“Crap,” Holly muttered, staring down at the sheaf of papers she’d just stepped on. The small disc stapled to the top corner told her that it was the paperwork for one of their clients. It included the burial permit, the coroner’s certificate, the application for cremation and the coversheet with the client’s name and info . . . and it should have been given to John Byron when he arrived to start his shift at 4:30 that afternoon. Obviously, it hadn’t. This bundle must have fallen off her desk at some point that day.

Holly continued to stand there for several seconds, simply staring at the bundle. She didn’t even remove her foot, because once she did, she’d have to do something about it . . . like take it to the crematorium . . . and she really didn’t want to go down there. Not at this hour. Making the trek during the day was one thing, but it was just past midnight now. She’d have to make her way through the graveyard to get to the building that housed the chapel;
the columbarium, where the urns rested; and the crematorium, where the bodies were stored and waiting for their turn at the retort.

Retorts is what the owner of Sunny Side Cemetery, Max, had called them when he’d given her the tour the day she’d started. He could call them what he liked, but retort was just a fancy word for the oven where they burned the bodies.

Shuddering at the thought of the coffins shelved in the cooler, Holly closed her eyes briefly. A popular game here seemed to be to freak out the new worker with tales of the “ovens.” Jerry, the day technician, and John, who took the evening shift, as well as her boss, Max, and even Sheila, the receptionist, had all told her one horrific tale or another. But the most memorable was John telling her how the coffins burned away first and the corpses sometimes sat up inside the oven, muscles contracting in the heat and mouths agape as if screaming in horror at their doom. That image had stuck with her, convincing Holly she really didn’t want to be cremated. In fact, she’d decided dying was to be avoided at all costs if possible.

Sighing, she opened her eyes and peered at the papers, wishing she could pretend she hadn’t seen them. After all, in the normal course of events, she wouldn’t have found them until morning. She shouldn’t be here now except she’d got home after work, made dinner and looked for her purse to get her blood tester to check her sugar levels, but hadn’t been able to find it. Thinking she’d probably left her purse in the car and not wanting dinner to get cold, she’d decided the blood test could wait. Of course, by the time dinner was finished, she’d forgotten all about it . . . until she was brushing her teeth before
bed. She’d been halfway done when she’d remembered.

Pulling on her trench coat over her pajamas, Holly had hustled out to the car in her slippers to retrieve her purse . . . only it hadn’t been there either. That had stymied her briefly, and she’d stood in the cold garage for several moments, trying to think where it might be. She’d had it at work when she’d paid Sheila for lunch, Holly recalled. She then tried to bring up a memory of slinging it over her shoulder as she left work, but instead remembered that her hands had been full of tax forms and receipts . . . no purse. Holly hadn’t noticed at the time because her car keys had been in her coat pocket.

After wasting another few minutes debating whether she could just skip testing that night, she’d slouched with resignation and got in the car to drive back to work. Missing one test once in a while wasn’t that bad, but skipping two in a row wasn’t good. Besides, the cemetery was only a ten-minute drive from her home. It simply wasn’t worth risking a diabetic coma.

Of course, Holly thought now, if she’d realized that coming back would mean having to make a trek through the graveyard—in her pajamas no less—she might have risked the coma.

Grimacing, she bent and snatched up the papers. There was nothing for it, she would have to drop them off before heading home. Otherwise, the cremation wouldn’t happen until tomorrow or the next day, which could be a problem depending on when his service was scheduled to take place.

Clasping the papers firmly in one hand, Holly slung her purse over her shoulder with the other. But as she headed out of the office, she couldn’t help thinking
that life would be a lot easier if she were a little less conscientious. Being a responsible type person was really a pain in the ass at times, she thought as she stepped outside and dug her keys out of her pocket.

The funeral home key was easy to find despite the dark night; it was on its own ring. It was also shiny and new, though that was hard to tell in this light. She’d only received it last Friday. It was now Monday. Why did a brand-new and temporary employee have a key to the company? The answer to that was simple enough: because her coworkers weren’t as conscientious and responsible as she was. During her first week there, Max hadn’t shown up much before noon even once, and Sheila, the receptionist who also happened to be Max’s daughter, had been late three times. The apple really hadn’t fallen far from the tree with those two.

On Friday, after twiddling her thumbs in the funeral home parking lot for over an hour and a half for the third morning that week, Holly had let some of her irritation show when Sheila finally arrived. She’d also suggested that perhaps she should start later in the day rather than waste her time and their money sitting in the parking lot waiting. Sheila had what she considered to be a better solution—she’d gone out and had a key made for her. Now Holly could get in on time.

She’d like to believe that it was her conscientiousness and responsible nature that had led Sheila to give her the key, but knew the truth was it was pure laziness and convenience. So long as Holly had a key and could open the office on time, Sheila could be as late as she liked. The other woman had proven that today, when she hadn’t shown up until lunchtime, and then it was with lunch for them both that
Holly hadn’t wanted but had paid her back for her half anyway.

Holly locked the door and turned to glance toward the crematorium, only to pause and frown when she couldn’t see the building. It was the fog. It had made driving here something of a pain, but she’d forgotten about it while in the building. Now, she found herself staring into the misty darkness surrounding her and felt a little shiver of anxiety shimmy its way up her spine.

She was in a graveyard on a dark and foggy moonless night. This was way too much like a scene from a horror movie. Any minute decomposing corpses would begin to claw their way out of the ground and drag themselves toward her, lured by the scent of fresh flesh.

“Get a grip,” Holly muttered to herself.

The sound of her own voice in the night was a bit bracing, but not enough to make her move in the direction of the crematorium.

Holly shuffled her slippered feet briefly, and then sighed and turned to unlock the door again. Perhaps there was an umbrella or something in the office that she could carry with her. Having a weapon, even a mostly useless one, might help boost her courage for the trek ahead.

When a quick search of the offices didn’t turn up an umbrella, a cane, or a flame thrower to fend off those imagined zombie corpses, Holly resorted to grabbing a large pair of scissors she spotted sticking out of the pencil holder on the reception desk. She hefted them briefly, considered their size and then decided they would do. She probably wouldn’t need anything anyway. She was just being a ninny, but felt better clutching the scissors as she headed back outside.
Sadly, there had been no helpful gust of wind to sweep away the fog during the few minutes she’d been inside. If anything, it seemed to her that the fog had thickened, but that might have simply been her own anxiety making it seem that way. It had probably been just as thick earlier as it was now, she reassured herself and wished she had a flashlight.

The thought made her glance toward the parking lot. She kept a flashlight in the glove compartment for emergencies. Holly hurried to her car, unlocked it and settled in the passenger seat to open the glove compartment and make a quick search. Not finding it, she sat back with a sigh, then grabbed the papers and the scissors and got out. She left her purse inside. It would eliminate the possibility of accidentally leaving it behind in the crematorium, she thought as she locked the door.

Trying not to think of movies like *The Fog* or *Night of the Living Dead*, Holly headed determinedly in the direction of the crematorium. She moved as quickly as she dared along the paved path, her ears strain- ing for any sound that might indicate she wasn’t alone. Now that she was resigned to the task, getting it over with and getting back home was all she cared about. It was always better to get unpleasant tasks done quickly.

Unfortunately, it did seem that the unpleasant tasks often took the most time. She knew it was probably just her fear and anxiety, but the walk to the crematorium seemed to be taking much longer than it should. Holly actually began to worry that she’d headed in the wrong direction in the fog and lost her way, that she could be wandering the graveyard in her pajamas until the sun rose to burn away the fog, so was relieved when she spotted the weak
ABOUT A VAMPIRE

Holly released a little pent-up breath of relief once she slipped inside. She’d made it, alive and well and unmolested by rotting corpses.

“Awesome,” she said, and grimaced at how weak her voice sounded in the dimly lit entryway. Giving herself a little shake, Holly started forward, moving quickly past the doors to both chapels and through the columbarium with its niche banks full of urns. Some were visible behind glass, some were hidden by brass plates with names and dates on them, and a lot had flowers and whatnot stuck in special holders on or beside them. Her gaze skated to the floral tributes and then determinedly away as she passed. Holly used to love flowers, but two weeks of working here had changed that. She now associated flowers with death.

She should have been more relaxed now that she was inside. After all, the urns held only the ashes of the dead, which couldn’t spontaneously form into bodies to clamber after her in search of brains, but Holly found herself still anxious and jumpy. It didn’t take much thought to figure out why. She was about to head into the crematorium itself, where coffins holding the newly departed waited to be burned.

During that tour on her first day working here, the process of cremation had been explained to her in fine detail. Definitely more than she’d wanted to know, but apparently, the fact that she was a temp in the office to work on the taxes and wasn’t a sales associate didn’t remove the possibility of her having to explain things to customers. Holly hoped to God
that never happened, because she would not want to explain those details to the loved ones of the newly deceased. It had all seemed gruesome to her.

Holly had never really thought much about cremation, but if she had, she would have assumed that the coffin was rolled into the retort, flames shot out and poof, a nice urn of ashes came out the other end. Not so. First of all, it took much longer than she’d imagined. Despite reaching temperatures of 1600 or 1700 degrees, the actual cremation could take two to three hours. And no neat little urn of ashes came out at the end. The ashes, which weren’t all ashes, remained in the retort to cool, and then a magnet was used to remove anything metal such as fillings and pins. Once cooled, the ashes were swept out onto a tray using a corn broom as if the remains were so much debris on the floor. They were then allowed to cool further before being placed into a cremulator, which looked much like a garbage disposal unit to Holly when she’d peered inside. There the remains, including some bone that didn’t break down completely, were pulverized to make it all smooth and ash-like before it was placed in the urn if one was supplied. Otherwise it was bagged and boxed for the family to take away.

Gruesome, Holly thought as she pushed through another door into a short hall.

Here the dim lighting gave way to glaringly bright fluorescents overhead, and cinder-block walls painted a pale cream. It was almost sterile in its lack of color, and Holly paused and blinked, the buzz of the fluorescents loud in her ears as her attention shifted to the door ahead.

John Byron worked the 4:30-to-12:30 shift and should still be on duty, she thought, glancing at
her wristwatch. She’d met him several times and while he was a bit of a cynic, with a sarcastic, self-deprecating sense of humor, he seemed a nice enough guy. She didn’t think he’d give her too hard a time, although she’d no doubt have to explain why she was at the offices this late. Holly hoped he was alone though and Rick Mexler hadn’t yet arrived. Rick was the man who took over the crematorium from 12:30 to 8:30. She didn’t start work until 9:00 so hadn’t yet met him, but had heard he was a grumpy S.O.B. who didn’t like people. That really wasn’t something she wanted to have to deal with, so she was a bit alarmed when she stepped through the door into the crematorium and heard two men’s voices.

The crematorium was a large long rectangle, but the cooler took up a ten-by-ten space along the left on entering. The rest of the room was a large L shape, with the retorts against the wall that was around the corner of the cooler, out of sight. That was where the voices were coming from, so she didn’t at first see the men. But Holly assumed it was John and Rick.

Her gaze slid to the front of the cooler as she started forward. The door was a metal roll-up almost as wide as a garage door. It was open at the moment, leaving the contents on view—a set of tall wide shelves with various coffins on it. Two were cardboard boxes, two were the less expensive blue coffins, and three were actual oak coffins. She noted that the mini forklift was positioned in front of the open door as if John had been about to retrieve a casket when he’d been interrupted by Rick’s arrival.

Holly turned her gaze away from the cooler, trying not to think of the loved ones resting in the coffins . . . or their intended future. She’d nearly reached the
corner when she realized that neither voice sounded like John Byron. Had he left already? And if so, who was Rick Mexler talking to? She slowed and then paused just out of sight around the corner to listen to the men’s conversation.

Justin Bricker rolled the gurney stacked with dead rogues in front of the retort. After kicking the wheel locks to keep it in place, he then glanced to Anders, his partner in tonight’s endeavor.

With his dark hair and skin and the black leather clothes he wore, Anders was like a shadow in the white room. He was presently looming over the crematorium technician who stood in the corner. The adult male mortal who had opened the back door at their knock now looked like little more than a naughty schoolboy put there for punishment by an irate teacher. Only the child’s resentment was missing . . . the man’s expression was blank as Anders worked to remove their arrival from his memory and keep him where he stood, safely out of the way.

When Anders relaxed and turned to walk toward him, Justin raised his eyebrows. “Are we good?”

Anders nodded. “But we have to be quick. His shift ends in fifteen minutes. A new guy will be showing up soon.”

“No problem. We’ll be out of here by then. As flammable as we are, these guys will be dust in minutes.” Justin turned to open the door of the retort, and whistled at the wave of heat that blew out at him. He glanced to Anders as the other man reached his side. “So . . . What did you do to piss off Lucian?”
Rather than answer, Anders asked, “What makes you think I did anything to piss him off?”

Justin grinned. “Well, he gave me clean-up duty because I pissed him off. So I figure you must be in the same boat.”

Anders merely grunted and pulled the top body off the stack to send it into the retort.

“Come on,” Justin said as the flames shooting into the retort hit the body and it was set ablaze as if it were made of dry straw. “You must have done something.”

Anders watched him pick up another body to send it into the retort. Finally, he said, “I might have made some joke or other about his missing so many meals at home since Leigh turned vegetarian.”

Justin raised his eyebrows. “That wouldn’t bother him . . . unless you said it in front of Leigh.”

Anders grimaced, and then started to pick up the next body. “Unfortunately, Leigh came into the room behind me as I was saying it. I fear she overheard me.”

“Ah.” Justin winced, knowing Anders wouldn’t have deliberately hurt the woman’s feelings. None of the hunters would. Leigh was a good woman, they all liked her. “Yeah, I bet that—Look out! The head—”

Anders froze with this body half off the gurney, but it was too late. One of the heads had been dislodged and was rolling off the edge of the metal table. Justin made a grab for it, but wasn’t in time and the decapitated head hit the floor with a wet splat.

Both men stood and grimaced at the mess, and then Anders nodded toward the crematorium technician and muttered, “I don’t suppose we can make him clean this up?”
“You suppose right. It would be hard to erase that from his memory and ensure it stayed erased,” Justin said with amusement as he watched Anders grab the head by the man’s long hair and toss it into the retort. It rolled forward like a lopsided bowling ball wobbling into the flame jets where it exploded into immediate flames. Shaking his head, he murmured, “Like kindling.”

“Yeah, we’re pretty flammable,” Anders commented.

“I guess that makes us hot stuff,” Justin said and laughed at his own joke. It even brought a smile from Anders as he finished lifting the body he held and sent it into the retort after the head. Anders wasn’t known for a sense of humor, so the smile was the equivalent of a belly laugh from anyone else, Justin thought.

A shuffling sound and a moan drew his attention around to a woman standing at the corner of the cooler. She was short and rounded with a wave of raven black hair pouring over her shoulders and down her back, a shiny black mass against the tan trench coat she wore. She also had one hand pressed against the cooler wall as if to hold herself up, and her complexion was positively green as she stared at the puddle on the floor where the head had been just seconds ago. Justin was pretty sure she’d witnessed the whole head-rolling-off-the-table–onto-the-floor bit. No doubt a gruesome sight for someone not used to dealing with the dead. Hell, he had to do it on a semi regular basis and it had been gruesome to him.

Her eyes lifted reluctantly to him and Anders now and Justin noted that they were a lovely pale blue. She had nice lips too, full and kissable, and the cutest little slightly turned up nose . . . and she was
looking at him and Anders with a sort of mindless horror.

“I have the mess on the floor to clean up, so you get to deal with our tourist here,” Anders announced grimly.

“Thanks,” Justin said sarcastically, but didn’t really mind. He loved women, always had, and this one was a cutie. The only shame was that he wouldn’t get to play with more than her mind. Once he took control of her and wiped her memories, he’d have to avoid contact with her again to avoid those memories returning. Ah well, plenty more in the sea, he thought and concentrated his gaze on her forehead, trying to penetrate her thoughts.

“Well?” Anders asked after a moment. “What are you waiting for? Take control of her.”

Justin blinked, confusion sliding through him and then said weakly, “I can’t.”

“What?” Anders asked with surprise.

“I can’t read her,” he clarified, hardly able to believe it himself. Her thoughts were a complete blank to him.

“Seriously?” Anders asked, eyes narrowing.

“Seriously,” Justin assured him, aware that his voice sounded as dazed as he felt. Damn. He couldn’t read her. That meant—

“Well, then I’d get after her if I were you,” Anders suggested and when Bricker just stared at him in blank confusion, he gestured to where the woman had been just a moment before and pointed out, “She’s running.”

The closing of the door to the hall told him Anders was right before he could turn to see that she was no longer in the room. Cursing, Justin burst into a run. He’d be damned if he was going to let her get
away . . . and not because of what she'd seen. He couldn't read her, and that might mean she could be a life mate for him. Finding a life mate this early in life was pretty damned rare. If he lost her, he wouldn't be likely to find another for centuries . . . maybe millennia, and Justin had no desire to wait millennia to experience what it was like to have a life mate.

She was quick, he noted with admiration on reaching the hall to see her disappearing through the door at the other end. But then panic could be one hell of a motivation and he had no doubt what she'd seen had raised panic in her.

The thought made Bricker frown as he went after her. He would have a lot of explaining to do once he caught up. He'd have to calm her, and then somehow explain that he wasn't some murderous bastard destroying evidence of his dastardly work . . . and all without the aid of mind control. That ought to be interesting, he thought unhappily, and his worrying over that made him move more slowly than he could have. He wanted to work out how to explain things before he caught up. He wanted to do it right the first time, calm her quickly, and gain her trust. He couldn't convince her to be his life mate if she was terrified or suspicious of him. The right words were needed here.

The problem was, Justin didn't have a clue what those right words were and he was running out of time. It did seem a good idea to stop her before she actually left the building, though, and at that moment she was racing through the last hall, flying past the chapels and columbaries, headed for the exit. Letting go of the worry about what to say, Justin picked up speed and caught her arm just as
she reached the door. When he whirled her around, she immediately swung her free arm at him. Ex-pecting paltry girly blows, Justin didn’t react at first and only spotted the scissors she held a heartbeat before they sliced across his throat.

Justin sucked in his breath and released her as pain radiated through him. He saw the fine mist of blood that sprayed out and splashed across her tan coat and immediately covered his throat. The small amount of blood that had showered her told him it wasn’t a deep wound. He was more surprised by the attack than anything else. Still, by the time he turned his attention back to the woman, she’d tugged the door open and was slipping away. Cursing, he ignored his stinging throat and quickly followed.

The woman—his woman—glanced over her shoulder at the sound of the door opening and Justin’s mouth tightened at the sight of her wide terrified eyes. So much for winning her trust, he thought, and then cried out as she stumbled. She had been looking back rather than where she was going and that was her undoing. It left her unprepared for the sudden step down in the sidewalk and she lost her footing. She fell flat on her face. It wasn’t much of a fall though and he fully expected her to pop back up fighting and with feet moving, but instead she lay prone until he reached her side.

Concerned by how still she was, Justin squatted and turned her over. He spotted the bloody gash on her forehead first. She’d obviously hit her head on the sidewalk as she fell. It was a good bump, but not that bad, he noted with a relief that turned to horror as he then spotted the scissors protruding from her chest in the small space where the loosely done up coat didn’t meet. Even as Bricker saw that, her eyes
opened and then widened with pain and fear of a different kind now. She no longer feared him, at least not as much as she feared for her life. The hell of it was, he was afraid for her life too. It looked bad.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to run with scissors?” he said shortly, ripping her coat open to reveal a pink pajama top with white bunnies. The sight startled him enough that he paused briefly, until he noted that those bunnies around the scissors were quickly growing red with the blood bubbling up from her wound. He was sure the presence of the shears in her body was the only thing keeping that blood from spraying out in a fountain. It looked like a mortal wound to him. He was going to lose his life mate before even learning her name.

“Screw that,” Bricker muttered, and jerked his sleeve up to tear into his wrist with the fangs that slid forward in his mouth. He wasn’t losing her.