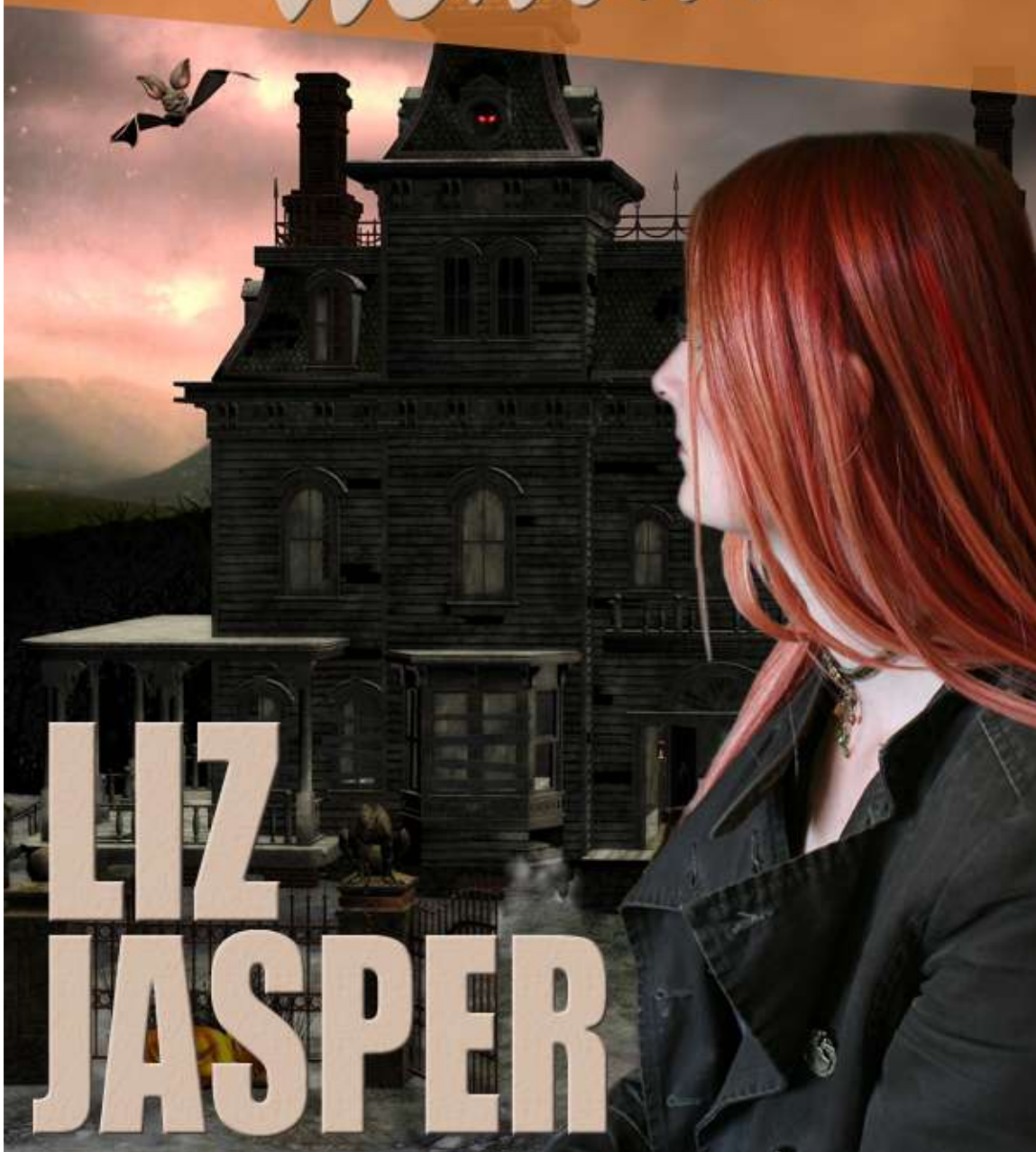


UNDERDEAD IN *denial*



You are reading an excerpt from *Underdead In Denial* by Liz Jasper.

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*******What others are saying about *Underdead In Denial********

"Jo is one of those comfort characters. You know the ones you can't wait to revisit, the ones that leave you smiling and nodding as you race through their newest adventure... another favorite and keeper."~~Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine

"5 Angels. Very funny!"~~ Fallen Angel Reviews

"A lovable main character leading the way!" ~~ParaNormal Romance

Chapter One

If it hadn't been for the faint odor of gym socks I never would have believed I was in the theater at the Bayshore Academy.

The stage was transformed into an amazingly accurate replica of the school quad, complete with real grass (I could smell the sweet, earthy sod from my seat.) and a Broadway quality backdrop of the Long Beach shoreline. It was so impeccably rendered I half expected the Queen Mary to pull up from its moorings and glide over the horizon in a belch of black smoke. But the sets were nothing next to the actors, who were emoting like soap opera stars in Emmy Award season. I wasn't sure if what I was watching was spectacularly good or spectacularly bad, but I couldn't look away.

I gasped with the rest of the audience as a rowdy mob of football players produced a noose and went after head cheerleader Esmeralda. And as they strung her up between the goal posts and let her swing, I actually rose in teacherly alarm.

I knew from watching copious amounts of television (You grade ninety-six copies of each assignment, then judge me.) that the actress had a safety harness hidden under her cheerleader costume. Even so, it was a *very* convincing effect and as my initial tug of alarm dissipated, I couldn't help but wish the play had called for a more exciting death.

I bet the director really could have done something with a play that called for, say, a knife fight. I wondered what he would have used. Some sort of special mail-order stage blood and a pump?

I was halfway through imagineering a really good design to simulate arterial spray that involved those little packets of ketchup you get at fast-food restaurants before I realized what I was doing. Obviously, I'd been spending too much time with my middle school students. Bloodthirsty things.

As Esmeralda gave her fifth and final death spasm, someone cut the lights, plunging the theater into inky darkness. A faint breeze emanating from the back of the theater broke the stale, noisome air and as I gratefully turned in my seat, I could just make out a slight, misshapen silhouette standing in an open doorway. A spotlight snapped on, identifying the hunching figure as our hero, Quasimodo, the Chess Club Chairman. As he limped convulsively up the aisle to where the cheerleader's body lay in a pool of golden light, an unseen figure up in the balcony keened a lament.

I whispered across the seat arm to Becky, "This isn't exactly the Disney version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, is it?"

Becky is the high school's hot-shot chemistry teacher. She is also one of my best friends and the reason I was spending Thursday night watching this unexpectedly artsy high school production instead of polishing my lesson plan for tomorrow. Or grading lab reports. Or surfing the net for ideas on how to make my eighth grade students interested enough in earth science that they didn't seek their own entertainment in the form of lobbing spitballs. At me.

"Shhh!" With an impatient jerk of her hand, Becky waved me to silence.

“Don’t you shush me. You dragged me to this...”

Becky wasn’t listening to me or the play. She was craning her neck to get a better view of the backstage area just visible from our seats at the far right of the theater. Her slim black-clad figure hummed with so much energy I could almost see sparks shooting from her spiky, bleached-then-dyed-silver hair.

I let my curious gaze follow her line of sight. She was fully checking out the director, a compact, thirtyish man who was giving stage directions with mouthed words and wild flourishes of his arms.

“Oh for the love of Pete,” I said. “Not you too.”

Dan Sterling—Drama Dan, as the students adoringly called him—had made another conquest. I tried to figure out what the big thrill was. I suppose Dan looked a *little* like Leonardo DiCaprio, if you imagined the famous actor redrawn with crayon colors. Dan Sterling’s eyes were sky blue, his cheeks were lightly flushed with pink sherbet and his hair was yellow straight out of the basic eight crayon box. He might be a little too boyishly handsome for my tastes, but that didn’t seem to be keeping just about everyone else from joining the Drama Dan fan club.

A good half of the students—roughly the female half—were wildly in love with our interim director. I hated to think what would become of all his mooning groupies on Monday when our regular drama teacher came back from maternity leave and Drama Dan returned to his job as the lead actor at the Milverne Theater.

I gave up on getting anything lucid out of Becky and returned my attention to the stage, where an anguished (I could tell from the loudness of his chest thumps.) chess-club-Quasimodo was mourning cheerleader-Esmeralda.

All at once the little hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I was trying to figure out how Drama Dan had managed that particular stage trick when Carol, my other best friend at Bayshore, slid quietly into the seat I’d reserved for her. Not wanting to miss whatever was coming next, I kept my eyes firmly glued to the stage.

“It’s about time you showed up,” I told Carol in a low voice. “This play is something else. You’re going to have to come back tomorrow night and see it from the beginning.”

“Is that an invitation?” The low, silky voice wasn’t Carol’s, not even close.

The stage lights went up and the audience around me went wild, clapping and whistling at whatever was happening on stage. I sat frozen in my seat, staring at the man occupying the seat next to me, watching the lights from the stage dance over the sharp cheekbones and harsh planes of his lean face. Brilliant blue eyes the color of the night sky just before the sun went down glinted with intelligence and humor.

It had been months since I’d seen Will. He hadn’t changed a bit. His inky black hair was still longer than current fashion. He still favored beautifully tailored black clothes that undoubtedly cost more than I made in six months. I couldn’t have clicked my heels and wished up a more gorgeous male. And as if that weren’t enough, he was intelligent,

had a wry sense of humor and could charm chocolate off a newly dumped woman with PMS. He was, decidedly, perfect in every conceivable way.

Except for the tiny personality flaw of wanting me dead.

Undead, actually. Like him.

For one wild moment, I considered jumping to my feet and telling everyone to make a run for it as there was a vampire loose in the theater. But I didn't. No one would have believed me. Everybody knows vampires don't exist.

As if in mockery of that thought, the very real warmth from Will's lean, lithe body radiated across the armrest. Oh, he existed all right. And, God help me, he smelled fabulous. I have no idea if it was cologne or aftershave or just the soap he used combined with his natural scent. I've never been up on that sort of thing, but whatever it was, it was making my hormones hum as hard as my nerves.

I first met Will nearly a year ago. After a whirlwind sixty-minute courtship, he apparently decided I would do and sunk his teeth into my neck. Thinking him some sort of Goth freak who was taking the vampire thing a *little too* seriously, I fought him off. But not quickly enough. Not before he'd managed to turn me nearly into a vampire.

So that's me, Jo Gartner. I have my mother's red hair (The original red-gold shade, before her colorist, Rafael, got hold of her head and sanity.) and my father's hazel eyes. I'm five foot ten and I'm almost Undead.

Last spring the secret had nearly cost me my life and I'd begged Will to leave me alone. To my surprise, he had honored that request. I hadn't seen hide nor hair of him, all spring, all summer, all fall...

Until now.

A cold rush of fear snapped me out of my open-mouthed shock. "What are you —"

Will put a finger to my lips.

"Shhh, let's watch the rest of the play. I admit to being intrigued by this...unique interpretation of the classic." As he spoke, his mouth brushed my ear, sending warm shivers down my spine. Goose bumps of terror popped out everywhere else.

He relaxed back against his seat with every indication of enjoying the play. I sat bolt upright and tried to keep the air going in and out of my lungs.

The play ended with a finale that made the audience jump to their feet in a frenzy of applause. The house lights went up and I glanced at Will. He was looking boggle-eyed at the stage.

He said, "That was..."

"I know." For a moment, I forgot he was a walking death threat and we were in complete harmony.

Becky was halfway into the aisle at the side of the theater before she thought better of leaving me, her date, without a word. Catching my eye, she pointed surreptitiously to the stage to let me know she was heading over to congratulate the director. She had taken two brisk steps in that direction before she stopped and did a double take at Will.

Her black eyebrows shot into her spiky silver bangs. And then she stared dreamily at him, her urgent mission apparently forgotten.

“Don’t let us keep you.” I gave her a shove toward the stage before she could introduce herself. I thought it best not to widen her circle of friends to include vampires.

Becky wrenched her gaze away and gave herself a slightly befuddled shake. Meeting my eyes, she flashed me a look that said, “Well done, Jo, we’ll talk later,” and left for the stage, her progress slow and a little unsteady.

Will’s sapphire gaze followed her retreating form. “She looks familiar.” His voice was thoughtful and contained that hint of an accent that I had never been able to place.

Becky had been the one, in all innocence, to point Will out that fateful night last December. I didn’t want him to think of Becky as “familiar”. I didn’t want him to think of Becky at all. It was bad enough he’d met my mother.

“How about some coffee?” I had no idea if he drank coffee—or ate, or imbibed anything but blood—but the crowd was relocating to the foyer and I wanted to stay with them.

It might seem irresponsible of me to encourage the head of the local vampire clan to linger in the midst of so many innocent people, but I knew Will wouldn’t do anything to me, or anyone else, in a crowd. It was in his interest to keep his identity secret. Crowds, even those comprised of well-mannered prep-school parents, teachers, and students, had a bad habit of turning into a panicked, torch-carrying mob when they learned they had a vampire in their midst.

Granted, in this day and age it would be hard for anyone to locate torches and pitchforks in a pinch. But after tonight I’d put my money on finding just about anything in Drama Dan’s prop room and this was a resourceful group.

With the force of a fast-moving river, the departing crowd pushed us into the foyer and dropped us off in an eddy by the refreshment table. I grabbed a Styrofoam cup of coffee and a small plate of the cafeteria’s rock-hard pink cookies and pushed them into Will’s hands.

We were greeted, almost immediately, by a tall, plump spinster in her sixties and a small, prissy man a couple of decades younger. The school librarians. Gossip central had arrived.

I reminded myself that I wanted to be around people. Any people.

Janice spoke first in a quiver of jowls. “Jo, don’t you look lovely. It’s so nice to see you in a skirt.”

An unsaid “for once” hung in the air. Janice wasn’t shy about voicing her—their—opinion that “the students have a dress code, and so do we”. Becky had been the librarians’ special project since the day she stepped on campus in Doc Martens and low-slung black jeans, and she avoided both the librarians and the library like the plague.

I usually did too, but with Will on one side of me, the junior librarian mouth breathing on the other, a wall behind and Janice blocking any chance of forward escape, I was trapped. Janice went for me like an evangelist sighting a heathen in the holy land.

“Isn’t that sweater *nice* on you, Jo. Green is always handsome with red hair. So much better than that pink you wore the other day. And how nice to see you out of your running shoes. Why you look practically dainty in those tiny heels. I always say, a tall woman shouldn’t be afraid of her height. And is this your young man?” She peered nearsightedly up at Will, who had her by a full half a head though she was only an inch shorter than me.

Around us, the crowd was rapidly thinning as parents herded their children to the parking lot and home for the several hours of homework they undoubtedly still had ahead of them. The wealth of opportunities this presented wasn’t lost on Will, who was slowly but surely edging me away from the librarians. Reversing tactics, I dug in my feet. The last thing I was going to do was allow myself to be led into a dark corner where I would be alone with Will.

The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could take them back. “Janice, Gilbert, this is Will.”

Will’s eyes narrowed as he shot an unreadable look in my direction. I felt his body tense next to mine and for a moment, I thought he was going to make a break for it, dragging me with him.

He put down his untouched coffee and then his cookie plate. Smiling widely, he shook hands with both librarians before draping an arm possessively around my shoulders. He smiled lovingly down at my face. “I adore Jo.”

Both librarians sighed. Oh God, what had I done? The way these two worked, by morning the whole school would be planning my engagement party.

To a vampire.

Who, as the love of my life and soon to be father of a dozen children (I should be glad they didn’t know Will was immortal or it would be twenty dozen children.) would be informed immediately of my whereabouts anytime he showed up.

I was so horrified I broke my own rule and unthinkingly bit into a rock-hard pink sugar cookie.

At the thunderous crunch, Will’s gaze slid from the pain-clamped right side of my mouth to the trio of pink sugar cookies on the plate I’d given him.

Our eyes met and held. Moving deliberately, he stretched the hand resting on my shoulder to gently brush pink crumbs from my lips.

Then he turned back to the librarians, who were watching as if we were the most exciting thing since the invention of the printing press. Will’s polite smile turned decidedly wolfish.

“What a fascinating play. Jo and I had such a lovely time tonight. She was just taking me backstage to meet some of the actors. If any of them are still around...”

I opened my mouth to protest and choked on the cookie. Will patted me on the back.

"I think Jo needs some air." Voice thrumming with concern, Will steered me out the door and into the cool October night. His arm around my shoulders was as warm, solicitous and solid as a vise.

"I'll walk you to your car." He wasn't offering, he was telling.

There were still plenty of people milling about campus. Will adjusted his pace to maximize the distance between us and the other groups strung along the path.

I stole a glance back toward the theater. From all the excited whispering and surreptitious pointing, the librarians were busy spreading the word about my new boyfriend.

Will turned to see what I was looking at. A wicked smile curved his lips.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"Ah, she talks. I was beginning to wonder if that 'cookie' had permanently soldered your jaw shut. Why ever did you eat it?"

"I— Why are you here, Will?"

"It's been a while. I've missed you."

He lifted his hand from my shoulder to run a finger lightly down the side of my neck. His touch lingered at my jugular.

I didn't breathe. I couldn't.

He watched me for a moment and then his hand dropped back to drape negligently around my shoulders and he began telling me a story about a recently released movie. As if we really were that image of the happy, normal couple we'd sold to the librarians.

It was a very funny story. Or maybe it was the reassurance of having people in front and behind us on the path as we made our slow way across the grassy quad toward the teacher's parking lot. Somehow, by the time we reached my old boxy gray Volvo, I'd regained my equilibrium.

I dug my car keys out of a pocket and Will gently removed his arm from around my shoulders as if he really were the gentleman he professed to be.

I probably could have jumped in my car and squealed away. Instead I leaned back against the driver's-side door, crossed my arms and faced him.

"What do you want, Will?"

He stepped forward and touched his lips to mine in a light kiss that sent traitorous quivers along my nerve endings.

"I thought that was obvious."

"I see. Absence makes the heart grow fonder? A little trite for someone of your age. How old *are* you, anyway?"

His face lit with a sudden grin. "I have missed you, Josephine Gartner."

A bittersweet pang beat against my chest. Confused, I ignored it. "You didn't come to see the play? The drama kids will be disappointed. They worked so hard littering the town with posters."

"I came to see you. You decided to live in this world." A wave of his hand took in the administration building, the academic quad, and the gym hulking in the distance. His gaze remained fixed on me, suddenly serious. His mouth was drawn down in an abstracted frown. "There's a place for you in...mine, when you want it."

"Is that what you want? To be my boyfriend?"

He smiled. "Are you offering?"

A rusty Toyota idling at the gate pulled out onto the street and I realized with a start that the teacher's parking lot was deserted. So did Will. The air crackled with the awareness between us. He shifted closer. Only a fraction of an inch separated his hard, lithe body and mine.

He said, "'You meet your destiny on the road you take to avoid it.' Carl Jung."

"Better than sitting and doing nothing. Jo Gartner."

He pulled me hard against him and kissed me. I had forgotten how achingly good it felt to be in his arms. I forgot to be scared. Forgot to be discreet.

Chattering voices pealed like warning bells from the path around the side of the administration building. I pulled myself together enough to push Will away.

By the time the group (To this day I have no idea who was in it.) rounded the corner into the parking lot, Will was leaning casually against the SUV parked next to me, gorgeously unruffled, appearing every inch the chivalrous male. He wasn't looking at the group. His midnight gaze was fixed on me. He watched and waited as I somehow fit my key in the lock, got in, started up my car and drove out of the parking lot.

When I looked back, he was gone. Another black shadow in the night.

The fear I had kept at bay came back with a vengeance, shimming down deep into my gut like a filet knife. I reached up a hand to touch my neck. I didn't really think he could have bitten me without my knowledge, but then Will was capable of a lot of things I didn't understand.

The skin was smooth and dry. No new marks.

I pulled up to a stop sign and rested my forehead against the cool vinyl of the steering wheel. "Oh God. Oh God. Oh God."

Someone behind me leaned on the horn. I jolted upright and drove forward. I realized I was cold. Freezing. I started to shiver. My hands shook so bad, I had a hard time keeping them on the wheel.

At the next stop sign, I pulled to the curb to let a couple of impatient tailgaters pass and dug for my cell phone. As soon as my fingers closed around it, the shaking subsided a little and I started driving again. Maybe I should have waited until I was calmer, but I didn't. Movement made me feel less like a sitting duck. But only a little.

I desperately needed someone to talk to and there was only one person—one human—who knew my secret. I hadn't spoken to him in months, but I thought this was a good time to renew our acquaintance. I fumbled with the buttons on my cell phone.

The number rang and rang and finally switched over to a robotic recording saying the number was no longer in service. I jabbed the "end call" button and cursed technology for depriving me of the satisfaction of banging a receiver back on its cradle.

At the next stop sign, I called the main switchboard at the local police station and asked to be transferred to Detective Raines. He answered on the first ring.

"Dammit, Gavin, what the hell do you think you're doing, changing your cell phone number?"

There was a slight pause. "Jo?"

"How the hell am I supposed to reach you?"

"By calling the police station, as you just did."

I hung there in stunned silence. It'd taken me weeks of knowing him last spring to get his personal cell phone number, and I had thought it meant I could rely on him. Apparently I'd misunderstood his willingness to help me. "Why did I think you could help? Goodbye, Detective Raines."

I ended the call and cursed him until I pulled into a parking space right in front of my apartment. Go figure. The night all hell broke loose, I got the number one parking spot. There's the universe in balance for you.

Stifling a noise that was half sob, half slightly hysterical laughter, I grabbed my book bag from the passenger seat and bolted for my apartment. I took the stairs at a run, as if a dozen hungry vampires were after me. Which, for all I knew, they were.

When I got inside, I jittered around, turning on every single light and ended up in the kitchen. I had the freezer open for a full five minutes before I accepted there wasn't any ice cream inside. I slammed it shut, pulled butter and eggs out of the fridge and got to work on comfort food. After a few minutes of alternating nuking and stirring two sticks of butter into a soft fluffy paste, I started to calm down. My hands were almost steady as I measured out white and brown sugar and cracked an egg into the mixing bowl.

I had the first tray of triple chocolate chip cookies in the oven and was almost humming with denial when someone knocked on my door. I glanced at the oven clock. It was after eleven. I wiped batter off my hands on a yellow daisy kitchen towel and went through the small living room to stand in front of the door.

"Who is it?"

"Gavin."

I flicked on the outside light and opened the tiny peephole door that local builders had favored back in the twenties. It was Gavin all right. I re-latched the peephole, and after a short internal debate, let him in.

The last time I'd seen him, long hours and the strain of a murder investigation had aged him so he looked closer to forty than his actual age of thirty. A new man stood before me. He was as trim and fit as ever, but a summer of biathlons had given him what my mother would have called a "healthy glow". He was...relaxed, down to the golden stubble wreathing his jaw.

My summer had been spent cowering indoors, hiding from sunlight. I felt like a pasty, redheaded mushroom and resented every sun-bleached hair on his head.

"Detective," I said, crossing my arms and fighting the urge to drop kick his toned butt back out the door.

"Hello, Jo. Long time no see." He looked at me closely, but as usual his inscrutable light gray eyes gave nothing of his thoughts away.

He sniffed the air and headed, uninvited, for the kitchen. "You're baking cookies."

He pulled out a chair from the small table in the breakfast nook. "I don't suppose that's why you called me?" He turned the chair so he could face me and sat down, stretching his long legs into the kitchen.

"No."

The timer went off. I pulled the first batch of cookies out of the oven, transferred half onto an inverted brown paper grocery bag to cool and the other half to a plate. I handed Gavin a napkin and the plate before I realized what I was doing.

I stood frozen at the second horror of the evening. My mother had rubbed off on me.

Gavin picked up a cookie and took a large bite. The chips were still molten and he had to breathe quickly through his open mouth to cool it.

"I was watching the high school drama club's fall production tonight. Will stopped in to say hello."

Gavin swallowed his mouthful of cookie. "I see. Had you invited him?"

I snatched the plate of cookies off the table and plucked the half-eaten one from his hand. "I don't know why I bother with you."

Gavin look mournfully at the cookie plate in my hand. "Really, Jo. You didn't used be this sensitive."

"Oh? And what makes you an authority on my character?"

His face took on a shuttered look. "Nothing." He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his broad, well-muscled chest, suddenly businesslike. "What did Will want?"

I felt myself blush.

"Right. Anything else?"

I gave him *a look*, and I didn't care if it had enough uncontrolled vampire venom in it to reduce him to a pile of ashes. "If you're not going to take this seriously, why don't you leave?"

He held up his hands in surrender. "You're right. I'm sorry."

When he spoke again, he sounded more like the old, worrywart Gavin. "I assume this is the first time you've seen him in a while."

My head dipped in a tight nod. "Since last spring."

He took a small wire-bound notebook out of his jacket pocket and sighed. "Why don't you tell me everything Will said." Fishing out the ballpoint pen that was tucked inside the spiral, he flipped to a blank page.

He'd asked nicely and I was scared enough that the old maxim, "a burden shared is a burden halved" sounded pretty good to me.

Who was I kidding? I would have made him listen if I'd had to tie him up to get his attention.

"Let's see..." As I forced myself to think back over the whole evening without skipping over the more troubling bits, I nibbled on a cookie to calm myself. Gavin was watching me with a funny look on his face and I realized it was the one I'd stolen out of his hand. I put the cookie down, gave him back his plate and, closing my eyes, told him everything I could remember.

"Not much to go on, is it?" he said when I stopped talking.

"No."

Gavin stood, put his empty plate in the sink and looked longingly at the few cookies left cooling on the counter before leaving the kitchen. He did his usual circuit around my tiny apartment, checking all the windows to make sure they were shut and locked. I followed him, trying not to show how nervous I was at the prospect of being alone that night.

"I think it would be a good idea if you got home before sundown, at least for a while. I'll talk to the chief and see if I can't get a couple of uniforms to drive by your place at night."

Officially, Gavin was "visiting" from a small community up north to "learn" investigation techniques from the Long Beach Police Department detectives. Only the Chief of Police, and maybe one or two other necessary people affiliated with the department, such as the coroner, knew Gavin was there to quietly rid Long Beach of vampires, and they all wanted to keep it that way. Whenever a suspicious case came down the pike, the chief made sure it ended up on Gavin's desk.

My apartment, for as much of my meager paycheck that it ate up each month, is absurdly small and in no time at all we'd circled back to the front door. Gavin dug into his back pocket and handed me a card. "My new number's on that. Call anytime."

He fixed his silvery-grey gaze on me for a long, silent moment before he turned to leave.

All at once, my nerves seemed to catch up with me. I caught his arm before he went through the door. He stopped and turned slowly back to face me.

"Do you think I should be worried?" I asked.

The hard grooves of last fall returned to Gavin's face as he dropped the pretense of trying to make me feel better. "Yes."