

# A. J. SMITH

## NIGHT WORLD

Author of *Secret Vampire*

### Daughters of Darkness

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Night World #2

**Daughters of Darkness**

L.J. Smith

*In memory of  
John Manford Divola*

*And for Julie Ann Divola,  
still the best of best friends*

# CHAPTER 1

Rowan, Kestrel, and Jade," Mary-Lynnette said as she and Mark passed the old Victorian farmhouse.

" Huh?"

" Rowan. And Kestrel. And Jade. The names of the girls who're moving in." Mary-Lynnette tilted her head toward the farmhouse-her hands were full of lawn chair. "They're Mrs. Burdock's nieces. Don't you remember I told you they were coming to live with her?"

"Vaguely," Mark said, readjusting the weight of the telescope he was carrying as they trudged up the manzanita-covered hill. He spoke shortly, which Mary-Lynnette knew meant he was feeling shy.

"They're pretty names," she said. "And they must be sweet girls, because Mrs. Burdock said so."

" Mrs. Burdock is crazy."

" She's just eccentric. And yesterday she told me her nieces are all beautiful. I mean, I'm sure she's prejudiced and everything, but she was pretty definite. Each one of them gorgeous, each one a completely different type."

" So they should be going to California," Mark said in an almost-inaudible mutter. "They should be posing for Vogue. Where do you want this thing?" he added as they reached the top of the hill.

" Right here." Mary-Lynnette put the lawn chair down. She scraped some dirt away with her foot so the telescope would sit evenly. Then she said casually, "You know, I thought maybe we could go over there tomorrow and introduce ourselves-sort of welcome them, you know...."

"Will you cut it out?" Mark said tersely. "I can organize my own life. If I want to meet a girl, I'll meet a girl. I don't need help."

" Okay, okay. You don't need help. Be careful with that focuser tube-"

"And besides, what are we going to say?" Mark said, on a roll now. "'Welcome to Briar Creek, where nothing ever happens. Where there are more coyotes than people. Where if you really want some excitement you can ride into town and watch the Saturday night mouse racing at the Gold Creek Bar....'"

"Okay. Okay." Mary-Lynnette sighed. She^ - looked at her younger brother, who just at the moment was illuminated by the last rays of sunset. To see him now, you'd think he'd never been sick a day in his life. His hair was as dark and shiny as Mary Lynnette's, his eyes were as blue and clear and snap ping. He had the same healthy tan as she did; the same glow of color in his cheeks.

But when he'd been a baby, he'd been thin and scrawny and every breath had been a challenge. His asthma had been so bad he'd spent most of his second year in an oxygen tent, fighting to stay alive. Mary-Lynnette, a year and a half older, had wondered every day if her baby brother would ever come home.

It had changed him, being alone in that tent where even their mother couldn't touch him. When he came out he was shy and clingy-holding on to their mother's arm all the time. And for years he hadn't been able to go out for sports like the other kids. That was all a long time ago-Mark was going to be a junior in high school this year-but he was still shy. And when he got defensive, he bit people's heads off.

Mary-Lynnette wished one of the new girls would be right for him, draw him out a bit, give him confidence. Maybe she could arrange it somehow....

" What are you thinking about?" Mark asked suspiciously.

Mary-Lynnette realized he was staring at her.

"About how the seeing's going to be really good tonight," she said blandly. "August's the best month for starwatching; the air's so warm and still. Hey, there's the first star-you can make a wish."

She pointed to a bright point of light above the southern horizon. It worked; Mark was distracted and looked, too.

Mary-Lynnette stared at the back of his dark head. If it would do any good, I'd wish for romance for you, she thought. I'd wish it for myself, too-but what would be the point? There's nobody around here to be romantic with.

None of the guys at school--except maybe Jeremy Lovett-understood why she was interested in astronomy, or what she felt about the stars. Most of the time Mary-Lynnette didn't care-but occasionally she felt a vague ache in her chest. A longing to ... share. If she had wished, it would have been for that, for someone to share the night

with.

Oh, well. It didn't help to dwell on it. And besides, although she didn't want to tell Mark, what they were wishing on was the planet Jupiter, and not a star at all.

Mark shook his head as he tramped down the path that wound through buckbrush and poison hemlock. He should have apologized to Mary-Lynnette before leaving-he didn't like being nasty to her. In fact, she was the one person he usually tried to be decent to. But why was she always trying to fix him? To the point of wishing on stars. And Mark hadn't really made a wish, anyway. He'd thought, if I was making a wish, which I'm not because it's hokey and stupid, it would be for some excitement around here.

Something wild, mark thought-and felt an inner shiver as he hiked downhill in the gathering darkness.

Jade stared at the steady, brilliant point of light above the southern horizon. It was a planet, she knew. For the last two nights she'd seen it moving across the sky, accompanied by tiny pinpricks of light that must be its moons. Where she came from, nobody was in the habit of wishing on stars, but this planet seemed like a friend-a traveler, just like her. As Jade watched it tonight, she felt a sort of concentration of hope rise inside her. Almost a wish.

Jade had to admit that they weren't off to a very promising start. The night air was too quiet; there wasn't the faintest sound of a car coming. She was tired and worried and beginning to be very, very hungry.

Jade turned to look at her sisters. "Well, where is she?"

"I don't know," Rowan said in her most doggedly gentle voice. "Be patient."

"Well, maybe we should scan for her.

"No," Rowan said. "Absolutely not. Remember what we decided."

"She's probably forgotten we were coming," Kestrel said. "I told you she was getting senile."

"Don't say things like that. It's not polite," Rowan said, still gentle, but through her teeth.

Rowan was always gentle when she could manage it. She was nineteen, tall, slim, and stately. She had cinnamon-brown eyes and warm brown hair that cascaded down her

back in waves.

Kestrel was seventeen and had hair the color of old gold sweeping back from her face like a bird's wings. Her eyes were amber and hawklike, and she was never gentle.

Jade was the youngest, just turned sixteen, and she didn't look like either of her sisters. She had white-blond hair that she used as a veil to hide behind, and green eyes. People said she looked serene, but she almost never felt serene. Usually she was either madly excited or madly anxious and confused.

Right now it was anxious. She was worried about her battered, half-century-old Morocco leather suitcase. She couldn't hear a thing from inside it.

"Hey, why don't you two go down the road a little way and see if she's coming?"

Her sisters looked back at her. There were few things that Rowan and Kestrel agreed on, but Jade was one of them. She could see that they were about to team up against her.

"Now what?" Kestrel said, her teeth showing just briefly.

And Rowan said, "You're up to something. What are you up to, Jade?"

Jade smoothed her thoughts and her face out and just looked at them artlessly. She hoped.

They stared back for a few minutes, then looked at each other, giving up. "We're going to have to walk, you know," Kestrel said to Rowan.

"There are worse things than walking," Rowan said. She pushed a stray wisp of chestnut-colored hair off her forehead and looked around the bus station which consisted of a three-sided, glass-walled cubicle, and the splintering wooden bench. "I wish there was a telephone."

"Well, there isn't. And it's twenty miles to Briar Creek," Kestrel said, golden eyes glinting with a kind of grim enjoyment. "We should probably leave our bags here."

Alarm tingled through Jade. "No, no. I've got all my--all my clothes in there. Come on, twenty miles isn't so far." With one hand she picked up her cat carrier-it was homemade, just boards and wires and with the other she picked up the suitcase. She got quite a distance down the road before she heard the crunch of gravel behind her. They were following: Rowan sighing patiently, Kestrel chuckling softly, her hair shining like old gold in the starlight.

The one-lane road was dark and deserted. But not entirely silent there were dozens of tiny night sounds, all adding up to one intricate, harmonizing night stillness. It would

have been pleasant, except that Jade's suitcase seemed to get heavier with every step, and she was hungrier than she had ever been before. She knew better than to mention it to Rowan, but it made her feel confused and weak.

Just when she was beginning to think she would have to put the suitcase down and rest, she heard a new sound.

It was a car, coming from behind them. The engine was so loud that it seemed to take a long time to get close to them, but when it passed, Jade saw that it was actually going very fast. Then there was a rattling of gravel and the car stopped. It backed up and Jade saw a boy looking through the window at her.

There was another boy in the passenger seat. Jade looked at them curiously.

They seemed to be about Rowan's age, and they were both deeply tanned. The one in the driver's seat had blond hair and looked as if he hadn't washed in a while. The other one had brown hair. He was wearing a vest with no shirt underneath. He had a toothpick in his mouth.

They both looked back at Jade, seeming just as curious as she was. Then the driver's window slid down. Jade was fascinated by how quickly it went.

"Need a ride?" the driver said, with an oddly bright smile. His teeth shone in contrast to his dingy face.

Jade looked at Rowan and Kestrel, who were just catching up. Kestrel said nothing, but looked at the car through narrow, heavy-lashed amber eyes. Rowan's brown eyes were very warm.

"We sure would," she said, smiling. Then, doubtfully, "But we're going to Burdock Farm. It may be out of your way...."

"Oh, hey, I know that place. It's not far," the one in the vest said around his toothpick. "Anyway, anything for a lady," he said, with what seemed to be an attempt at gallantry. He opened his door and got out of the car. "One of you can sit up front, and I can sit in back with the other two. Lucky me, huh?" he said to the driver.

"Lucky you," the driver said, smiling largely again. He opened his door, too. "You go on and put that cat carrier in front, and the suitcases can go in the trunk," he said.

Rowan smiled at Jade, and Jade knew what she was thinking. I wonder if everybody out here is so friendly? They distributed their belongings and then piled in the car, Jade in the front with the driver, Rowan and Kestrel in the back on either side of the vested guy. A minute later they were flying down the road at what Jade found a delightful speed, gravel crunching beneath the tires.

"I'm Vic," the driver said.

"I'm Todd," the vested guy said.

Rowan said, "I'm Rowan, and this is Kestrel. That's Jade up there."

"You girls friends?"

"We're sisters," Jade said.

"You don't look like sisters."

"Everybody says that." Jade meant everybody they had met since they'd run away. Back home, everybody knew they were sisters, so nobody said it.

"What are you doing out here so late?" Vic asked. "It's not the place for nice girls."

"We're not nice girls," Kestrel explained absently.

"We're trying to be," Rowan said reprovingly through her teeth. To Vic, she said, "We were waiting for our great-aunt Opal to pick us up at the bus stop, but she didn't come. We're going to live at Burdock Farm."

"Old lady Burdock is your aunt?" Todd said, removing his toothpick. "That crazy old bat?" Vic turned around to look at him, and they both laughed and shook their heads.

Jade looked away from Vic. She stared down at the cat carrier, listening for the little squeaking noises that meant Tiggy was awake.

She felt just slightly ... uneasy. She sensed something. Even though these guys seemed friendly, there was something beneath the surface. But she was too sleepy-and too light-headed from hunger-to figure out exactly what it was.

Rowan was still looking polite and puzzled, but Kestrel looked at the car door on her side thoughtfully. Jade knew what she was looking for-a handle. There wasn't one.

"Too bad," Vic said. "This car's a real junkheap; you can't even open the back doors from inside."

He grabbed Jade's upper arm so hard she could feel pressure on the bone. "Now, you girls just be nice and nobody's going to get hurt."

They seemed to drive a long time before Vic spoke again.

"You girls ever been to Oregon before?"

Jade blinked and murmured a negative.

"It's got some pretty lonely places," Vic said. "Out here, for example. Briar Creek was a gold rush town, but when the gold ran out and the railroad passed it by, it just died. Now the wilderness is taking it back."

His tone was significant, but Jade didn't understand what he was trying to convey.

"It does seem peaceful;" Rowan said politely from the backseat.

Vic made a brief snorting sound. "Yeah, well, peaceful wasn't exactly what I meant. I meant, take this road. These farmhouses are miles apart, right? If you screamed, there wouldn't be anyone to hear you."

Jade blinked. What a strange thing to say. Rowan, still politely making conversation, said, "Well, you and Todd would."

"I mean, nobody else," Vic said, and Jade could feel his impatience. He had been driving more and more slowly. Now he pulled the car off to the side of the road and stopped. Parked.

"Nobody out there is going to hear," he clarified, turning around to look into the backseat. Jade looked, too, and saw Todd grinning, a wide bright grin with teeth clenched on his toothpick.

"That's right," Todd said. "You're out here alone with us, so maybe you'd better listen to us, huh?"

Jade saw that he was gripping Rowan's arm with one hand and Kestrel's wrist with the other.

## CHAPTER 2

You see, we're both lonely guys," Todd said from the back. ""There aren't any girls our age around here, so we're lonely. And then when we come across three nice girls like you-well, we just natu rally want to get to know you better. Understand?"

"So if you girls play along, we can all have fun," Vic put in.

"Fun-oh, no," Rowan said, dismayed. Jade knew she had caught part of Vic's thought and was trying very hard not to pry further. "Kestrel and Jade are much too young for anything like that. I'm sorry, but we have to say no."

" I won't do it even when I am old enough," Jade said. "But that isn't what these guys mean anyway they mean this." She projected some of the images she was getting from Vic into Rowan's mind.

"Oh, dear," Rowan said flatly. "Jade, you know we agreed not to spy on people like that."

Yeah, but look what they're thinking, Jade said soundlessly, figuring that if she had broken one rule, she might as well break them all.

"Now, look," Vic said in a tone that showed he knew he was losing control of the situation. He reached out and grabbed Jade's other arm, forcing her to face him. "We're not here to talk. See?" He gave her a little shake. Jade studied his features a moment, then turned her head to look inquiringly into the backseat.

Rowan's face was creamy-pale against her brown hair. Jade could feel that she was sad and disap pointed. Kestrel's hair was dim gold and she was frowning.

Well? Kestrel said silently to Rowan.

Well? Jade said the same way. She wriggled as Vic tried to pull her loser. Come on, Rowan, he's pinching me.

I guess we don't have any choice, Rowan said.

Immediately Jade turned back to Vic. He was still trying to pull her, looking surprised

that she didn't seem to be coming. Jade stopped resisting and let him drag her in close- and then smoothly detached one arm from his grip and slammed her hand upward. The heel of her hand made contact just under his chin. His teeth clicked and his head was knocked backward, exposing his throat.

Jade darted in and bit.

She was feeling guilty and excited. She wasn't used to doing it like this, to taking down prey that was awake and struggling instead of hypnotized and docile. But she knew her instincts were as good as any hunter who'd grown up stalking humans in alleys. It was part of her genetic programming to evaluate anything she saw in terms of "Is it food? Can I get it? What are its weaknesses?"

The only problem was that she shouldn't be enjoying this feeding, because it was exactly the opposite of what she and Rowan and Kestrel had come to Briar Creek to do.

She was tangentially aware of activity in the backseat. Rowan had lifted the arm Todd had been using to restrain her. On the other side Kestrel had done the same.

Todd was fighting, his voice thunderstruck. "Hey hey what are you-"

Rowan bit.

"What are you doing?"

Kestrel bit.

"What the freak are you doing? Who are you? What the freak are you?"

He thrashed wildly for a minute or so, and then subsided as Rowan and Kestrel mentally urged him into a trance.

It was only another minute or so before Rowan said, "That's enough."

Jade said, Aw, Rowan ...

"That's enough. Tell him not to remember anything about this-and find out if he knows where Burdock Farm is."

Still feeding, Jade reached out with her mind, touching lightly with a tentacle of thought. Then she pulled back, her mouth closing as if in a kiss as it left Vic's skin. Vic was just a big rag doll at this point, and he flopped bonelessly against the steering wheel and the car door when she let him go.

"The farm's back that way-we have to go back to the fork in the road," she said. "It's

weird," she added, puzzled. "He was thinking that he wouldn't get in trouble for attacking us because-because of something about Aunt Opal. I couldn't get what."

"Probably that she was crazy," Kestrel said unemotionally. "Todd was thinking that he wouldn't get in trouble because his dad's an Elder."

"They don't have Elders," Jade said, vaguely smug. "You mean a governor or a police officer or something „

Rowan was frowning, not looking at them. "All right," she said. "This was an emergency; we had to do it. But now we're going back to what we agreed."

"Until the next emergency," Kestrel said, smiling out the car window into the night.

To forestall Rowan, Jade said, "You think we should just leave them here?"

"Why not?" Kestrel said carelessly. "They'll wake up in a few hours."

Jade looked at Vic's neck. The two little wounds where her teeth had pierced him were already almost closed. By tomorrow they would be faint red marks like old bee stings.

Five minutes later they were on the road again with their suitcases. This time, though, Jade was cheerful. The difference was food-she felt as full of blood as a tick, charged with energy and ready to skip up mountains. She swung the cat carrier and her suitcase alternately, and Tiggy growled.

It was wonderful being out like this, walking alone in the warm night air, with nobody to frown in disapproval. Wonderful to listen to the deer and rabbits and rats feeding in the meadows around her. Happiness bubbled up inside Jade. She'd never felt so free.

"It is nice, isn't it?" Rowan said softly, looking around as they reached the fork in the road. "It's the real world. And we have as much right to it as anybody else."

"I think it's the blood," Kestrel said. "Free-range humans are so much better than the kept ones. Why didn't our dear brother ever mention that?"

Ash, Jade thought, and felt a cold wind. She glanced behind her, not looking for a car but for something much more silent and deadly. She realized suddenly how fragile her bubble of happiness was.

"Are we going to get caught?" she asked Rowan. Reverting, in the space of one second, to a six-yearold turning to her big sister for help.

And Rowan, the best big sister in the world, said immediately and positively, "No. "

"But if Ash figures it out-he's the only one who might realize-"

"We are not going to get caught," Rowan said. "Nobody will figure out that we're here."

Jade felt better. She put down her suitcase and held out a hand to Rowan, who took it. "Together forever," she said.

Kestrel, who'd been a few steps ahead, glanced over her shoulder. Then she came back and put her hand on theirs.

"Together forever."

Rowan said it solemnly; Kestrel said it with a quick narrowing of her yellow eyes. Jade said it with utter determination.

As they walked on, Jade felt buoyant and cheerful again, enjoying the velvet-dark night.

The road was just dirt here, not paved. They passed meadows and stands of Douglas fir. A farmhouse on the left, set back on a long driveway. And finally, dead ahead at the end of the road, another house.

"That's it," Rowan said. Jade recognized it, too, from the pictures Aunt Opal had sent them. It had two stories, a wraparound porch, and a steeply pitched roof with lots of gables. A cupola sprouted out of the rooftop, and there was a weather vane on the barn.

A real weather vane, Jade thought, stopping to stare. Her happiness flooded back full force. "I love it," she said solemnly.

Rowan and Kestrel had stopped, too, but their expressions were far from awed. Rowan looked a hair's breadth away from horrified.

"It's a wreck," she gasped. "Look at that barn the paint's completely gone. The pictures didn't show that."

"And the porch," Kestrel said helpfully. "It's falling to pieces. Might go any minute."

"The work," Rowan whispered. "The work it would take to fix this place up ..."

"And the money," Kestrel said.

Jade gave them a cold look. "Why fix it? I like it.

It's different." Rigid with superiority, she picked up her luggage and walked to the end of the road- There was a ramshackle, mostly fallen-down fence around the property,

and a dangerous-looking gate. Beyond, on a weed-covered path, was a pile of white pickets as if somebody had been planning to fix the fence but had never got around to it.

Jade put down the suitcase and cat carrier and pulled at the gate. To her surprise, it moved easily.

" See, it may not look good, but it still works-" She didn't get to finish the sentence properly. The gate fell on her.

" Well, it may not work, but it's still ours," she said as Rowan and Kestrel pulled it off her.

"No, it's Aunt Opal's," Kestrel said.

Rowan just smoothed her hair back and said,

"Come on."

There was a board missing from the porch steps, and several boards gone from the porch itself. Jade limped around them with dignity. The gate had given her a good whack in the shin, and since it was wood, it still hurt. In fact, everything seemed to be made of wood here, which gave Jade a pleasantly alarmed feeling. Back home, wood was revered-,and kept out of the way.

You have to be awfully careful to live in this kind of world, Jade thought. Or you're going to get hurt.

Rowan and Kestrel were knocking on the door, Rowan politely, with her knuckles, Kestrel loudly, with the side of her hand. There wasn't any answer.

"She doesn't seem to be here," Rowan said.

"She's decided she doesn't want us," Kestrel said, golden eyes gleaming.

" Maybe she went to the wrong bus station," Jade said.

" Oh-that's it. I bet that's it," Rowan said. "Poor old thing, she's waiting for us somewhere, and she's going to be thinking that we didn't show up."

""Sometimes you're not completely stupid," Kestrel informed Jade. High praise from Kestrel.

" Well, let's go in," Jade said ^ , to conceal how pleased she was. "She'll come back here sometime."

" Human houses have locks," Rowan began, but this house wasn't locked. The doorknob turned in Jade's hand. The three of them stepped inside.

It was dark, even darker than the moonless night outside, but Jade's eyes adjusted in a few seconds.

"Hey, it's not bad," she said. They were in a shabby but handsome living room filled with huge, ponderous furniture. Wood furniture, of course dark and highly polished. The tables were topped with marble.

Rowan found a lightswitch, and suddenly the room was too bright. Blinking, Jade saw that the walls were pale apple green, with fancy woodwork and moldings in a darker shade of the same green. It made Jade feel oddly peaceful. And anchored, somehow, as if she belonged here. Maybe it was all the heavy furniture.

She looked at Rowan, who was looking around tall graceful body slowly relaxing.

Rowan smiled and met her eyes. She nodded once. "Yes."

Jade basked for a moment in the glory of having been right twice in five minutes--and then she remembered her suitcase.

"Let's see what the rest of the place is like," she said hastily. "I'll take the upstairs; you guys look around here."

" You just want the best bedroom," Kestrel said.

Jade ignored her, hurrying up a wide, carpeted flight of stairs. There were lots of bedrooms, and each one had lots of room. She didn't want the best, though, just the farthest away.

At the very end of the hall was a room painted sea-blue. Jade slammed the door behind her and put her suitcase on the bed. Holding her breath, she opened the suitcase.

Oh. Oh, no. Oh, no ...

Three minutes later she heard the click of the door behind her, but didn't care enough to turn.

"What are you doing?" Kestrel's voice said.

Jade looked up from her frantic efforts to resuscitate the two kittens she held. "They're dead!" she wailed.

"Well, what did you expect? They need to breathe, idiot. How did you expect them to make it through two days of traveling?"

Jade sniffled.

"Rowan told you that you could take only one."

Jade sniffled harder and glared. "I know. That's why I put these two in the suitcase." She hiccuped. "At least Tiggy's all right." She dropped to her knees and peered in the cat carrier to make sure he was all right. His ears were laid back, his golden eyes gleaming out of a mass of black fur. He hissed, and Jade sat up. He was fine.

"For five dollars I'll take care of the dead ones," Kestrel said.

"No!" Jade jumped up and moved protectively in front of them, fingers clawed.

"Not like that," Kestrel said, offended. "I don't eat carrion. Look, if you don't get rid of them somehow, Rowan's going to find out. For God's sake, girl, you're a vampire," she added as Jade cradled the limp bodies to her chest. "Act like one."

"I want to bury them," Jade said. "They should have a funeral."

Kestrel rolled her eyes and left. Jade wrapped the small corpses in her jacket and tiptoed out after her.

A shovel, she thought. Now, where would that be?

Keeping her ears open for Rowan, she sidled around the first floor. All the rooms looked like the living room: imposing and in a state of genteel decay. The kitchen was huge. It had an open fireplace and a shed off the back door for washing laundry. It also had a door to the cellar.

Jade made her way down the steps cautiously. She couldn't turn on a light because she needed both hands for the kittens. And, because of the kittens, she couldn't see her feet. She had to feel with her toe for the next step.

At the bottom of the stairs her toe found some thing yielding, slightly resilient. It was blocking her path.

Slowly Jade craned her neck over the bundle of jacket and looked down.

It was dim here. She herself was blocking the light that filtered down from the kitchen. But she could make out what looked like a pile of old clothes. A lumpy pile.

Jade was getting a very, very bad feeling.

She nudged the pile of clothes with one toe. It moved slightly. Jade took a deep breath and nudged it hard.

It was all one piece. It rolled over. Jade looked down, breathed quickly for a moment, and screamed.

A good, shrill, attention-getting scream. She added a nonverbal thought, the telepathic equivalent of a siren.

Rowan! Kestrel! You guys get down here!

Twenty seconds later the cellar light went on and Rowan and Kestrel came clattering down the stairs.

"I have told you and told you," Rowan was saying through her teeth. "We don't use our-" She stopped, staring.

"I think it's Aunt Opal," Jade said.

## CHAPTER 3

She's not looking so good," Kestrel said, peering over Rowan's shoulder.

Rowan said, "Oh, dear," and sat down. Great-aunt Opal was a mummy. Her skin was like leather: yellow-brown, hard, and smooth. Almost shiny. And the skin was all there was to her, just a leathery frame stretched over bones. She didn't have any hair. Her eye sockets were dark holes with dry tissue inside. Her nose was collapsed.

"Poor auntie," Rowan said. Her own brown eyes were wet.

"We're going to look like that when we die," Kestrel said musingly.

Jade stamped her foot. "No, look, you guys! You're both missing it completely. Look at that!" She swung a wild toe at the mummy's midsection. There, protruding from the blue-flowered housedress and the leathery skin, was a gigantic splinter of wood. It was almost as long as an arrow, thick at the base and tapered where it disappeared into Aunt Opal's chest. Flakes of white paint still clung to one side.

Several other pickets were lying on the cellar floor.

"Poor old thing," Rowan said. "She must have been carrying them when she fell."

Jade looked at Kestrel. Kestrel looked back with exasperated golden eyes. There were few things they agreed on, but Rowan was one of them.

"Rowan," Kestrel said distinctly, "she was staked. "

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes," Jade said. "Somebody killed her. And somebody who knew she was a vampire."

Rowan was shaking her head. "But who would know that?"

"Well ..." Jade thought. "Another vampire."

"Or a vampire hunter," Kestrel said.

Rowan looked up, shocked. "Those aren't real. They're just stories to frighten kids-aren't they?"

Kestrel shrugged, but her golden eyes were dark.

Jade shifted uneasily. The freedom she'd felt on the road, the peace in the living room-and now this. Suddenly she felt empty and isolated.

Rowan sat down on the stairs, looking too tired and preoccupied to push back the lock of hair plastered to her forehead. "Maybe I shouldn't have brought you here," she said softly. "Maybe it's worse here." She didn't say it, but Jade could sense her next thought. Maybe we should go back

"Nothing could be worse," Jade said fiercely. "And I'd die before I'd go back."

She meant it. Back to waiting on every man in sight? Back to arranged marriages and endless restrictions? Back to all those disapproving faces, so quick to condemn anything different, anything that wasn't done the way it had been done four hundred years ago?

"We can't go back," she said.

"No, we can't," Kestrel said dryly. "Literally. Unless we want to end up like Great-aunt Opal. Or" she paused significantly-"like Great-uncle Hodge."

Rowan looked up. "Don't even say that!"

Jade's stomach felt like a clenched fist. "They wouldn't, she said, shoving back at the memory that was trying to emerge. "Not to their own grandkids. Not to us."

"The point," Kestrel said, "is that we can't go back, so we have to go forward. We've got to figure out what we're going to do here without Aunt Opal to help us--especially if there's a vampire hunter around. But first, what are we going to do with that?" She nodded toward the body.

Rowan just shook her head helplessly. She looked around the cellar as if she might find an answer in a corner. Her gaze fell on Jade. It stopped there, and Jade could see the sisterly radar system turn on.

"Jade. What's that in your jacket?"

Jade was too wrung-out to lie. She opened the jacket and showed Rowan the kittens. "I didn't know my suitcase would kill them."

Rowan looked too wrung-out to be angry. She glanced heavenward, sighing. Then,