

Full Moon Rising

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Chapter One

The night was quiet.

Almost too quiet.

Though it was after midnight, it was a Friday night, and Friday nights were usually party nights – at least for those of us who were single and not working night shift. This section of Melbourne wasn't exactly excitement city, but it did possess a nightclub that catered to both human and nonhumans. And while it wasn't a club I frequented often, I loved the music they played. Loved dancing along the street to it as I made my way home.

But tonight, there was no music. No laughter. Not even drunken revelry. The only sound on the whispering wind was the clatter of the train leaving the station and the rumble of traffic from the nearby freeway.

Of course, the club was a well-known haunt for pushers and their prey, and as such it was regularly raided – and closed – by the cops. Maybe it had been hit again.

So why was there no movement on the street? No disgruntled partygoers heading to other clubs in other areas?

And why did the wind hold the fragrance of blood?

I hitched my bag to a more comfortable position on my shoulder, then stepped from the station's half-lit platform and ran up the stairs leading to Sunshine Avenue. The lights close to the platform's exit were out and the shadows closed in the minute I stepped onto the street.

Normally, darkness didn't worry me. I am a creature of the moon and the night, after all, and well used to roaming the streets at ungodly hours. That night, though the moon rode toward fullness, its silvery light failed to pierce the thick cover of clouds. But the power of it shimmered through my veins – a heat that would only get worse in the coming nights.

Yet it wasn't the closeness of the full moon that had me jumpy. Nor was it the lack of life coming from the normally raucous club. It was something else, something I couldn't quite put a finger on. The night felt wrong, and I had no idea why.

But it was something I couldn't ignore.

I turned away from the street that led to the apartment I shared with my twin brother and headed for the nightclub. Maybe I was imagining the scent of blood, or the wrongness in the night. Maybe the club's silence had nothing to do with either sensation. But one thing was certain – I had to find out. It would keep me awake, otherwise.

Of course, curiosity not only killed cats, but it often took out inquisitive werewolves, too. Or, in my case, half weres. And my nose for trouble had caused me more grief over the years than I wanted to remember. Generally, my brother had been right by my side, either fighting with me or pulling me out of harm's way. But Rhoan wasn't home, and he couldn't be contacted. He worked as a guardian for the Directorate of Other Races – which was a government body that

sat somewhere between the cops and the military. Most humans thought the Directorate was little more than a police force specializing in capture of nonhuman criminals, and in some respects, they were right. But the Directorate, both in Australia and overseas, was also a researcher of all things nonhuman, and its guardians didn't only capture, they had the power to be judge, jury, and executioner.

I also worked for the Directorate, but not as a guardian. I was nowhere near ruthless enough to join their ranks as anything other than a general dogsbody – though, like most of the people who worked for the Directorate in *any* capacity, I had certainly been tested. I was pretty damn happy to have failed – especially given that eighty percent of a guardian's work involved assassination. I might be part wolf, but I wasn't a killer. Rhoan was the only one in our small family unit who'd inherited those particular instincts. If I had a talent I could claim, it would be as a finder of trouble.

Which is undoubtedly what I'd find by sticking my nose where it had no right to be. But would I let the thought of trouble stop me? Not a snowflake's chance in hell.

Grinning slightly, I shoved my hands into my coat pockets and quickened my pace. My four-inch heels clacked against the concrete, and the sound seemed to echo along the silent street. A dead giveaway if there *were* problems ahead. I stepped onto the strip of half-dead grass that separated the road from the pavement and tried not to get the heels stuck in the dirt as I continued on.

The street curved around to the left, and the run-down houses that lined either side of the road gave way to run-down factories and warehouses. Vinnie's night-

club sat about halfway along the street, and even from a distance, it was obvious the place was closed. The gaudy red-and-green flashing signs were off, and no patrons milled around the front of the building.

But the scent of blood and the sense of wrongness were stronger than ever.

I stopped near the trunk of a gum tree and raised my nose, tasting the slight breeze, searching for odors that might give a hint as to what was happening up ahead.

Beneath the richness of blood came three other scents – excrement, sweat, and fear. For those last two to be evident from that distance, something major had to be happening.

I bit my lip and half considered calling the Directorate. I wasn't a fool – not totally, anyway – and whatever was happening in that club *smelled* big. But what would I report? That the scent of blood and shit rode the wind? That a nightclub that was usually open on a Friday night was suddenly closed? They weren't likely to send out troops for that. I needed to get closer, see what was really happening.

But the nearer I got, the more unease turned my stomach – and the more certain I became that something was very wrong inside the club. I stopped in the shadowed doorway of a warehouse almost opposite Vinnie's and studied the building. No lights shone inside, and no windows were broken. The metal front doors were closed, and thick grates protected the black-painted windows. The side gate was padlocked. For all intents and purposes, the building looked secure. Empty.

Yet something *was* inside. Something that walked quieter than a cat. Something that smelled of death. Or rather, *undeath*.

A vampire.

And if the thick smell of blood and sweaty humanity that accompanied his sickly scent was anything to go by, he wasn't alone. *That* I could report. I swung my handbag around so I could grab my cell phone, but at that moment, awareness surged, prickling like fire across my skin. I no longer stood alone on the street. And the noxious scent of unwashed flesh that followed the awareness told me exactly who it was.

I turned, my gaze pinpointing the darkness crowding the middle of the road. 'I know you're out there, Gautier. Show yourself.'

His chuckle ran across the night, a low sound that set my teeth on edge. He walked free of the shadows and strolled toward me. Gautier was a long, mean stick of vampire who hated werewolves almost as much as he hated the humans he was paid to protect. But he was one of the Directorate's most successful guardians, and the word I'd heard was that he was headed straight for the top job.

If he did get there, I would be leaving. The man was a bastard with a capital B.

'And just what are you doing here, Riley Jenson?' His voice, like his dark hair, was smooth and oily. He'd apparently been a salesman before he'd been turned. It showed, even in death.

'I live near here. What's your excuse?'

His sudden grin revealed bloodstained canines. He'd fed, and very recently. My gaze went to the nightclub. Surely not even he could be *that* depraved. That out of control.

'I'm a guardian,' he said, coming to a halt about half a dozen paces away. Which was about half a dozen paces *too* close for my liking. 'We're paid to patrol the streets, to keep humanity safe.'

I scrubbed a hand across my nose, and half wished

– and not for the first time in my years of dealing with vampires – that my olfactory sense wasn't so keen. I'd long ago given up trying to get *them* to take regular showers. How Rhoan coped with being around them so much, I'll never know.

'You only walk the streets when you've been set loose to kill,' I said, and motioned to the club. 'Is that what you've been sent here to investigate?'

'No.' His brown gaze bored into mine, and an odd tingling began to buzz around the edges of my thoughts. 'How did you know I was there when I had shadows wrapped around my body?'

The buzzing got stronger, and I smiled. He was trying to get a mind-lock on me and force an answer – something vamps had a tendency to do when they had questions they knew wouldn't be answered willingly. Of course, mind-locks had been made illegal several years ago in the 'human rights' bill that set out just what was, and wasn't, acceptable behavior from nonhuman races when dealing with humans. Or other nonhumans for that matter. Trouble is, legalities generally mean squat to the dead.

But he didn't have a hope in hell of succeeding with me, thanks to the fact I was something that should not be – the child of a werewolf *and* a vampire. Because of my mixed heritage, I was immune to the controlling touch of vampires. And that immunity was the only reason I was working in the guardian liaisons section of the Directorate. He should have realized that, even if he didn't know the reason for the immunity.

'Hate to say this, Gautier, but you haven't exactly got the sweetest scent.'

'I was downwind.'

Damn. So he was. 'Some scents are stronger than the wind to a wolf.' I hesitated, but couldn't help

adding, 'You know, you may be one of the undead, but you sure as hell don't have to smell like it.'

His gaze narrowed, and there was a sudden stillness about him that reminded me of a snake about to strike.

'You would do well to remember what I am.'

'And you would do well to remember that I'm trained to protect myself against the likes of you.'

He snorted. 'Like all liaisons, you overestimate your skills.'

Maybe I did, but I sure as hell wasn't going to admit it, because that's precisely what he wanted. Gautier not only loved baiting the hand that fed him, he more often bit it. Badly. Those in charge let him get away with it because he was a damn fine guardian.

'As much as I love standing here trading insults, I really want to know what's going on in that club.'

His gaze went to Vinnie's, and something inside me relaxed. But only a little. When it came to Gautier, it never paid to relax too much.

'There's a vampire inside that club,' he said.

'I know *that* much.'

His gaze came back to me, brown eyes flat and somehow deadly. 'How do you know? A werewolf has no more awareness when it comes to vampires than a human.'

Werewolves mightn't, but then, I wasn't totally wolf, and it was my vampire instincts that were picking up the vamp inside the building. 'I'm beginning to think the vampire population should be renamed the great unwashed. He stinks almost as much as you do.'

His gaze narrowed again, and again the sensation of danger swirled around me. 'One day, you'll push too far.'

Probably. But with any sort of luck, it would be *after* he'd gotten the arrogance knocked out of him. I

waved a hand at Vinnie's. 'Are there people alive inside?'

'Yes.'

'So are you going to do something about the situation or not?'

His grin was decidedly nasty. 'I'm not.'

I blinked. I'd expected him to say a lot of things, but certainly not that. 'Why the hell not?'

'Because I hunt bigger prey tonight.' His gaze swept over me, and my skin crawled. Not because it was sexual – Gautier didn't want me any more than I wanted him – but because it was the look of a predator sizing up his next meal.

His expression, when his gaze rose to meet mine again, was challenging. 'If you think you're so damn good, you go tend to it.'

'I'm not a guardian. I can't—'

'You can,' he cut in, 'because you're a guardian liaison. By law, you can interfere when necessary.'

'But—'

'There are five people alive in there,' he said. 'If you want to keep them that way, go rescue them. If not, call the Directorate and wait. Either way, I'm out of here.'

With that, he wrapped the night around his body and disappeared from sight. My vampire and werewolf senses tracked his hidden form as he raced south. He really *was* leaving.

Fuck.

My gaze returned to Vinnie's. I couldn't hear the beating of hearts, and had no idea whether Gautier was telling the truth about people being alive inside. I might be part vampire, but I didn't drink blood, and my senses weren't tuned to the thud of life. But I could smell fear, and surely I wouldn't be smelling that if

someone wasn't alive in the club.

Even if I called the Directorate, they wouldn't get there in time to rescue those people. I had to go in. I had no choice.

I took the cell phone from my bag and quickly pressed the Directorate's emergency number. When the operator answered, I gave them my details and told them what was happening. Help would be there in ten, they said.

Those people inside would probably be dead in ten.

I shoved the phone into my bag and strode across the road. Though I'd inherited a vampire's ability to shadow, I didn't bother using it. The vampire inside would know I was approaching. He'd hear the rapid beating of my heart.

Was it fear? Hell, yeah. What sane, normal person wouldn't feel afraid when about to walk into the nest of a vampire? But fear and I had been on many adventures together. It hadn't stopped me before, and it wouldn't stop me now.

When I reached the pavement, I stopped and studied the metal doors. Though the urge to hurry was beginning to beat through my brain, I knew that was the one thing I couldn't do. Not if I wanted to save lives.

The locks on the doors were simple padlocks. When the club was closed, they used a grate similar to the one over the windows to stop forcible entry. Which meant Vinnie, at least, was inside, and probably some of the wait staff.

I closed my eyes and breathed deep. Three different scents were coming from the left. The vampire and two others from the right.

I blew out a breath, then kicked off my shoes. Four-inch heels might be okay to party in, but they were shit

when it came to fighting. At least, they were shit on the feet. The heels actually made damn fine weapons, especially when they were made of wood, like mine. Not only did they provide deadly little stakes when it came to dealing with vampires, but they were handy against everyone else, too. Few people ever thought that a shoe could become dangerous, but these *were* dangerous. Years of finding trouble in unexpected places had at least taught me one thing – always have a weapon handy. Sometimes a werewolf’s teeth just weren’t deterrent enough.

I rolled up my jeans so I didn’t slip on the excess material, then tossed my bag into the right-hand corner of the doorway, out of the way and out of sight. After flexing my fingers, I stepped forward and kicked the door. It shook under the impact of the blow, but didn’t open. Cursing softly, I kicked it again. This time it flew back with enough force to shatter the nearest window.

‘Directorate of Other Races,’ I said, standing in the doorway and letting my gaze roam the darkness. I couldn’t see the vampire hiding in the shadows, but I could certainly smell him. Why wouldn’t most vampires wash? ‘Come out, or face the consequences.’

Which wasn’t exactly legal speak, but I’d been around guardians long enough to know they generally didn’t bother with legalities.

‘You ain’t no guardian,’ a soft, almost childish voice said.

I rolled my shoulders, trying to ease the tension tightening my muscles. The voice came from the left, yet the unwashed scent was still coming from the right. Could there be two vampires? Surely Gautier would have told me . . . Then I remembered his nasty smile. The bastard had known, all right.

‘I never said I was a guardian. I said I was Directorate. And the rest of my statement still applies.’

The vampire snorted. ‘Make me.’

Make me, not make us. The vamp was betting I didn’t know there were two of them.

Last chance, vampire.’

‘I can smell your fear, little wolf.’

So could I. Could feel the tremor of it through my veins. But the smell of my fear was nothing compared to what was coming from the humans in the room.

I stepped inside the club.

The air to my right stirred, and the pungent aroma of death sharpened. I dropped. A shadow soared over my back, his stench so bad I almost gagged. The soft thump of his landing told me where he was, even if his scent was too close, too overwhelming, to pinpoint it exactly. I spun, and lashed out with a bare foot. The blow connected with solid darkness and the vampire grunted. Again air moved, giving me warning. I twisted, whipping the spiked heel across the darkness. Felt it scrape across flesh even as the vampire howled in pain. Again, it wasn’t the voice of an adult – more that of a kid. Someone had turned youngsters. The thought sickened me.

Movement caught my eye. The first vampire had shaken free of the shadows and climbed to his feet. He swung around to face me, his eyes red with bloodlust, his thin features contorted with rage. Not only youngsters in human terms, but youngsters in vampire years, as well. But that didn’t make them any less dangerous. Just a little less devious.

He ran at me. I dodged, then swung the shoe, hitting his jaw with an audible whack. He howled and lashed out with a clenched fist. I leaned back, felt the breeze of the blow brush past my chin. The reek of unwashed

flesh swamped me again. Not the scent of the first vampire, but the second. And he was approaching fast. I grabbed a fistful of the first vamp's shaggy brown hair and yanked him around into the second vampire's path.

They hit with enough force to rattle *my* teeth, but it wasn't enough to knock either of them out. The first vamp somehow twisted around, his fist catching the side of my face with enough force to knock me off my feet. I hit the floorboards with a grunt, the shoes flying from my hands. For a moment, I even saw stars. Then the weight of one of the vamps hit, his body covering my length and pinning me to the ground. His stench flooded my senses, making it hard to breathe as his canines lengthened in the expectation of a feed.

Not on *my* neck, he wasn't.

I bucked, trying to get him off me, but he had his legs wrapped around mine to anchor himself. He laughed, and suddenly all I could see was bloodied teeth, slashing down.

'No way, you bastard.' I forced an arm between us. His teeth slashed my wrist, slicing deep, and pain roiled white-hot through my body. Some vampires made the experience of taking blood pleasurable, but this one sure as hell didn't. Maybe he was too young. Whatever the reason, I screamed.

The other vampire laughed, which only served to fuel my anger. Strength surged though my limbs, momentarily obliterating the pain. As the vampire sucked greedily at my blood, I thrust my free hand through his hair, grabbed a fistful, then yanked his head back, dragging his teeth from my arm. As he squawked in surprise, I clenched a bloodied fist and hit him in the mouth as hard as I could. Blood and bone and teeth flew, and his squawk became a howl of

agony. I bucked again and flipped him backward over my head. He landed with a crash on his back, hard up against the bar, and didn't get up.

One down, one to go.

And that one was flying through the air, diving straight for me. I scrambled upright and got the hell out of his way. The vamp twisted in midair, landing catlike, then swept with a booted foot, trying to knock me off my feet. I dodged the blow, then repeated it, battering *him* off his feet. He landed with a thump on his butt but quickly twisted around and dove forward. One fist smacked into my thigh and sent me staggering. The vamp was up almost instantly, teeth gleaming in the cold darkness.

I faked a blow to his head, then spun and dove for one of my shoes. It would kill the sucker if I hit the right spot, but the chances of his standing still long enough were next to nil.

Still, no matter where I hit, a wooden spike hanging out of his chest would not only slow him down, but burn the shit out of him. No one was actually sure why, especially given that vamps could touch wood without problem. Current theories suggested it was some sort of chemical reaction between a vampire's blood and the wood – and *that* reaction was the reason a stake through the heart could kill a vampire. It set off a response that resulted in the cindering of all internal organs, in much the same way as sunlight crisped new vampires stupid enough to go out in it.

He snarled in rage and leapt for me. I grabbed the shoe, snapped off the heel, then rolled out from underneath him and jumped upright. As he spun around to face me, I drove the spike as hard as I could into his chest.

He moved, and I missed the right spot. It didn't

matter. At that moment, anywhere was good. He stopped abruptly and stared down in surprise at the flickers of fire erupting from the wound. That's when I dropped him. He hit the ground and didn't move.

For a moment, I simply stood there, desperately battling to get some air back into my lungs. When I could breathe again, the pain hit – a tide that was almost all-consuming. I took a deep, shuddery breath and called to the wolf that prowled within.

Power swept through me, tingling through vein and muscle and bone, blurring my vision, blurring the pain. Limbs shortened, shifted, rearranged, until what was standing in the club was wolf not human. I remained in my alternate form for several seconds, panting softly and listening to the silence for any hint of movement, then began to shift back into human form.

The cells in a werewolf's body retained data on body makeup, which was why wolves were so long-lived. In changing, damaged cells were repaired. Wounds were healed. And while it generally took more than one shift to heal wounds as deep as the ones on my arm, one would at least stem the bleeding and begin the healing process.

Of course, changing shape while fully clothed is never a good thing for the clothes – especially when they were as fragile as the lace top I was wearing. At least my jeans were made of stretchy material, and usually managed to survive the change in reasonable shape.

Once back in human form, I knotted the remains of the shirt together, then swung around, my gaze searching the darkness for the humans who were here, somewhere. That's when the clapping began. It was a solitary tattoo that somehow managed to sound sarcastic.

I knew it was Gautier without even smelling him.

‘You bastard,’ I said, as I turned back around to face him. ‘You just stood there and watched?’

There was nothing pleasant about his sudden grin. ‘You’re right. You can handle yourself.’

‘Why didn’t you help?’

He shoved his hands into his pockets and strolled into the club. ‘Only arrived back in time to see you shoving your shoe into the kid’s chest. Interesting innovation, by the way.’

I felt like raging at him, or, better yet, grabbing the other shoe and spiking it into his chest. But what would be the point? Gautier was twisted enough actually to enjoy the caress of fire across his flesh.

‘I called the Directorate. Is that the reason you’re here?’

He nodded and squatted beside the vamp I’d spiked. ‘It isn’t every day the Directorate gets an emergency call from a liaison. Jack put out an all-points to any guardians close to the area.’ He looked up. ‘Imagine the luck, me being so close.’

Imagine, I thought sourly, and spun on my bare heel, walking to the corner where Vinnie, and a woman I presumed was one of the waitresses, lay. The big man had slashes across his arms, chest, and one cheek, but they weren’t all that deep. His leg was twisted at an odd angle, and even in the dim light, I could see the white of shinbone. He’d somehow managed to wrap a tourniquet around his thigh, but even so, he’d lost a lot of blood. I wondered why the baby vamps hadn’t sucked it up.

The woman hadn’t escaped so lightly. Her shirt had been ripped open and her breasts deeply lanced. The vamps had suckled her like children would their mothers, and from the look of it, they’d bled her dry.

I squatted beside Vinnie. His gaze, when it met mine, was distant, shocked. ‘They followed me in when I opened. I didn’t even see them.’

I placed my hand over his. His skin was cold. Clammy. ‘I called an ambulance. They won’t be long.’

‘Doreen? Is she okay? God, what they did to her—’

I glanced at the dead Doreen. Saw the echoes of terror in her lifeless blue eyes. What a goddamn awful way to spend your last moments.

My stomach stirred and rose. I swallowed back bile and squeezed Vinnie’s hand. ‘I’m sure she’ll be okay.’

‘What about the others?’

I hesitated. ‘If I go check, will you be okay?’

He nodded. ‘Me and Doreen, we’ll just wait here.’

‘I won’t be long.’ As I rose, there was an audible snap of bone. Gautier, finishing what I’d started.

Not that snapping vampires’ necks actually killed them, but it certainly incapacitated them for a while. Long enough to drive a stake through their black hearts, anyway. Though Gautier didn’t actually need to disable *any* vampire while he used the stake – he just enjoyed it. Enjoyed seeing the fear gather in their eyes as he raised the stake and drove it into their hearts. Which probably meant he was extremely pissed off at me just then, because I’d knocked both of the baby vamps unconscious, thereby robbing him of his pleasure. Why he was breaking their necks was anyone’s guess. Maybe it was habit.

Maybe he just liked the sound.

I walked on past him like there was absolutely nothing wrong, like it was an everyday occurrence that rogue vampires were executed in my presence. Any other reaction could be deadly, because he was watching me like a cat does a mouse.

And I had no intention of ever being Gautier’s mouse.

The distant wail of sirens bit through the silence as I squatted beside the three other women. All three of them were badly cut, and at least two of them raped. And as the soft squelch of wood being pressed into flesh, past bone and into heart whispered across the silence, part of me was fiercely glad. Those bastards didn't deserve a fair trial or justice. They didn't even deserve the quick staking they were being given.

The emergency crews finally arrived. As Vinnie and the women were tended to, I made a statement to the cops. Gautier flashed his credentials and walked out. But the look he gave me as he wrapped the shadows around his body suggested he and I were going to be at odds for a while yet. No real surprise there.

As soon as I was able, I picked up my handbag and got the hell out of there.

The night air was sweet compared to the nightclub, and I breathed deep, letting it fill my lungs and sweep away the foulness. Blood still rode the wind, but that was natural, especially since a lot of it was now on me.

What I needed was a nice hot shower. I slung my bag over my shoulder and headed home barefoot.

But I'd barely gone a dozen steps when the wrongness hit again, this time stronger than before.

I stopped and looked over my shoulder. What the hell was going on? Why was I feeling this when the situation inside the club had been sorted?

Then it hit me.

The wrongness wasn't coming from the club or the night. It was coming from a more distant place. A more personal place. A place that was forged from the bond of twins.

My brother was in trouble.