



STRANGE FATE

CHAPTER 1: ASH

In Sarah's sleep she smelled roses. Please—no, she thought, trying to wake up, to stop the migraine from coming, but the nightmare had already begun.

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"I'm just trying to make amends for any harm that I did to you, Madison." Ash Redfern said, doing his very best to look small and harmless, which he knew he did surprisingly well, especially for someone as tall and dangerous as he actually was.

Madison Adams, who had a magnificent waterfall of red hair and a temper to match legends, exploded. "At one o'clock in the morning? After taking me to a cemetery? Are you *crazy*?"

"I suppose I might be," Ash suggested, now trying to look unbalanced and harmless at the same time. He didn't much care how he got the pity he needed, and females were sometimes strange, soft-hearted creatures.

Madison, however, was ranting. "I mean, you drop me without even a phone call and I

don't see you for nearly two years. Then you stalk me and hide in my closet so you can pop out once I'm asleep in bed—”

“I didn't stalk you. I don't *need* to stalk you. I told you; I came straight in through your bedroom window—”

“And now you're handing me all kinds of impossible lies—“

“They're not lies. I don't lie anymore—well, not *much* anymore, and if you'd just let me finish . . .”

“If you think this is the way to win a girl's heart, then I have a hot news flash for you—”

“It *is* the way to win a girl's heart, I promise. Oh.” Ash paused as her words sank in. “Um . . . it's just not your heart, is sort of the point. Someone else's . . . see?”

“*You brought me out here to talk about some other girl?*” Madison hit him. Ash, who could have easily avoided the roundhouse blow, let it land and went with it, so that all the bones in Madison's slim fist didn't shatter.

“Can you see now why I thought a cemetery was a good idea?” he asked hopefully, standing straight again. “It's because it's so quiet and out of the way. You can yell at me and hit me all you want.” He held out his arms expressively.

For the first time Madison looked more wary than angry. “Are you trying to say, ‘there's no one to hear you when you scream?’”

“Well—sort of. I mean *I'll* be here to hear you, obviously, but we don't need to wake up anyone else.”

Now Madison was eyeing Ash narrowly and moving away.

“No one to hear me when I scream,” she muttered. She came up with her back against a

white wall that had “Holy Sepulcher Cemetery” mounted in black iron letters on it.

“No, no,” Ash said hastily as he understood her sudden alarm. “I don’t mean what you think I mean. I’ve told you already: I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Not until we were out here,” Madison replied, watching him sideways now, skittish as a wild horse.

It was all going bad, Ash thought. You’d imagine he’d have it down pat by now, but he still said all the wrong things. Making amends was *difficult*, and Ash had always liked things smooth and easy. Easy had become a way of life.

“But I have to change because of Mary-Lynnette,” he told Madison earnestly, while she slowly and stealthily edged away from him. “Mary-Lynnette is my soulmate,” he added rapidly, stepping around to flank her. “She’s back east, studying astronomy in college. She’s so bright.”

“Oh, is she?” Madison asked between clenched teeth.

“And so beautiful,” Ash went on, although something in his brain was telling him it wasn’t a good idea. “She’s about *this* tall, with dark hair all the way down to *here* and cornflower blue eyes.”

“I see,” Madison said frostily.

“No, no: I hadn’t got to the good part yet. She’s got a very prickly conscience, and even though she and I are soulmates and she can see the silver cord between us, she sent me away. It hurt her as much as it hurt me, but she had to do it. Because of all the bad things I’d done in the past.”

“Like waking me up at one o’clock in the morning?”

Ash put on his most winsome smile. “Like dropping you after dating you for two months and not leaving a phone number or forwarding address with you.”

Madison stopped looking uneasy and went back to incandescent. “That’s right, you lying son of a . . .” and here she engaged in some very creative cursing.

“But you see,” Ash said, when she finally ran out of epithets, “that if I had kept on biting you, it could have had serious consequences.”

Madison opened her mouth, shut it, and opened it again, this time with her head cocked to one side. “Kept on . . .”

“Biting you. Drinking your blood. I know you don’t remember, because I put a block in your mind so you wouldn’t.”

“Kept on *biting* me,” Madison said tonelessly. “Drinking my *blood*.”

“Right. Uh . . . because-of-me-being-a-vampire-don’t-scream.” Ash had had plenty of practice at this line, and at the various reactions it elicited. He’d figured Madison for a hitter, but instead of striking out at him, she pulled something out of her purse.

“I’ve got mace, you crazy bastard,” she snarled.

“Actually, that’s just pepper spray,” Ash said, regarding the keychain accessory absently. “But don’t try to use it, or you may get hurt. It depends on which way the wind’s blowing.” His mind was divided into layers; one of which felt the tedium of going through rote explanations again and again (Madison was Lightly Bitten Girl #97) and the other, which had a strange feeling that something uncanny was around. That something was stalking *him*.

“Don’t go. I have to explain more,” he said, wondering what could possibly be stupid enough to attack him. “And I have to apologize for using you. I didn’t know before Mary-Lynnette that it *was* using you. Or at least I thought it was okay, because in the Night World that’s the way vampires think about humans.”

“Right, right,” Madison said shortly, backed up against the wall again. She had the pepper spray pointed directly at him, but Ash knew he could dive quickly enough to avoid the stinging liquid. He went on talking.

“The Night World—well, that’s just a society of vampires and dark witches and shapeshifters and things. But it’s all falling to pieces now. First, a lot of us found out that we had human soulmates. And then we decided humans weren’t vermin or slaves after all.” Ash had been hit plenty of times after that line, too, but Madison was staring high over his head with a blank expression.

“And so now we’ve organized ourselves—‘we’ being the rebels—and we’ve formed a safe place for witches and humans and vampires and soulmate couples to live in peace, and we call it—are you getting any of this, Madison?”

“Oh, yes, I’m getting it,” Madison replied, making eye contact for a moment before her gaze drifted upward to look behind and above Ash once more. “There are real monsters, and one is going to kill me.”

“Not *monsters*,” Ash replied hastily. “I never said monsters. The SPCW—‘W’ being werewolves—would chew me red if I said something like that.” He wished she wouldn’t keep staring at the sky behind him. It was starting to give *him* the feeling that something was there: something malevolent. Fine hairs were lifting on his neck, and the skin beneath was tingling.

Slowly, as Madison stood frozen in place, Ash turned.

And saw nothing. There was mist, the standard kind of dark, swirling mist you got in old cemeteries where unquiet spirits haunted their graves, and it had closed in around him and Madison, leaving them in an island of moonlight.

Up, Ash thought suddenly. She was looking up high. He tilted his head back.

There, much higher than he could get his befuddled mind to grasp at first, was a pair of eyes. Malicious eyes. They were glowing—actually seeming to give off their own light—and they were red, ancient, and evil. Ash couldn't imagine the creature they belonged to having any kind of compassion for him or his human companion. He also couldn't imagine what the creature *was*. Nothing in the Night World was twenty feet tall.

“Look,” he said to Madison without moving his lips, “the most important thing is not to scream or run. I'm betting that if we don't make any noise and just walk quietly away, it will let us go without—”

Madison squirted pepper spray in his general direction, shrieked, and fled. Ash ducking to avoid the stinging liquid, couldn't really blame her for running. His own instincts had been howling at him to do the same thing. And now that she *was* fleeing, he had to grab her and get both of them out fast.

He barely had time to think this when a rushing energy sideswiped him, knocking him off his feet. As he gasped with pain, he saw the energy, which was like fire but black with a strange purple luminescence to it, hit Madison squarely.

And then she was gone.

Sheer instinct made Ash roll over on the manicured grass to confront her attacker. If he'd been capable of thought he never would have managed it, but his courage did one thing—it saved him from the second blast. Black fire struck right beside him, hard enough to send him tumbling away, scrambling to get to his feet.

As he did, he automatically focused, trying to see the inner self of his attacker. It was the

same thing that most vampires did before they began to meddle with the minds of creatures to make them docile or make them dead—fast. Ash just happened to be a prodigy at it, even before he tasted blood. And the monster—the thing that towered above him—didn't seem to like the interference. There was a third burst of streaming black energy aimed at him, and by the time he ducked and recovered, the monster was missing.

Where there had been dark mist, now there were white headstones and small trees. Where there had been malevolent eyes, there was air. Nothing was left—except a sound like the beating of giant wings.

Ash tried to stand up, only managing after several clumsy attempts. Acquaintances who knew him as a long, languorous blond cat of a young man would have been astonished to see the expression on his face. Ash himself couldn't catalogue all he was feeling. He was furious, ashamed, enraged, numbed, horrified and sickened all at once. He hobbled over to the cemetery wall, which was now charred black for fourteen feet.

Except for the white silhouette of a girl. A nineteen-year-old girl, Ash thought slowly, as he watched his own hand reach out and touch the shadow. This imprint was all that was left to show that Madison Emily Adams had ever been standing here.

Abstractedly, he then touched the darkness and rubbed his fingers together, examining them in the moonlight. Yes, soot. Madison had been incinerated instantly.

That was when the hairs on the back of his neck lifted for the second time. He whirled, ready to do something—he had no idea what—to fight the attacker that had killed a luckless young human girl with red hair.

What he saw this time was dream-like. It was an image that seemed to float in space. There

was a girl, perhaps fifteen or sixteen. She had mouse-brown hair, a bit disheveled, falling to her shoulders. Her face was ordinary; her frame slight and commonplace. The one memorable thing about her was her eyes, which were aquamarine and were bent on him with horrified intensity, as if the girl had seen everything that had just happened. As Ash watched, tears welled up in those eyes, hanging on the eyelashes without falling. And as her mouth trembled in an effort to hold the tears back, two unexpected dimples showed themselves in the baby-soft skin of her cheeks.

Automatically, Ash reached out a hand, but the girl wasn't really there. She was only a ghost-vision—who, strangely smelled of roses.

Ash sighed. The girl turned her tearful gaze on the cemetery wall, where now the only the word *Holy* could be seen in the white silhouette against the blackness.

Holy, Ash thought. It wasn't the exact word that he would have picked for Madison. But it was her word now.

And his own words, he thought as the vision of the brown-haired girl rippled and dissolved, were penitence and patience . . . and now vengeance, too.

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Sarah sat up in bed so fast that it made her dizzy. She pushed mouse-brown hair off her face and breathed deeply, trying to make the pain in her head go away. But no amount of breathing could stop her from noticing the pounding of rain against her window or the gray West Virginia daylight that shone through it.

Sarah looked at the digital clock that had fallen off her nightstand. She'd had a migraine in her sleep and had knocked out her alarm. She was going to be late for school if she didn't hurry—and she hadn't even finished her math homework last night!

What was she going to do? Her head was still throbbing relentlessly. But she couldn't just sit here and baby herself. Her stepfather, Alan, would ask questions. If she admitted that she'd had another migraine, he might want her to go to a doctor. And that couldn't happen, especially not now.

Despite the urgency she felt, she simply sat for a moment, wondering over her latest nightmare. It had been so different from the others. It had been longer, for one thing, not merely a momentary glimpse of scales or teeth or even an entire . . . creature. It had been about people—well, one person and one *sort of* person. One . . . vampire. Was she going to start dreaming about vampires now? She didn't think she could stand that. Even if the guy in the dream hadn't seemed very scary, Sarah feared and loathed what he was from some deep instinct. She hoped that his would-be girlfriend who was going to college stayed as far away from him as possible.

Something drew her eyes back to the clock on the rug. She was going to have to run just to get to school and somehow do her math on the way. She might just manage—if she could keep from having another migraine.