

Guardian

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Chapter 1

It was past eight o'clock at night in the damp streets of London. Dressed in skin-tight jeans, with a black hoodie drawn over her head, Anna made her way down into the subway. She was an attractive, dark-haired girl, but she kept to herself. She let nobody pay close enough attention to notice anything strange about her.

She passed a faded wall with graffiti that said, "Humans fucking own vamps."

Her cell phone rang, and she answered.

A calm, pleasing female voice said, "Anna Chambers?"

"Who's this?"

"I'm calling from the custodian department. You've been issued a new guardian."

"Why?"

"Your current guardian has had a coronary. Come into the nearest office before 11:00pm tomorrow."

After the infection had been discovered and made public, it was made law for every infectee to be under the supervision of a human versed in guardianship laws. For eight years Anna had been under inspection. She had spent two of those years in a testing clinic. When it was determined she was no longer a danger to herself and those around her, she was released. Guardians were like parole officers. They made sure vampires exercised restraint and fitted in with society. There were plenty of accidents, though.

The artificial blood gave them all they needed in terms of nutrition, but did little to satisfy their thirst.

Anna had only been out a few weeks since her second time in the clinic. Before she had her interview at the custodian office, they took a quick blood test, which vampires were randomly subjected to for observation. The room was quiet and felt like a lawyer's office. Anna was greeted by a man in his late forties to early fifties. The skin on his face was coarse, and slightly pitted, as if he had suffered small-pox. The name plaque on his desk said, Howard Jenkins.

"I'm glad we could meet, even though it's not under ideal circumstances," he said politely, shaking her hand. She sat down in the leather chair, and he sat behind his desk. He went through some papers.

She tucked her hair behind her ears, but it was so short it slipped forward. She still looked twenty-four, the age when she had first been infected. Her face was pale, with clear, transparent skin, and her eyes were very dark with a peculiar golden tinge, almost flavescent, just like those of all the other vampires.

"It's unfortunate Mr. Arnold didn't take his responsibilities more seriously and take greater care with you. Naturally, you understand there'll be closer observation, seeing how you've only just been released," said Howard. He studied her a moment. "How do you take care of yourself?"

"I have a job."

"Yes. I see. A waitress at Le Soleil. How else?" His eyes were curious, looking into hers.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"How do you take care of your nutritional needs? And you have other ones, don't you?" He spoke as if the questions were completely casual, trivial. He didn't seem put off by the tense silence he received in reply. "Are you in a relationship?"

She shifted in her seat uncomfortably. "No."

"Do you have sex?"

She looked at him tensely. She was one who fumed without showing anger.

"This is an informal interview. I can go through proper channels and find out all I like."

"Yes, I do."

"How many partners?"

"A few," she said, with her usual half-honest, half-insolent reserve.

"A few?"

"A few, including your sister. Can I go now?"

"What kind of sex do you like?" he asked. "Do you feed during intercourse?"

She stood up to leave. She'd had enough.

"Here's the number for your new guardian," he said, staying seated, and handed her a small bit of paper.

When she got outside into the night air, she calmed down. She didn't feel like walking home, so she decided to call the number Howard had given her. A man with a pleasant voice answered. "Leon Downing, here."

"Anna Chambers."

"I've been waiting for your call. Where are you? I want to meet. I'll come pick you up, if you like."

In half an hour, an expensive silver-black four-door saloon car pulled up, and a man got out. He was older than she would have expected from his voice, probably about forty-five, good-looking, with clear-cut features. He wore glasses, had grey-streaked hair, combed in a businesslike way, and was dressed in a tasteful suit. He was, perhaps, the more handsome for the deep lines in his brow.

"Anna?" he said.

She walked over hugging her body. Leon opened the door for her and she climbed in, sinking down in the passenger seat. The car had a clean, new smell, along with the scent of his cologne. She felt hyper-aware of everything. He walked across the front of

the car and got in on his side, and suddenly the roomy interior seemed very small. It had white leather seats and steering wheel. She clipped on her seat belt as the car moved off, smoothly and quietly.

He reached over to adjust the heater. "Are you cold?" He had a crisp accent.

"No."

She studied the man's face with little glances, which he didn't appear to notice. He stared forward, steering the car. His profile was straight and mathematical, his mouth a straight line, his chin square. He was incredibly calm.

"What have your relationships been like with previous guardians?" Leon asked casually.

She shrugged. "There haven't been any problems."

"I'm sorry to hear about Mr. Arnold. Did you want to see him?"

"No, I hate hospitals, and he was a prick."

He half-smiled, and kept driving.

"I promise to be fair. And you know you can make complaints to the custodian office," he said. "All right?"

He turned his head to observe her, and she felt compelled to give him an answering look.

"We've met before," he said, glancing briefly back at the road, then at her again. "At the hospital a year ago."

"You remember?"

"Yes. You had almost killed a man."

She looked out the window. "So he didn't die. I didn't know. They wouldn't let me see him again."

They were quiet for some time. She watched the streetlights go by. She could smell his blood, a nauseous, smothering odor. She was sexually aware of him, but that was normal for her since she had been turned. It didn't take much to trigger a response, but she had learned to control it mostly. Sometimes it was a certain scent they gave off, other times it was the way they might move. She couldn't identify what made her have these cravings. She didn't

try to. She just tried to ignore them. She didn't want to always be hungering after someone.

"Do you have any religious views I should be made aware of?" he asked.

"No," she said, idly. "I remember reading a quote by Butch Hancock. 'Life in Lubbock, Texas, taught me two things: One is that God loves you and you're going to burn in hell. The other is that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth and you should save it for someone you love.' Where are we going?"

Leon rounded a corner and changed gears with a swift, fluid motion. "I just have to stop in at work."

He pulled the car up in front of a modern, medical-looking building and turned off the engine. She sat staring at him. "I'll be a few minutes. Would you like to come in?"

They walked together up to a glass sliding door, which opened when he slipped an identification card through the slot. The facility was sterile and businesslike, with pieces of equipment like those used in scientific laboratories. He took her into his office and sat down in front of a computer.

She stayed standing, uncomfortable being there, while he stared intently at the screen, occasionally typing something. He had strong brows over light blue eyes that were calculating and cool as polished steel.

"Do you experiment on people?" she asked, her eyes were fixed on him.

"It's completely voluntary. No one is forced to do anything they don't want to, and everyone is informed of the risks involved. They are paid for their contribution."

She was silent. She didn't like him. She looked over his shoulder at the computer screen. "Would it cause trouble if I saw something in particular?"

He narrowed his eyes and blinked. "No."

"Will you take me home, please?" She was worried he wouldn't let her go.

“I know you’ve spent some time in the Stanton Research Facility. I don’t agree with what goes on there,” he said. “I’m against it. I don’t submit any data to them. I’m on a completely different team, I assure you. We do non-invasive research.”

Leon spoke very frankly and openly. She almost believed him. He stood up and grabbed his keys. “Let me spend the rest of the evening with you. We have to get comfortable with one another. Have you eaten yet?” He opened the office door for her. “Let me show you my home.”

Chapter 2

He lived in a restored nineteenth-century, neo-Gothic town house. It had tasteful and elaborate decor, with modern furniture and French provincial touches. The upstairs rooms offered views over the rooftops of London.

“Do you live here by yourself?” asked Anna, while Leon fetched a glass of red wine for himself and a glass of artificial blood for her.

“Except for my housekeeper,” he answered. “I’ve upset you taking you there,” he said.

She made a small, scornful sound. “They stuck needles in my eyes to see if they could blind me. They broke bones to see how quickly they would mend.”

“Unnecessary, useless tests,” said Leon.

“They get paid to be monsters.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

She sat down on the cream-coloured sofa and put her glass on the coffee table. He got out a photo album and took a seat next to her. The book balanced over his knees, he showed her the different places he had been. He lingered particularly on the pictures with brilliantly-coloured sunsets.

“The photo doesn’t do the sunset justice,” said Leon. He obviously thought showing them was a nice gesture, but she looked with distracted politeness.

“I don’t really want to be seeing these,” she said at last.

He was surprised and worried he was upsetting her, but she

only looked bored. She wore intense eye makeup with thick eyeliner and heavy mascara, which accentuated her eyes.

"It's getting late," she said. "Don't you have work in the morning?"

"I don't mind staying up with you," he said. "But if you would like me to take you home, I will."

He looked at her hands clasped between her thighs. Her pose mildly disconcerted him. She felt a strong pull toward him. Only a bit of flesh separated her from intimate knowledge of him. He seemed a little breathless as he looked at her. She felt that he wanted her body and not her.

"I'm going to tell you something upsetting," he said, "but it's important for you to know. When victims of vampire bites are brought into hospitals, staff are legally obliged to inform a specialist so that the patients can be assessed if they've contracted the virus. The man you brought in didn't only suffer loss of blood. He had symptoms of changing."

"But how? I was cleared."

"Somehow, you have contracted the carrier part of the virus. I kept it under wraps, so you wouldn't be taken into custody."

"Why did you do that?"

"I saw your face when they wheeled him away. I knew you hadn't meant any harm. It was brave of you to bring him in."

"No. I knew once blood samples were taken from him they would eventually find me. They go somewhat easier on you if you own up to it yourself."

"You could have let him die. Do you remember a man by the name of Brian Grant?"

"Yes."

"He's a colleague of mine. He made sure you were safe during your time in the clinic."

"I had blood taken tonight. They'll find out," she said.

He shook his head. "Once the initial test is cleared, it isn't repeated. We were all under the impression that if you didn't

have the transmittable venom to start with, you never would. We didn't realize it was capable of being transmitted to ones already infected. Somehow along the way though, you have developed or contracted it."

"You want to test me?" she asked guardedly.

"No. I already have access to willing, very rich carriers at the lab. It's of the utmost importance you don't bite or feed from anyone. I may seem a fool to trust you, but I think you'll adhere to the rule. If you don't, even if you slip only once, I'll be obligated to have you taken in. There will be nothing I can do to protect you. Do you understand? What I did was serious. It's my life on the line along with yours, so let's have trust."

He put out his hand for her to shake on the agreement. She clasped it, and it was firm and warm. She was unsure of him, and felt badly out of her depth. He took her home then. He left the engine on while he waited for her to get out. As she opened the door, he said, "You can come visit me whenever you like. I'm almost always home in the evenings."

She lived in an old apartment building in a narrow street. Her unit was on the ground floor. She had blackout shutters installed on the windows and outer door. It had cost a fair amount to have them fitted, but she refused to spend her daylight hours shut up in one of those boxes like fancy-looking coffins.

She didn't have to work tonight, but she felt restless and decided to go out. She slipped into a black turtleneck sweater, put knee-high boots on over her jeans, and wore hoop earrings.

The late night diner was unusually busy; it was Friday night. She sat quietly in a booth, a glass of wine in front of her. She still enjoyed the taste of wine. Most people ignored her, not caring, or pretending not to. A few stared until eye contact was made, then looked away, feigning disinterest. They knew what she was. One guy winked at her; another made a face of disgust and turned away.

She had long since stopped caring what people thought of her. Folding her arms, she considered what Leon had said tonight. She wondered who she had let bite her that was a carrier and if he or she knew. It upset her that she could no longer feed. Such violent, yet pleausurably irksome sensations took possession of her whenever she fed on human blood. It was terribly intimate and satisfying.

When she stepped outside she passed a young guy leaning against the wall smoking. He had one boot crossed over the other. She looked straight at him. When he saw her eyes, he nearly lost the cigarette out of his mouth. Halfway down the street, he caught up with her.

“So, I’ve heard if you’re in the clear as a carrier, you’re allowed to be in a relationship with a human,” he said. “Is that true? I’m not trying to scare you or anything. I’m just saying. Do you want get a drink or something with me?”

“No. Leave me alone.”

“Hey, you don’t need to be scared of me,” he said, sounding friendly. “Hell, you could kick my ass.” She kept walking. “I’m not sure about the rules, but I’m pretty sure you’re allowed to speak to me.”

She turned on him sharply. “I don’t care about any laws. If you bother me again, I will rip your teeth out.”

He fell back and didn’t follow her any further. She took half an hour to walk to Le Soleil (The Sun). It was a vampire nightclub, very exclusive, but select humans were also admitted. A consenting adult could legally engage in all sorts of debauched intimacies, including feeding. Some people were trying to make it illegal, given that vampires exerted a sexual influence, but those in a position of power to make it illegal enjoyed the experiences too much. It was a dangerous game, because a vampire could so easily overpower a companion that it was difficult to prove whether an act was consensual or not, if the human decided to take it to court.

The place was outrageously packed, hot and sticky with dance,

drink, and grazing. More than once Anna would see somebody getting sucked in a dark corner or when pushed against the wall, living the nightlife. She slipped in unnoticed by her co-workers, lost amongst the crowd. The music pounded in her ears. It was an overwhelmingly decadent atmosphere. She hadn't been working here long. Half the time, they couldn't even remember her name. Her boss still called her Anne.

Lighting a cigarette, she stood in a corner to watch. She knew she couldn't participate, so she felt edgy. She had never liked it so publicly; she preferred private circumstances; this was too vulgar and full of animal passion. It was not uncommon to see an individual overwhelmed by a brutal ravisher. Whether they liked it or not, it wasn't going to stop, but the sight of the moving bodies took such possession of Anna that she hardly knew how to contain herself.

She was on her way out when she bumped past a woman in a backless white dress, almost spilling her drink. She had a beautiful body. The woman didn't appear to be annoyed; her lips curved into a slow smile. Anna saw the look—provocative, daring. She was aware of a stirring excitement inside her. She leaned forward and kissed the woman on the mouth. It was peculiar to feel something the same, yet different. Finding her playmate pliable and unresisting, Anna drew the woman forcibly towards her. Her forwardness seemed more to please than alarm her. She hardly gave herself or Anna breathing time. She was burning up for her.

To Anna, all modes of pleasure were familiar. Impulses induced by her condition inclined her to make the most of enjoyment, wherever she could find it, without distinction of sexes. Emboldened by the woman's easiness, Anna suggested they go back to her place. She didn't know if the woman was usually inclined toward another woman, or whether she was now under the dominion of desires she could not control, but Anna was overwhelmed by kisses as fierce and lustful as she had ever received from the other sex.

Anna took her back to her apartment. She felt like a softer

touch tonight, and it fired her less than when she was with a man. Her desire was for men, not women, but when she met with such occasions as this, a satiety of enjoyment was more of a necessity than waiting to find the preferred sex. She enjoyed the woman's body like a madness, but it was not even a shadow of what she wanted, the entanglement all so weak, so hollow, and she was denied the most pleasurable part of all, the blood.

It was four in the morning when she turned over to look at the naked woman sleeping in her bed. She felt a stab of tenderness for the pitifully vulnerable creature. She looked very young sleeping. Anna put the lamp on dimly, so her guest wouldn't feel afraid when opening her eyes. She wondered if she would be embarrassed when she awoke and wanted to avoid making her feel that way as much as she could. She knelt down by the bedside, and leaning over, kissed the young, tender face.

The woman stirred sleepily. She opened her eyes and smiled with a curious luxuriousness. There was a blushing glow on her cheek, from the extreme tenderness which they had undergone. Reaching her hand out from beneath the sheets, she took hold of Anna's hand, which led her to find some relish in the moment.

"You have to go home," Anna said quietly. "The sun will be up soon."

The woman nodded. She got up with a slow, half-sleepy languor, seeming uncomfortable now at seeing herself naked. Half dazed, and brushing back her hair impatiently, she gathered up her clothes off the floor, then began to put them on, quickly disappearing inside her dress.

Anna stood watching her in silence. "I'll call a taxi for you. Do you need some coffee before you go?"

She shook her head. "I'm all right."

Anna thought the girl looked awkward enough, and let her go without another word. Closing the front door and locking it, Anna went back into the bedroom. She always felt as if the person she had spent the night with left with a part of herself she would never

get back. She opened the window and climbed out, pulling herself up on the side of the building, climbing to reach the top, which gave her a splendid view of a series of rooftops. The streets below were misty grey.

She sat there for a long time, waiting for the sun. She liked to catch the start of morning. It was a very calm, peaceful time. The air was still and cool. She saw the sky getting lighter and lighter. Her eyes began to burn as if she had dust in them, and her skin began to tingle unpleasantly. She ignored it obstinately, feeling that to catch a glimpse of the sun was the last hold she had on her humanity, but it became too much, and she was forced back down and inside.

She closed the shutters to block out the coming light, needing total darkness to rest. She felt the weakness of morning, and knew she would be sick if she didn't sleep soon, so she got between the cool sheets and closed her eyes. When she slept it was more like oblivion. Very few things could disrupt her. Occasionally, she would wake for no reason, or from a particularly loud noise, and she would be deathly ill until she could get back into unawareness.

