

Vampire Kitten

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This story is kinda... well, not done yet. That, and I can't believe I wrote something like this without being forced to.

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Chapter 1 - Discovery

2

1 - Discovery

Vampire Kitten by Amanda Easter

Chapter One

Vampire Kitten

After seeing Sophie safely surrounded by friends, being her typical self, talking about hair and make-up and nail polish, I ran back to the black Thunderbird waiting for me in the school parking lot. It only took seconds for me to reach my car, pulling myself in and strapping up quickly. After all these weeks, my newfound agility and speed still shocked me. As I started down the long road to my house, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a shadow move under a nearby tree. Just a rabbit. I turned my eyes back the street. A car crash would only expose who... what, really, I was, and I really didn't need that.

As I pulled into the start of my driveway, in itself about one and a half miles long, I heard a very familiar sound - the soft *pitter-patter* of fairly large paws, running fairly fast. I swore under my breath and put my foot farther down on the gas pedal, finally out of speed limit zones. I had avoided coming out during the day - whether rainy *or* sunny - as much as I could, and never stayed in the same place for long, so that I wouldn't have to see him. But he was especially attuned to my scent, and I couldn't believe how stupid I'd been - thinking I could fool him for long.

I pulled up next to my house, thinking about investing in a garage, and when I looked out my window I saw him. His hair was wind-blown and he was sweating, like normal. But something was very different now.

I could tell he was irate. And I dreaded rolling down my window to speak to him, like he wanted. I mean, he'd been angry with me plenty of times before - like when I broke my arm, he usually got mad at me for not telling him to protect me from something. But I knew that now he would be more angry with me than ever before. Because I hadn't just snapped a limb that would heal with time; oh, no, no, I'd done far worse. I'd made myself his natural enemy, permanently, without telling him first.

He hadn't always been this strict. Way back, during the first few months of our relationship, he'd always given me as much leeway as I wanted; never pressing himself on me, but always staying by my side.

And then everything started to change. First, he stopped me in the doorway and asked where I was going. It didn't bother me much, it was just one thing. But it stayed in the back of my head, and wouldn't leave.

He kept doing it. He started separating me from my friends, especially the guys, not letting me do anything he wasn't involved in. And he would be rough with me. It was so unlike him, it scared me to death. I thought he was sick, so I asked his mother. She told me he was going through a very difficult change in his life, and he would get over it, so don't worry. But she'd been so awkward, like there was something she literally *couldn't* tell me. And even though I tried to relax, I left her house feeling even worse than before.

In the car with him later, I thought about just asking him straight out, but then I looked at him. He'd gotten really big, almost taking up all of the front area we were in; but he still squeezed me into the passenger seat behind him, and I realized it was very easy for him to hurt me if I said the wrong thing. He hadn't really yet, just

pulled me where he wanted me to go, squeezing me too tight when someone ruffled his feathers; but he really could. So I asked him a side question: "Are your parents okay?"

He looked at me like I was crazy. "Of course. Why?"

I looked out the window, to the sky beyond. "Oh, nothing," I said. So it wasn't like his mom and dad were getting divorced or anything. I wondered what the problem was. I held his hand for the rest of the ride. Maybe, I thought, if he knew I was here for him, he would tell me, and I wouldn't need to be so weird around him. But he wasn't like that a lot now.

Later that afternoon, as I was stepping out the door, he grabbed my wrist and, like he'd gotten into the habit of doing, demanded to know what I was leaving for.

"I'm going out with Mom," I answered, wincing as his thumbnail, unusually long for a guy's, pressed into my skin.

"Oh, that's okay," he huffed. And I could tell he didn't really think that, but didn't want to mess with my parents.

He backed away, looking irritable as he watched me leave. I wondered what he did in my house while I was gone. Hang out with my folks? Look at baby pictures and home movies? Play Guitar Hero and pig out on Twinkies? I couldn't begin to fathom the amount of things my Dad would do to embarrass me or give him a hard time. But I stopped worrying about that and focused on having a good time with my mother.

Our fun day was cut short by an emergency trip to the hospital.

He was furious when he came to see me. The whole time he was in the room he was throwing accusations, swearing, and making fists. But when he left, as soon as he was on the other side of the door, his guard fell. And from that point on I knew that I had to be strong, not to mention careful, for him. Because no matter who or what he got mad at, when it came to me, he got hit the hardest.

After that, he changed again. But this time, he let me know everything. He had just started shifting into a werewolf. He was scared of what he imagined my reaction would be, but this was a lot easier on me than his unexpected meanness. He went on to explain that it ran in his father's side of the family, and it affected his mood, made him territorial, protective. He wanted to know if he could start spending the night with me. I pointed out the fact that I still lived with my parents. "Oh."

At seventeen, though, I moved out on my own. He started spending the night with me, and I found out the hard way how hot he was. Literally. By midnight, I would be sweating no matter what I did to cool down. Especially since he always slept with his arms protectively wrapped around me. But we got used to it.

Now, when I rolled down the driver's side window, he directly asked me the one question I could never really ask him. "*What did you do to yourself?*"

I took a deep breath, disgusted by the way he smelled, even though the last time I'd seen him it was the best thing to ever meet my senses. I knew he wouldn't have the patience to wait much longer, so I said simply, "I made a choice, and the result wasn't what I expected, but I have to live with the consequences of my actions."

I got out of the car, and when I brushed his arm, though I immediately pulled away, I heard him inhale sharply. Now, like so many other things about us, our temperatures were completely different, and repulsive to each other.

I could imagine how hard it had to be for him. After so long apart, he probably wanted nothing but to touch me. Every part of me, like he had so many times before. At least he knew that I shared his feelings.

About three months after I moved out, he started acting strange around me again. One night, about halfway through a week that I'd been having my period, he made his intentions clear. I knew that the scent of my blood threw his feelings off balance, but this was a giant leap for him. He'd stuck his hand up the back of my shirt and told me, "I want you to be my mate."

So, to save you the agony and indigestion of reading descriptive material, I will sum it up for you: we'd really occupied each other's time.

And this would tear us apart. He followed me into my house, slamming the door behind him. "Could you reiterate?" he asked sourly.

I rolled my eyes and turned to face him. "Philanderer." I muttered, using a term I frequently called him. "If you want me to tell you, all details included, you will have to be incredibly patient with me," I warned him. "I'm capable of that," he said, sitting on the chair next to the fireplace. I moved to the chair next to the window, across the room from him. His light green eyes showed every bit of discomfort we were both feeling.

"I found myself in an empty building in between an unconscious girl and a vampire sworn to kill her. I was given a choice: let him kill her and go free, or become her protector." I did the typical I-don't-know shrug and let him make of that what he wanted.

He pulled a hand through his chestnut hair. "This world became so freaking confusing last month. Why the heck did it have to happen right after your -" he gasped and stared at me. "The baby?" he barely whispered.

I felt the pang in my womb. Just the night before my fateful turning, he'd finally done it, and we were both so happy I was going to have a child. Now that wouldn't be happening anymore. I just bit my lip and shook my head, tear ducts burning because I couldn't cry.

But he could, and I would have to make sure that he didn't feel bad enough to actually do that. So, despite my better judgment, I looked at him. He was looking right at me, and for the first time that night, our eyes met. "I thought within the first year you fed on your own blood," he said.

I winced. Of course he would notice that my eyes were too dark. "Not if you throw it up," I said.

"Why would you--" he asked, "How--?"

I didn't notice when I placed my hand on my abdomen, but he did. "Not taking it well?" He didn't need an answer. He reached into the space in front of him, as if he could reach my cheek from all the way across the room.

But even though I knew it was the most either of us could handle, it didn't work from there. As the pain came crashing down on me, I doubled over, retching the last of my blood onto the hardwood floor.

It would have been better if I would've had a stillbirth, I'd thought then. I could feel the embryo inside me, dead weight. Sometimes I recognized the fact that it was my decision. But a lot of times, I found myself blaming Sophie. She was the unconscious girl I didn't even know, who I'd offered up my own life to save. I'd lost everything for her. She'd stolen my boyfriend. My body heat. My food. My sun. My life. And used it to gossip and bother about material things with friends I knew for a fact were only with her because of her family's wealth. And she couldn't even have stolen the baby. What Nate and I had worked so hard for, the one thing I could really grieve the loss of. An innocent, unborn child. Couldn't she have taken that, too? Oh, no. She couldn't. It was physically impossible. So it just died. And I felt the burden of the tiny, unfinished, already dead body inside me. Everything just hurt. It hurt so, so much. I always doubled over and threw up. My own blood tasted rotten in my mouth.

"Crap," I muttered into the washcloth I'd been wiping my mouth off with. I had to clean my floor, and I didn't know how. I'd never been in my house long enough to actually throw up on it. Chiefly, not the wood. I hit my head with the hand that wasn't holding the rag.

"What?" Nate asked from across the house. That was another thing about the two of us. Not only did we have incredible speed and extreme temperatures, we both had *really* good hearing.

"I should have up-chucked on the tile," I said.

"Oh," he chuckled.

"Do *you* know how to get blood stains off of wood?" I asked, vexed that he found this problem humorous.

"No."

"Then you can't laugh. What if the police suspect me of murder?"

"Oh, right," he said, "I forgot leeches need to kill to live."

I glared at the bathroom mirror. "*What* did you just call me?"

"A leech," he said. I could hear him smile.

This just provoked me further. "Is that a racial slur?" I asked.

"Calm down, Katherine," Nate said. "I was just playing around."

"Sure you were," I said, depressed. "If that's how you're going to treat me now, why don't you just leave and make it easier on both of us?"

"Aaw, don't be that way, honey. Did becoming a vampire play with your mind? I am not going to leave you, no matter what."

"Why not?" I asked. "It would just make things simpler."

I heard him sigh, could smell him coming closer. "Maybe for you," he said, his voice low. "But for me, even if I have to stay on the other side of the house, putting up with your stench and ugliness and bad habits and iciness... Trust me, it's

much better than not being able to know where you are or what's going on with you. I'd even put up with watching you drink some stranger's blood if I have to."

He was in the doorway now, and I wished he would come closer. But I knew that wouldn't happen. I turned around slowly. "You still love me?" I asked. It was hard to believe.

"Yes," he said with certainty. "Do you?"

I was torn in half. I formed the answer I wanted to say, "Yes", but no sound came. I swallowed.

He posed with his finger at his mouth, looking up at the ceiling. Seeing him looking so good - tan and muscled, white T-shirt showing it off, bangs in his eyes, thinking - made me feel even worse. "Well, on second thought," he said, looking at the wall, "I'm not so sure about the sucking."

I opened my mouth to say something, but he cut me off. "I'm serious," he said, smiling wide, the first time he'd smiled directly at me that day. "Ticks suck."

"You won't have to worry about that," I whispered. I immediately regretted it. He'd stopped smiling.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"No," he argued, "That was definitely something. Do you want me to come over there and pry it from you?"

I smiled, wishing he would. "I guess not," I told him. He waited. I sucked in a breath, holding it for a while before letting it all out in a rush of words. "I said, you won't have to worry about that."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not going to feed."

He put his arms around me, in a big enough circle that they never came in contact with my skin. "I'm sorry about what I said before," he said, "I didn't mean for you to starve yourself. You need to eat." His eyes burned into mine. I shook my head, putting my arms around him, with the same respect in distance as he gave me. "No," I said, "You didn't do anything. This was another decision I made a long time ago. What kind of hypocrite would I be if I kept Sophie alive but killed some other innocent bystander?" I asked him.

"Sophie?" he repeated, confused.

"The unconscious girl I mentioned before." I clarified.

"Oh," he said. Then his face clouded over.

"What?" I asked, worried.

"Nothing," he said, and I would have pressed the issue further, but he'd pulled his arms in to enclose me, murmuring something about "Gosh, it's like they made you a cat", and all I wanted to do was lay my head on his chest and forget everything for a while.

I ran through hallway after hallway in the dark, the cold slicing to my very bones. I had no idea where I was going, or what was even happening, but I turned corner after corner, clutching the girl in my arms, scared for my child, yes, but more afraid of whatever it was that was chasing after us. Whenever I thought I'd lost it, I would slow down, but hear it's breath behind me and have to sprint again.

I turned into another corridor, and came face-to-face with what had frightened me so much. He seemed about six feet tall, utterly beautiful, with auburn hair that stuck up in a lot of little gelled spikes on his head. He had three rings in his right ear, dark jeans, and a black shirt with long sleeves. His skin was so white it made mine look almost tan like Nate's. And his eyes were blood red.

He took a step near me. "Now, be a good little girl," he smiled, showing eerily glistening teeth, "and stop running."

"No," I said, taking a step back. I'd never let anyone or anything get hurt in my presence before - other than myself - and I wasn't about to start now.

"How about this," he said, coming closer, "I'll make you a proposition."

"What do you have in mind?" I asked, sounding stronger than I felt, taking two more steps behind me.

"Either you go free and I kill her," he took three long strides toward me, "Or she goes free and you have to watch over her like a baby-sitter," his grin grew wicked. "Now, which one do you prefer?"

I thought hard. The first option was definitely the one I couldn't choose. I knew there had to be some catch, but I couldn't figure it out. The second one seemed to be the only one I could live with, so I chose it.

Next thing I knew, I was in absolute pain. Everything ached, especially my belly. I couldn't help it. I let

loose, vomiting on the ground. I got up, walking unsteadily into the sunshine, and when I looked down at my hands, they were almost invisible. I mean, I could see them, but I could also see through them. I ran back the way I came, slipping on the blood I'd recently expelled. I looked up into the shiny metal of a garbage can, seeing, for the first time that day, my reflection. I had blood smeared on my left cheek, white skin, and dark lines under my eyes... which were now blood red. I ran to lean against a tree, out of the sun. I looked at the crowd on the other side of the fence, searching for the only face I wanted to see. Not Nate. I would probably never be able to see him again. But that girl...

I found her, and when she turned to look at me, her face was blank. No emotion. No recognition. Nothing. And then she turned away, and left me standing there. When the final bell rang, I went to the bathroom and washed up. I knew what the catch was now.

We didn't have contact like that much. Which had an odor. On the bright side, however, I was informed on what Nate's problem was. Monday afternoon, on the way home from school, he told me. "It's just," he said, glancing at me in the rearview, "There has to be more strings attached than that. He shouldn't have given you any

chance at life. It doesn't make any sense." We were on my driveway, following a curve to the left in his SUV. He'd replaced his tiny car with something he could more easily fit in. And I was all the way on the other end of it. I was torn out of the reverie I was in by an abrupt swerve to the right.

"What--" I asked, as we bumped down a hill and broke through a ring of bushes. "Nate? Have you lost *your mind* in the last two minutes?" We diverged once again to the right, and when he finally stopped I dared to look out my window. We'd intermitted at the start of a natural forest.

"How much spare time do you have tonight?" he asked.

I did the math in my head. "14 hours. You only have 6."

"Six hours should be enough," he said. "You want to try something new?"

I gave him a look. It thrilled me to know he would, it had only been two weeks since that first day when he'd found out about my vampiric transformation, and we were adjusting well. But I had to keep a practical head on my shoulders, so I told him, "Friday night. Not during the school-week."

"Promise?" he asked, holding out his pinky finger.

"Promise." I said, wrapping my pinky, encased in a glove, around his. He held it there for a second before driving me the rest of the way to my home.

We were eating dinner - well, he was, I was just watching - when he brought what has been henceforth labeled "His Issue" again. "I'm just saying you should be careful," he said, emptying another plate of spaghetti and meatballs. I'd started making his meals for him a long time ago. I wondered if he'd recalled the same thing I had.

I came out of the bathroom to find Nate in the beginning of fixing our dinner, which I couldn't do because I had no knowledge of the culinary arts whatsoever. "What's on the menu for tonight?" I asked.

He looked up at me and grinned. "Steak."

"Again?" I asked, wanting to gag.

"What?" he asked, "You tired of it already?"

"Who *wouldn't* be?" He'd made steak every night he'd been in my house so far. Steak for dinner, roast beef for lunch, bacon for breakfast. I was going to go vegetarian if he didn't stop it. "You know," I said as I stood up behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist and putting my head on his shoulder, "You eat way too much meat, not enough greens."

He gasped. "Nu-uh!" he said, pulling me off him and shooing me out of the kitchen. "No trouble while I'm

cooking! You can try to pull off your devious plans during dinner!"

So during dinner it was. As soon as we sat down and said grace, I held out my hand. "I got a proposition for ya," I proclaimed with a southern accent.

"And what would that be?" he asked.

"I'm going to enroll in cooking classes," I said with great pride. "If I

promise to keep some amount of meat on the menu, can I end your reign as Master Chef?"

He pondered that for a bit. "No salads?" he asked.

I burst his bubble before it got too big. "Chicken salads."

"Some meat though, right?"

"Promise," I held my hand out farther. He looked at it, confused. "Don't you want to shake on it?" I asked him.

His face took on comprehension. "No," he stated. "A shake doesn't mean anything." He held out his pinky finger.

"You're joking," I stared at it.

He waggled it in my face. "Nope."

"I haven't done that since I was six years old!" I couldn't believe this.

"Is it a deal, or not?" he asked.

I sighed heavily, rolling my eyes, but I wrapped my pinky around his. He held it there for a second before making the most of his last all-meat meal.

Thursday morning I was driving myself to school. It wasn't like we'd gotten into a fight or anything; the whole week had been nothing special. This was just how it was. Nate had enough trouble getting *himself* to school in the morning with how much he sleeps, I didn't want to cause even more problems for him. While I turned into the parking lot of our high school, cleverly named Juntura High, I noticed something wrong. Out of picture. Not that it was empty. It usually was; I got here with enough spare time to run to Sophie's school, check on her, and come back. The strange thing was that someone was already there. Parked in the first spot in third row was a shiny electric-blue Volvo that I didn't recognize. Which is not as stuck-up as it sounds. I was a senior now, and I'd kept a tight surveillance on the entering classes, mostly to make sure none of them were my human-hunting cousins. I pulled into the parking space right next to the mysterious Volvo, looking to see if the driver was inside. No one was, so I got out and, while I started walking to the front entrance to drop my stuff off in my locker, decided to forget all about it. But fate must not have wanted it that way.

When I came back out to the lot, the owner of the enigmatic car was standing right in front of me. I felt like I was standing in front of a mirror. The girl in front of me was my height, with the same dirty-blonde hair cut to her shoulders, same uniform - of course - same white skin. The only difference was, whereas my eyes were black with thirst, the bags under them dark, easily discernible, hers were light, hardly noticeable, her eyes a brown color - almost gold.

"Hey," she said cheerily.

"Hi," I replied.

"You got here early," she said.

"I usually do," I explained, "I have stuff I have to do before school."

"Oh," she said. Her face fell, then lit up. "Well, I'm new here, and I was wondering if you could show me around."

"I don't know," I said, thinking of how I would have to walk now.

"You'll have time," she assured me, "You have no secrets to hide from me."

"What?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"Though I probably can get it done faster than you," she corrected herself, "You haven't been feeding properly."

"How could I?" I asked her, "Without killing somebody?"

"Simple," she said, "Try a different way of life. Become a vegetarian."

I just looked at her.

She was very easy to talk to. Her name was Vivian. She was living on her own, as well, but under very different circumstances. For one, she didn't have a werewolf boyfriend. She was single and believed that wolf-shifters were the worst beings on the face of the earth. Nothing I could say to her would change that.

She'd been a vampire for about two years already. By "vegetarian" she'd meant living on other types of animals, not, at-least primarily, on humans. Her personal favorite was the jackal, but you couldn't find them in North America. She was sure I could adapt.

She'd moved here because it wasn't sunny very often, and she'd missed having close friends. She didn't have a lot of my classes - hers were all advanced - but she had my lunch, and we were talking when Nate came up.

I learned immediately what my role would be today when Nate tried to pull me away, growling, and Vivian hissed. I broke away from Nate, pulling them both out of the cafeteria.

Outside, there were more crowds of people having fun and hanging out with their buds, just having a normal lunch-break. I kind of envied them. I pulled the two quarreling nightmare creatures into a ring of trees off to the right, getting on to them for starting a fight in public.

"Katie," Nate said, looking at Vivian and baring his teeth, "Who -- is -- *this*?" He said each word individually and with emphasis.

"Yeah, Kate," Vivian snarled, "What is *that*!?"

"Calm *down*, you two!" I urged. They bit their lips and turned to face me, clearly not planning on talking to each other. "My *gosh*!" I exclaimed, "You guys are like little biased kindergartners!" They slumped visibly: Nate coming to stand next to me, forcing himself to look the other way; Vivian disappearing, reappearing with a chair, and making a show of collapsing out of aggravation onto it. "Okay," I said, holding my hands out as arrows. "Vivian," I started gesturing to my left, "this is Nathan. And *he* is my boyfriend."

"*Boyfriend*?" she asked, astonished.

"Would you prefer 'mate'?" I asked her. She chose not to answer that. "And Nate," I turned to him and pointed to Vivian. "This is Vivian. She doesn't drink human blood, and she thinks she knows how to persuade me to start feeding." I thought this was very good news, but for some reason, the look he gave her after I said this was even worse than before.

"What?" Vivian taunted him. "You jealous 'cause I achieved something, after *one day*, that even you, her trusty boyfriend couldn't do?"

Nate growled and started sprouting fur. "Vivian!" I yelled. "That was uncalled for!"

"Should I apologize?" she asked sweetly.

The bell rang, declaring the end of lunch period, and Vivian disappeared. I worked on calming Nate as we headed to our next class. Though he was cooling down a little, his ears were still poking out a bit, and we were almost to Trig. So I backed us into a space between rows of lockers and held him until they turned human. By the time we were walking through the entrance to Mrs. Caldwell's Trigonometry class, we had both put on our masks, and no one could see through the "regular teenage couple" facade.

I blew out the six striped candles on my birthday cake and made a wish. I wanted to tell everyone what it was, but Nate had told me that was bad luck, so I kept it a secret.

Nate was my best friend. He was the first friend I'd made when we'd moved from our old place in Texas to our new one in Juntura, Oregon. The next day after we'd moved up, I was playing with my new red, rubber ball in the front yard and I'd kicked it too hard. It flew over the fence, and I'd cried because I'd thought I'd never see it again. I heard a gate open. I looked over my shoulder.

There was a little boy standing there. He was a little taller than me, tan, with green eyes and brown hair that was so long it hid them in places. He was wearing a white T-shirt and shorts, and in his hands was my red ball.

"Why are you crying?" he'd asked me.

I was so happy to see my ball again. "I kicked my ball over the fence," I'd answered, pointing the chain-link wall beside me.

"Oh." He'd held my ball out to me, saying "You don't need to cry anymore." I took my ball from him, and we were friends. I'd been so happy he'd comforted me.

How ironic that the situation reversed from way back then, and I had to comfort him. We didn't see the shiny blue car in the parking lot after-school. I was a little worried, but Nate was personally pleased.

"Let's hope she stays gone," he said as we pulled out onto the main road.

"Nate," I sighed, "That is so immature."

"You know me," he said, reaching over to kiss my freezing neck, then pulling back quickly and focusing on driving. "All I do is play around."

"Yeah," I said, "Like during lunch. Oh, and by the way," I felt my face get warm, but knew he wouldn't be able to tell, so I looked at him. "Thanks for tranquilizing yourself today."

He blushed. I could tell. "You had a lot to do with that," he confessed in a hushed voice.

"Thanks, for admitting it," I whispered back, making further plans in my head for tomorrow night.

When we pulled into the end of my drive, we saw it. Expensive, brilliant, and beautiful, making the rest of the area, even my Thunderbird, look dull and tired. Nate grumbled the whole way inside. "Vivian?" I asked.

"Yeah?" The answering call came from the living-room.

"What are you doing?" I asked her. She was bending over something on the floor, chemical cleaners, rags, and a bucket beside her.

"I'm staying tonight," she said. "I don't have any other place to go right now. Oh! And right now I'm cleaning. When did you get this on the floor? It's taking *forever* to get it off! And you should make it so that the cleaning stuff is easier to get to. It took me, like, 5 *minutes* to find it! At *top speed*! Oh, yeah, and I crashed into your bookshelf. And your video case. But, don't worry, I got it up already." She scrubbed at the floor angrily, for once closing her mouth a second. I'd only taken a breath when she let it run again. "Done!" she exclaimed happily, sinking back on her heels and blowing hair out of her face. She smiled happily. I just looked at her. "Oh, yeah, I cut out of school early. I was ticked off, and I had to do something. I found a place to stay the night, thank you, and I noticed this stain. And cleaning helps."

"Oh," was all I could respond to that. That was interesting information. I was kind of speechless. And confused.

"No, no, no, no!" Nate said, walking in front of me and pointing at Vivian. "I am *not* putting up with you at *night*, too!"

"Cool it, Nate," I cautioned, "She'll bunk in the room across the house."

"Don't get too loud, though," Vivian said, "Or I'll come watch you for something to do." Nate glared at her. I laughed, and he turned to look at me. I was still giggling. I wrapped my arms around him and moved my lips along the outside of his ear. He blushed again. "Save it for tomorrow," he barely breathed in my ear.

In the morning we went into the kitchen to find Vivian cleaning it. Bacon, eggs, oatmeal, and biscuits were on the table, and a goat was in the backyard. "Um..." I started, awkward.

She turned to face me. "Oh," she said, "I was bored so I made breakfast, the dishes are all done..." I looked out the sliding glass door to the pen in where the goat was bleating. When she caught the direction of my vision, she averred "You're breakfast."

I was so thirsty. I must have looked uncomfortable, because Nate looked at my face and asked, "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, the dog stays inside," Vivian said, "Besides, your food will get cold." He looked like he was going to grow a tail any second, but he backed away, finally turning to sit down at the table. Vivian dragged me outside.

"I don't think I can do this, Viv," I said uneasily.

"I thought you might say that," she said. She pulled out an iPod and put the phones in my ears, turning the volume to maximum. She put earmuffs and headphones on top of that. I couldn't hear a thing. She pulled else out of her jacket pocket, and I recognized it as one of those things you use to plug your nose when you go swimming. She put it in place over my nostrils, saying "I had the exact same problem. This will help." Of course, I was lip-reading by this point, and I couldn't understand anything more than that. Next, she wrapped a scarf around my head so that I couldn't see either.

"Mama! Mama!" I cried.

"What is it, honey?" she asked from the study.

I kicked my muddy shoes off at the back door welcome mat, carrying the bundle I had in my arms to my mother's library table and laying it there. "I found something."

Even though my mother was a vet, she didn't like animals being brought inside. I was sure I'd done it so often by now that she always knew what I was talking about, but she still acted like she had no idea. She came to look at it, then whisked it off the kitchen table, which she did operations on when she had no other choice.

"It's a good thing you brought this kitty in," she told me as she closed the kitchen door, making a wall between me and her work. "She really needs some help."

I went over to Nate's house. Our parents had started suspecting that I had a crush on him, but I was still allowed over whenever I wanted to come. "You're so nice," he said when I told him what happened. "I would love it if I could marry you when we grow up."

"Gosh! We're only 10!" I exclaimed, but I blushed. This was my secret wish, too.

I felt better than I had since my transformation. I could feel my strength, and it made me happy. But I felt sick to my stomach.

Vivian had tried to comfort me by telling me about how she'd killed the goat before letting me drink, but had to make sure that the blood was fresh. I thought I would puke, but my system soaked every bit of nutrition up that it could get.

I rinsed out my mouth with water multiple times, though it tasted about the same as dirt. I went to my room, collapsing onto my bed, but not able to rest. When Nate had finished eating his breakfast, cleaning up, showering, getting dressed and everything he came in and held me. Out of everyone, he was the person who knew the most how I hated that.

But we had to get to school. I ended up making it there at Nate's usual time, and I hoped he wouldn't be late. I didn't see the shiny blue car in the parking lot at school. Anywhere. And I didn't see Vivian during lunch, either. I didn't bring it up with Nate. He was flirting with me all day, thinking about tonight. Okay, I'll

confess. A lot of it was brought on by actions on my part.

When we got to the house, she wasn't there either. Nate wanted to get some things, so we went inside. The cleaning supplies had been adjusted so that they were the first thing you saw when you walked in. Nate went off to somewhere, but I stayed where I was. There was a note written in neat handwriting taped to the handle of my broom. I pulled it off, neatly, spreading it out to read what it had to say.

Dear Katherine,

I'm sorry about just leaving like this. I knew I had to do something for you, so I put the cleaning stuff where it would be more easy to find.

No kidding.

My parents got back together, so I'm going to go visit them. I'm so excited! Tell the dog I'll miss him.

I'll do that later. I started to put it back, but then I noticed something. Scrolled at the bottom of the page was an afternote.

P.S. Trust your instincts around wood.

I wonder what that means. Oh, well. I put the note back and Nate strode into the room and we left again. He cut the engine and hopped out as soon as we pulled back up in front of the woods. "What do we do now?" I asked.

He heaved me out of the car and said, "You run. After that, just do what comes natural."

So I ran, dashing through the trees and shrub, the wind rushing by. It felt good to unleash myself, not have to pretend to be something I wasn't anymore. It was only minutes before I felt hands spinning me around, pinning me to a nearby tree. Nate pulled a blanket - that something he'd gotten earlier - around us. I cherished the feeling of being with the one person who knew everything about me, and loved me not only despite it, but because of it. He brought his hands to the sides of my face, and I felt a burning sensation on the back of my right arm.

I jumped and rolled over, not noticing the mess it left Nate in. My vision was clouded by fear. I couldn't tell what it was. I was clutching my right arm, backing away. Nate came up behind me, restraining me. "What? What is it?" Nate was asking me. His voice sounded hurt, and scared. I looked over my shoulder, bewildered. Nate couldn't get hurt. I wouldn't allow that. So I forced myself to calm down, take deep breaths.

And with the calm came understanding. "Silverwood," I said, pointing to a yellowish tree with pale leaves shaped like Vs. A section of the bark looked like it had been burned. A section about as long as my arm. Which we both looked at the back of at the same time. Nate's breathing rate, unbelievably, managed to rise higher than it already was. "Holy sh--" he swore. I just stared. It wasn't gushing blood or anything like that. It wasn't scary. Or gross. It was interesting, even awe-inspiring. All along the back of it, there was no white skin, but you could see millions of little golden threads weaving and reweaving with each other. I ran up to the tree, taking off my jacket and covering my hands with it. I broke off branches of different sizes, tying them up in the leather. I decided it might be smart to take some with me.