

Deadly Desire

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Extract

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Chapter 1

The almost ripe moon hung in the midnight sky, and the heat of it sang through my veins. Being a werewolf at this time of the month generally meant fun times, because we celebrated the moon's bloom with a sensual week of intimacy. One that involved much loving and many different partners. Although for me, there was currently only one man, and he was neither an ordinary man nor a werewolf—although as a vampire, he certainly had enough stamina to satisfy the hunger of *any* wolf.

Of course, I wasn't *just* a wolf, but when the moon bloomed toward fullness, it was she who reigned supreme, rather than the vampire half of my soul.

But I was also a guardian, and it was an unfortunate fact that the bad guys of this world had absolutely no respect for the moon or a werewolf's needs.

Which was why I was now stalking through the deserted backstreets of Coolaroo, following a scent that was all death and violence, rather than being curled up beside my vampire, enjoying his caresses.

The night itself was crisp and cold, and I had a killer case of goose bumps. If I'd had the time, I would have gone home to grab a sweater, but Jack—my boss, and the vampire in charge of the whole Guardian division—had insisted it couldn't wait. That lives depended on me catching this idiot before he could kill again.

Of course, I'd felt the need to point out that he had a veritable truckload of leashed killers sitting in the underground floors of the Directorate, every one of them just aching to be set loose on bad guys. After which, he'd kindly pointed out that if I hadn't lost said killer in the first place, he wouldn't be out killing tonight.

A point I could hardly argue with given it was true, so I'd shut up, kissed Quinn goodbye, and driven straight to the crime scene.

Only to discover another dead human. Like the teenager who'd been killed several nights ago, tonight's victim had been drained of blood. But it wasn't a vampire doing this, because their throats had been slashed rather than bitten, and vampires rarely went to that sort of trouble. Not unless they considered mutilating the bodies of their victims part of the fun, anyway.

Besides, vampires were rarely wasteful when it came to blood, and while both these teenagers had been drained, a whole lot of blood had been smeared across their necks, faces, and the ground. It was almost as if

someone had slashed, and then tried to gulp down the resulting surge.

I shuddered. Tonight's death was my fault, because I'd let the damned killer escape me days before.

And the fact that he'd seemingly disappeared into thin air wasn't an excuse. I was a trained hunter-killer, and no matter how much I might sometimes rail against it, there was no going back for me now. Therefore, I had to do the best that I could. And letting a killer go free to kill again definitely wasn't my best.

I blew out a breath and studied the night ahead. Evil was out there, just beyond my line of sight. The scent I followed was a foul thing that hung heavily on the cool night air, reminding me oddly of meat left rotting in the sun.

And I had no idea what it was, because he certainly didn't smell like any other nonhuman I'd ever come across.

Although he didn't smell human, either, even if the description we'd gotten off a witness matched that of a man who was listed as human. Only *he* was also very dead.

I'd immediately started imagining scenarios featuring killer zombies out for vengeance, but Jack claimed I'd been watching too many horror movies. According to him, while zombies *could* kill, it wasn't through any basic desire or need of their own. They weren't capable of thought *or* emotion, and were little more than receptacles for the deadly desires of others.

Which was a fancy way of saying someone else was in charge and directing the action. Only there was

never any hint of that other person, either at the crime scene or when I'd been tracking the dead man.

If there *was* another nut behind the wheel, though, then he'd found himself the perfect killer. One that did whatever he was raised to do without question or deviation, then fell down dead again afterward.

Except that *this* man, whether he be zombie or something else, didn't seem to be showing any signs of slowing down or dropping dead.

Although surely a dead body could only move around for so long before bits began falling off or rotting started becoming a real problem.

And given the scent I was following, he was *definitely* well on the way to putrefaction. It was surprising he could move so quickly without doing himself serious damage.

I shivered and rubbed my arms, suddenly glad that I made a habit of keeping my laser in the car. Its weight was a comfortable presence in my back pocket.

Once upon a time, a thought like that might have scared me, but I'd been through too much of late. Even a werewolf intent on *not* becoming a mindless killer needed the help of a weapon occasionally.

I walked on. In the distance, a freight train whistled, the lonely sound mingling with the roar of traffic traveling along nearby Pascoe Vale road. Little seemed to be moving through these streets however, although there were lights on in several of the nearby houses.

I sucked in a breath, my nostrils flaring as I sorted through the aromas running through the cold air. My dead-smelling killer had moved into a side street. I followed, my

sneaker-clad feet making little noise on the concrete. I'd mostly given up wearing heels for everyday work. The wooden stilettos might come in handy for staking the occasional rogue vampire, but running in the things across some of the terrain we had to traverse had proved too damned dangerous. And heels and ladders definitely *didn't* go together—as I'd discovered a week ago when I was chasing a rogue vamp. I'd earned another scar for that—this one across the top of my left hand. The same hand that was missing its little pinky.

The bad guys seemed to have a vendetta against my left limb.

The dead scent was getting stronger, though there was still no sign of the man. The warehouses that lined either side of this street were dark and silent, and the only life visible was the occasional cat.

The street came to a T-intersection. I paused, looking left then right. Still no sign of him in the darkness. I blinked, flicking to the infrared of my vampire vision, but the night remained devoid of the heat of life.

Which I guess, if he was dead, made total sense.

I followed my nose and headed left. Down at the end of the street was a gate and, beyond that, huge towers of paper and plastic. A recycling plant, obviously.

But why would a dead guy want to go to a recycling plant? It couldn't be an effort to get rid of any sort of evidence, because if he'd been intent on doing that, he wouldn't have left the mutilated bodies of his victims in easy viewing of anyone who happened to pass by.

So was this really some weird form of revenge

killing, as Jack had surmised, or was something stranger going on?

I suspected the latter, but that might be just my pessimistic streak coming out. After all, fate had a way of ensuring shit always got flung my way when I least wanted or needed it.

And in the midst of moon heat, it was most definitely unwanted.

The scent swung right, drawing me onto a smaller street, barely big enough to get a truck through. The wind filled the night with a forlorn moan as it gusted through the many broken windows that seemed to dominate the buildings here, and the shadows became thicker with the absence of street lighting.

Not that I needed light, especially when the moon shone so brightly, but it still felt better to enter a street lit by lights than one without them. Especially when I was alone, and following God-knows-what.

The thought had me touching my ear to turn on the tracker part of the com-link device that had been inserted a while ago. All Directorate personnel involved in field operations, whether guardians or not, now had them. Jack and the other division heads shared a dislike of losing people, and the units gave not only an instant position but allowed communication if things went sour.

Of course, in my line of work, things going sour usually meant death. And, more often than not, the cavalry had been known to arrive far too late. So far, my brother and I had been lucky, but given fate's delight in throwing curveballs our way, I often wondered just

how long it would be before she threw us the biggest curveball of all.

Death *wasn't* something I really wanted to dwell on, but I guess when I was dealing it out myself on an almost daily basis, it was hard *not* to think about it hitting closer to home than my twin, Rhoan, and I might like. Especially when his lover, Liander, had barely escaped his end three weeks ago.

I didn't want to die. I didn't want Rhoan to die, either, but the fact was, death would probably come hunting us sooner rather than later. There was no way around it. Not unless I wanted to become a vampire, and really, I enjoyed sunshine too much. I didn't want to wait a thousand years to be able to enjoy it again.

From somewhere up ahead came the slight rattle of metal. I slowed and listened intently. The sound didn't repeat, and the hair rose on the back of my neck. Something was decidedly off—something other than a walking dead man.

I moved into the deeper shadows, hugging the old buildings. The wind continued to moan, and the chill in the air seemed to be increasing. Or maybe that was just an amplifying side effect of the fear sitting like a weight in my stomach.

The street swung around to the left. Factories continued to line either side, but directly ahead was a high chain-link security fence. Beyond it was the recycling plant. I couldn't see my quarry moving through the corridors of paper, but logic—and the slight metallic rattle I'd heard—suggested he'd climbed the fence and was now in there somewhere.

And yet...

I looked at the building to my left. Like the other warehouses in this street, it was run-down and abandoned. Tin rattled on the roof and the wind whistled through the many broken windows. I could smell nothing out of place, and there was no sign of life-heat in the building—which in itself didn't mean anything when I was chasing a dead man.

But he was a dead man with no apparent mind of his own, so he was obviously running into this area for a reason. Given he'd done a quick side step last night to lose me, I was betting he was trying the same thing tonight. And I was *also* betting that he'd probably gone into the warehouse rather than the more obvious recycling plant.

However, if he *was* meeting his maker in that warehouse, why couldn't I see them? Was it because there seemed to be no light source whatsoever in the heart of the building, or was there something blocking it? Even though my infrared vision was far better than the night-vision devices used by the military, no infrared was going to work properly in utter blackness. Both the man-made devices and vampire vision needed some sort of heat or light source available.

If I was the betting type, I'd be putting money on the fact that something was blocking me. After all, a warehouse with *that* many broken windows surely wouldn't have a pit of blackness at its center.

I looked back at the fence. The scent trail and the metallic rattling I'd heard were both indicative of the

fact that my quarry had gone that way. But I'd trusted those two things before and had lost him.

Perhaps it was time to trust my other senses, which were pulling me toward the warehouse.

Of course, my clairvoyance was often a nebulous thing that refused to be pinned down to any direct information. Jack and the Directorate magi he'd roped in to train me kept insisting that not only would it become stronger as time went by, but I *would* learn how to fully utilize it. So far, they'd been proved wrong. Although if my ability to see souls was part of my clairvoyance, then maybe they weren't so off the mark. The damn things were now conversing with me as easily as the living, although that was one part of the gift I could have done without.

The ice of the night seemed to intensify as I neared the broken building. I ignored the chills running down my spine, and followed the graffiti-littered wall until I found the main entrance. The door hung off one of its hinges and swayed slightly in the soft breeze. Beyond it was a tumble of glass, smashed boxes, and rubbish. The air drifting out was rank with the smell of urine and unwashed bodies, suggesting this might have been a squat for the homeless, even though I couldn't see any life-heat within. Maybe something had chased them off.

Something that resembled a dead man walking.

I reached back to grab my laser, then turned it on and stepped inside, keeping my back to the wall as I quickly scanned the first room. A half-circular desk dominated the left side of the room, which suggested

this had once been the warehouse's main reception area. There were two glass-fronted offices along the wall behind the desk, but there was nothing or no one hiding in either of them. Not that I could see or smell, anyway.

There were several doorways leading off this main room and, after a moment's hesitation, I chose the one directly ahead. That's where the big blackness lay, and that's probably where I'd find my dead man—if my psi senses were right and he hadn't actually gone over the fence as my more mundane senses of smell and hearing had suggested.

Glass crunched softly under my feet as I picked my way through the rubbish, my laser held at the ready and every sense I had tuned for the slightest hint of movement or life. But there was nothing. The only sounds were the wind and my own breathing, which wasn't quite as steady as I would have liked.

The doorway led into a short corridor and, at the far end, a set of swinging doors. Two other doors led off the corridor itself, but neither of these were open. I hesitated at the swinging doors, flicking to infrared and searching the room beyond. Once again, there was nothing to suggest there was any sort of life—or un-life—laying in wait, but that strange blackness was filling it.

I went through carefully and quietly, catching the door with my free hand before it could swing back and clip the other door. The less noise I made, the better. I had no idea what lay beyond that blot of darkness, but I

wasn't about to announce my presence any more than necessary.

The air in this room was still, untouched by the wind that played about the rest of the building. Despite my earlier confidence that the inner building had to have some light, it didn't. There were absolutely no windows or skylights. It was little more than a big, black metal box. A box that held a heart of deeper darkness.

I scooted to the right, keeping my footsteps light and my back to the wall. Though I still wasn't getting any readings from infrared, I had a sense that something was near. My internal radar for dead things was jumping. Whether it was my zombie or something else, I had no idea. I certainly couldn't smell either the zombie or anyone else up ahead.

I reached the side wall. There were rust stains and small holes on the concrete floor—indications that machinery of some sort had once stood here. The smell of grease was prevalent, and a good inch of it coated the wall. It smelled faintly of age and rot, and made me wonder just what had been manufactured here.

Keeping a few inches between myself and that grimy wall, I padded along, listening intently for any sounds that might indicate I was getting nearer to my quarry. There was nothing. If not for the fact that my "other" senses were insisting that something *was* near, I might have thought I'd lost him yet again. It was almost as if that black blot in the center—whatever it was—was sucking up all sound and motion.

I crept nearer. Power began to slide across my

skin—a tingling, almost burning sensation that somehow felt unclean. I frowned, my steps slowing as the darkness in front of me seemed to grow—deepen—somehow. I reached out with my free hand and felt an odd sort of resistance to my touch before it gave way. My hand moved forward, into that darkness, and became lost. I knew my hand was there, but I could no longer see it.

Great. I was about to walk into a black hole, and who knew just where I was going to come out?

I blew out a breath, then wrapped the shadows of the room around me, using my vampire skill to hide my body from view. I might be walking into a trap, but I had no intention of doing so in plain sight.

I stepped into the blackness. I might as well have walked into a wall of glue. It pulled at me, making every step a battle. I pushed forward, fighting the gluey blackness, until sweat began to trickle down my spine. Just when I was beginning to think the blackness might never end, I was free of it—the suddenness of it leaving me staggering forward for several steps before I caught my balance.

The darkness beyond the black wall wasn't as deep, meaning I could actually see again. Ahead of me was the zombie. By his side were two big, black dogs. Only I didn't think they were ordinary dogs—not if the scent of sulfur was anything to go by. Sulfur was the scent of demons. I'd come across it once before, when I was trying—with Quinn's help—to close down a demon gate. It had been guarded by a hellhound, and the bastard had almost torn me to pieces. I didn't fancy meet-

ing two of them—not without any sort of weapon that would do them damage, like holy water and silver. God, it was tempting—very tempting—just to step back into the gluey darkness and disappear.

Only I had a job to do, and they didn't seem to be noticing me anyway. They were too busy looking upward, just like the zombie. I followed their lead. Above them, a gantry stretched from one side of the room to the other—a rusting metal structure that seemed far older than the building itself. On it sat a crow.

And while it looked like an ordinary everyday bird, I doubted there was anything plain or ordinary about it, if only because whatever it was had the complete and undivided attention of both the hellhounds and the zombie. If it wasn't a shifter, then it was undoubtedly something a whole lot *less* pleasant, and I really *didn't* want to discover what. Especially with the bitter taste of evil that seemed to be rolling off it.

I raised the laser and pressed the trigger. The crow must have sensed the shot at the last moment, because it dived sideways—a very uncrowlike movement if I'd ever seen one—and the bright laser beam shot past its wing.

I fired again. It squawked and avoided the laser a second time, moving faster than I would have thought possible for anything not a vampire.

I swore and shot the zombie instead. The beam hit him neck height, severing left to right. His head rolled slowly off and made a wet splash as it hit the floor. His body crumpled and did the same.

I shuddered. Rotting flesh indeed.

I raised my gaze to the ceiling again. The crow squawked even as I sighted the laser, and the two hellhounds turned as one, their beady yellow eyes gleaming in the darkness and their thick canines bared.

The bird was definitely in control of the beasties.

I pulled the trigger, firing off a final shot at the crow, then turned and ran into the black glue. A howl ripped across the air, but the sound abruptly closed off as the blackness wrapped itself around me.

But I knew they were behind me. I could smell the thick scent of sulfur getting ever closer. It seemed the blackness wasn't quite the hindrance to them that it was to me, and sweat broke out across my brow as I realized that I wasn't going to get out of this before they were on me.

Then a hand came out of nowhere, wrapped itself around my arm, and hauled me none too gently upward.