t have one and was getting something else,” Stephanie suggested.

Sherry shook her head firmly. “There are few teenagers around who don’t have cell phones nowadays. Besides, you specified iPhone rather than just saying cell phone, which suggests that’s what you have.”

“Okay, so how did you know I left my phone in the car, jacked into the USB?” she asked with interest.

“Because I’m always forgetting mine in the car for that reason,” Sherry admitted wryly. “I plug it into the USB so I can listen to music I like and then forget it when I get out.”

“Hmmm,” Stephanie murmured, but she was looking at her with interest now. “Or maybe you have some psychic abilities and that’s why I can’t read or control you.”

Sherry didn’t comment. Her mind wanted to rebel at the possibility of anyone controlling her actions or thoughts, but she’d watched the pregnant mother slit her own throat. No one would do that under their own impetus. She *did* believe the customer must have been controlled . . . and if *she* could be controlled . . .

Pushing these disturbing thoughts away, Sherry said, “So, all of this being true, you don’t want to call your Rogue Hunters because you’re going to get hell for slipping away from your protectors and putting yourself at risk in the first place.”

“Nah-ah,” Stephanie said with a slow smile.

Sherry raised her eyebrows doubtfully. “You won’t get in trouble?”

“Oh, yeah,” Stephanie said dryly. “Once Drina, Katricia, Harper, Elvi, and Victor are done raking me over the coals, Lucian himself will probably show up to completely demoralize me,” she admitted with unhappy resignation. “But that’s not why I’m not calling.”

“Okay,” Sherry said slowly. “So why don’t you want to call?”

“It’s not that I don’t *want* to call . . . I don’t *have* to,” she explained. “I already did. They’re sending Bricker even as we speak.” She tilted her head and then grinned and added, “And he’s bringing you a surprise.”