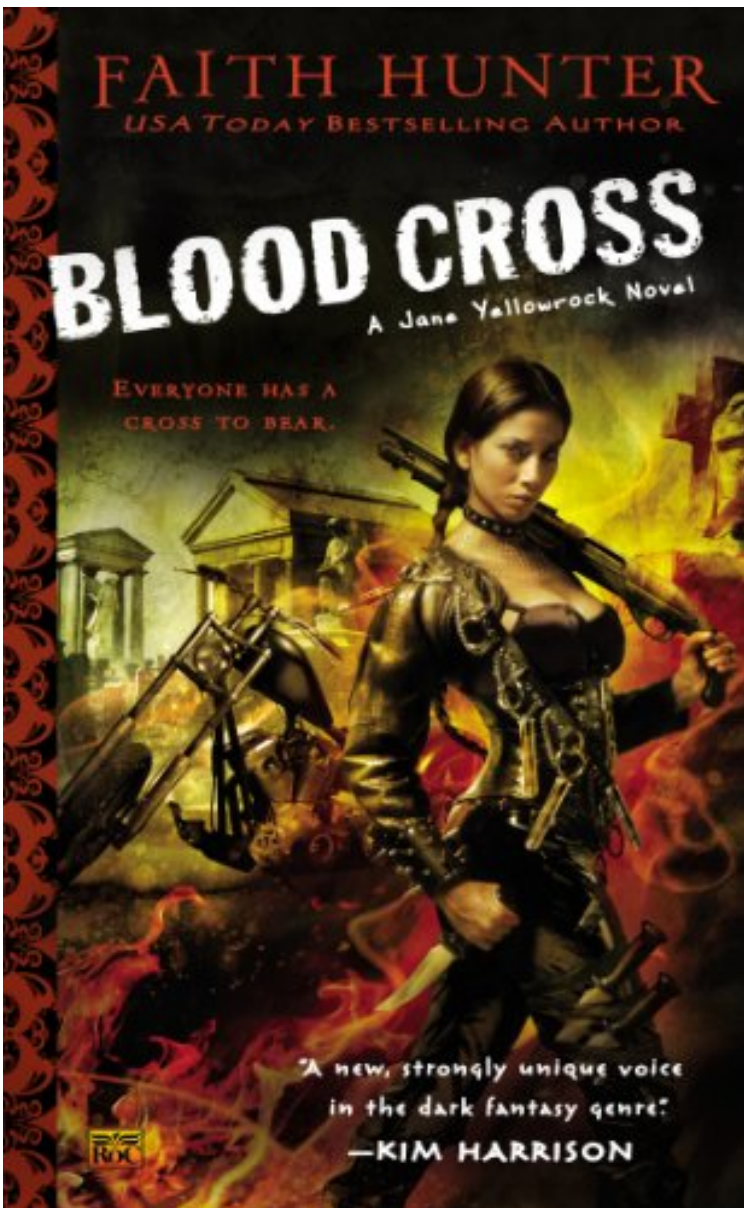


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Blood Cross



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurView our feature on Faith Hunters Blood Cross. Jane Yellowrock is back on the prowl against the children of the night... The vampire council has hired skinwalker Jane Yellowrock to hunt and kill one of their own who has broken sacred ancient rules-but Jane quickly realizes that in a community that is thousands of years old, loyalties run deep...ExtraitChapter 1 I like the fire. Can I come play? Molly and the kids and I were eating a big lunch when the lightning hit. The bolt slammed into the ground only feet from the house, throwing brilliant light through the windows, shaking the floor beneath us. I grabbed the table and looked up to see Molly questing with her senses to discern if the lightning had harmed her wards.

She had inactivated them because lightning and wards don't play well with each other, but even a quiescent ward can be structurally damaged. She gave me an "it's fine" look, but I could tell she was uneasy. Without the wards, the house where I lived while I fulfilled my current contract with the New Orleans vamp council was unprotected. Molly a powerful earth witch and my best friend and I are used to the summer storms in the Appalachian Mountains. Though they can be violent and intense, they had nothing on this monster. Outside, Hurricane Ada was pounding New Orleans, the category-two storm bringing with it wind and torrential rain, though none of the might and tidal surge of Katrina and Rita, and much less of the damage. Human memory is short; most of the natives had elected to ride out the storm, depend on the new levies to hold, and trust in the improvements to the city's infrastructure, courtesy of Uncle Sam. The only unanticipated aspect of the storm was the intense lightning and two tornados that had set down in the middle of the city's electric grid, resulting in the loss of power. The wind died for a moment and then slammed the house like a giant fist, the walls quaking. A fresh burst of rain drummed against the windows. Without power for the air-conditioning units, it was growing muggy inside, but fortunately, I had gas-heated water and a gas stove, and the city's water supply hadn't been impacted. So the kids had sandwiches and hot canned soup and Mol and I had prime rib, mine huge and rare enough to still have a moo or two in it, Mol's daintier and cooked medium. I had even made spinach salads to placate health-conscious Molly. Wind swirled against the front of the old house, and the noise went up a notch for a long moment, the house groaning. I had never been through a hurricane, and even a category two was pretty intense. I couldn't imagine a cat three or four, with a storm surge. It was no wonder Katrina and Rita had devastated the Gulf Coast, despite the efforts of New Orleans' witches to ward against landfall. I finished off the steak, ate a spinach leaf, and took a tour to check for damage. The old house in the middle of the French Quarter wasn't mine only on loan, as long as I was under contract but I intended to keep it in the same pristine condition I got it in. Not that the vamps I worked for were making that easy. I studied the twelve-foot-tall ceilings on both stories looking for leaks, made sure the towels at the doors were sopping up any rain that had blown in, and checked to see that the windows were secure. So far, so good no leaks, no damage. I sniffed at the damp air to confirm that the lightning strike hadn't hit the house. No smell of smoke, just the strong odor of ozone. It had been close. On the side porch on the first floor, my old, rebuilt, one-of-a-kind Harley, Bitsa, was safe and sound under a heavy tarp I'd bought to protect her. Out back, the granite boulders my vamp landlady, Katie Fonteneau, had brought in for the rock garden I'd needed installed were rain-slick and broken. Those were not going to survive my stay here. Already the stones were cracked and split, and one had been ground to sharp shards and piles of grit. I exchanged mass with stone when I shifted into an animal whose genetic structure and size were vastly different from my own. It was dangerous. And it always resulted in damage to the boulders. Quite a lot of damage. The power came on for a moment and the lights flickered. The fountain in the back garden stuttered, sending water into the air, the naked vamp statue in its center glistening with wetness. The vamp sent up a last, single spurt as the power flickered and died again. I walked from window to window, watching the wind and rain attack the subtropical vegetation and my rock garden, probably the only one in the entire French Quarter. It was beautiful, even in its current condition. "You're pacing." I looked at Molly, and then down at my feet. "You need to shift. You've been in human form all week. The kids and I will not fall into the sinister hands of the evil vampires if you take the evening off." She curled on the sofa and wrapped her arms around her knees, her red hair falling in frizzy curls from the humidity, curls she hated. Angelina raced up and threw herself on the leather cushion with a gust of trapped air. Molly rolled her daughter over, keeping an eye on Little Evan, who had found his ball under a chair and was bent over, butt-in-the-air, trying to get to it. "I'll set my wards. They'll keep us safe." "Is Aunt Jane gonna turn into Big Cat tonight? Can I watch? Please, please, please?" Angie asked. She was only six, but already the little girl was coming into her gift and it was strong. "No. That's private for Aunt Jane. And we do not talk about that, remember?" Angie dropped her voice into a whisper and put a small finger over her lips. "It's a secret. Shhhhh." And then she giggled, a sound that always brought a smile to my face. "Leo's not himself," I said, "not since I killed the thing that took over his son. He's still grieving, and my sources say grief can make vamps . . . not exactly rogue, but unstable. I don't trust him." Still, Mol was right. I hadn't shifted in too long. I could feel Beast's pelt rubbing under my skin, insistent. I needed the night. Beast will guard kits, Beast thought at me. I am strong. And fast. And have killing claws and killing teeth. I shushed her with a calming thought. "Leo won't violate your contract with the vampire council to find the young-rogue maker." Mol laughed up at me and added, "Of course, when you fulfill the contract, all bets are off." "Thanks. That makes me feel oh-so-much better." "Hunt tonight," Molly said. "Go running. End up at the Cherokee shaman's

place and let her sweat you. You've been promising." She looked down and finger-combed Angie's curls. In sunlight, the baby-fine hair almost glowed with honey blond and strawberry highlights, but in the dimness of the storm, it lost its vibrancy. Angie smiled and closed her eyes, soothed by her mother's hand. It was nap time, and even a storm was powerless against the sleep compulsion Mol was thrumming through her elder child. "You might learn something new about your past," she added. "About skinwalkers." "Yeah, like that they were all a bunch of crazed killers, and it's only a matter of time before I go nutso too." I had been trying for humor, but I could smell the tang of worry in my own words. "You are not a killer, nor are you crazed. You are my best friend in the whole world." The faith on Molly's face when she looked up was absolute. "I'd trust with you with my life and with my children's lives any day of the week, Jane." My heart turned over. I'd never had a best friend growing up, but I'd lucked out when I met Molly. She'd welcomed me into her small family and introduced me to the larger family of her sisters' coven without a single qualm. Her husband, Big Evan, wasn't so sanguine about me, but he was in Brazil, which was why Molly was visiting me for several weeks, despite the possible threat of trouble from Leo Pellissier, Blood Master of Clan Pellissier, the Blood Master of the City and head of the vamp council. "I'll think about shifting," I promised, knowing I was lying.

I looked over at Evan and found him asleep under the chair, his ball in his pudgy hands. I scooped up the baby and Molly gathered up Angelina, and we carried them both upstairs to their room. With the storm as protection, and the wards off, I could enter, settling the baby into his bed, placing the ball in the curve of his arms. I wasn't maternal, not at all, but I loved Molly's children. Beast reared up in me, fierce and violent, her maternal instincts vastly different from any human ones. Will protect kits. "I know," I said too softly for Molly to hear. Louder, I said, "Cards? Or a nap?" Molly yawned. "Nap for me. See you in an hour or so, Big Cat." I nodded, and as the storm outside died down and passed and the evening drew in, I went back to prowling the house and worrying. I didn't know much about my own heritage or my own past, except for the Cherokee stuff Aggie One Feather was teaching me, and that didn't include her knowing what I was: a skinwalker. The only other skinwalker I had ever seen was dead now, at my hand. He had killed, and taken the place of, Leo Pellissier's son Immanuel, maybe decades earlier, and then gone even further to the dark side, killing and eating humans and vamps. I still didn't know why. I worried that it was the nature of skinwalkers that we all went crazy eventually. I'd killed Immanuel's walker, and gotten myself into the predicament of being on the hate list of Leo Pellissier. I'm Jane Yellowrock, traveling rogue-vamp hunter, skinwalker-in-hiding, and occasionally muscle-for-hire. I know how to fight, how to protect myself, and how to use the array of weapons that were currently under lock and key in my bedroom, safe from the attention of the children. I wasn't so good at understanding humans or witches or vampires, and I sucked at social situations, but this gig in New Orleans was giving me a chance to learn a lot about all that. And about myself. My contract had been extended by the council, to hunt down and kill true-dead a master vamp who was turning scions and setting them free, feral, before the years they needed after the change to be "cured." The sire was releasing the young rogues on the populace with empty minds and unchecked desire for blood that made them crazy killing machines. I'd fought and killed two only a few weeks before. The council had asked me to get to the root of the problem, so I'd signed on the dotted line. And, though my beast was ready for mountain heights and rushing streams and deep valleys, I was beginning to like it here in the city that was made for partying. Here, where vamps and other supernats had been for centuries, I might even discover another skinwalker. I was coming to understand that it wasn't likely, as not even the oldest of the vamps had ever smelled anything quite like me, but I could hope. As I filled the kettle to make tea, I stilled, breathing deeply. Something smelled . . . wrong. Between storms, New Orleans' air is heavy and wet, pressing odors against the ground, making them linger, but as the sky had cleared, the air had seemed fresh and salty. Until now. Closing my eyes, I flared my nostrils, taking in the scent, sharp and biting. It was vamp, pungent and tangy. And more than one. Above the vamp-scent rode the stink of kerosene. And smoke. Beast rose in me.

Fire! My heart rate bounded and my breathing sped. I looked up. Outside the kitchen window, light flickered. It all came together fast. Because of the fear of lightning, Molly hadn't woken the wards back up yet. Leo Pellissier was out to get me. The hurricane had knocked out electricity, phone, and cell towers for most of the city. I couldn't call for help. Crap. Flames glimmered and sparkled against the antique window glass, visible through the sheer covering. I moved with the speed of my kind, sprinting to the door overlooking the back and side yards. The chair clattered to the floor behind me. I pulled a silver cross and chain over my head and two stakes from my hair. Ripped open the door. Raced out to the covered porch. As I moved, my hair swung forward, getting in the way, and I slung my head backward, clearing my vision. I counted four torches, widely spaced. Fear shot through me. I should have gotten the guns. I slid to a stop on

the wet porch. Vamps stood in my yard. Unmoving that dead-body immobility they do. Waiting. Holding torches. Time slowed, growing thick and viscous, the night taking on richness and depth. I absorbed the scene through my senses all at once. There were four vamps that I could see, fangs descended, fully vamped out. At their feet were five-gallon containers, hazard signs painted on the sides. The scent of several more was carried on the fitful wind. One vamp was opening a container. The smell of kerosene rose. The breeze was restless, the might of Ada coiled in its currents, but aimless now that the storm had passed. The sky was dark with fast-moving clouds. It was still drizzling; misty drops hit the flames and sizzled. The sound shot pulses of electricity through me. Other than that, the silence and dark of the early night were absolute. No cars, no music, no human noise at all. I forced down my fear, knowing they could smell it, knowing their excitement would grow. Bravado was my best weapon, and I held the cross high. It glowed bright in my hand, the silver reacting to the presence of vamps. But they didn't recoil. They held their places, which meant they were old vamps, every one. The wind whipped once and went still. Shadows and torchlight flickered over them, harsh and unforgiving on their skin, pale no matter their original race. My heart rate sped. What were they waiting A black silhouette stepped out of the shadows, lithe and elegant. Leonard Pellissier. In evening attire. Here to . . . visit. The most powerful vampire in the city had dressed to kill. A titter started in the back of my throat and I forced it down. Would not be smart to laugh right now. Would not. Beast rose in me, taking over my reflexes, ready to move, ready to fight. Ready to rush away, back inside to save my guests. If I could. Kits, Beast murmured, protective instincts fighting to get loose. I held her down, but close to the surface. I needed her strength and speed. A floorboard creaked from upstairs. Thank God. Molly must have seen the flames. She would be bringing up the wards, something defensive that would burn vamp flesh, maybe. I could hope. But it would take time. Maybe too much time. Leo stepped to the front of the small group that circled my house, his eyes holding mine. His fangs were snapped down, white in the early night, his pupils bled black in bloodred sclera. The silver cross and capering flames reflected in his pupils. "You killed my son," he said, eyes fixed on me. "No. I killed the creature that took his body." His lips pulled back, exposing his teeth, a killing grimace. "You," he whispered. Vamps didn't need to breathe much except to talk, but he took a breath, deep and slow. "Killed." Anger built in him. I could smell it, strong and sour. "My son!" he roared into the night. Beast lifted my own lips, exposing my human teeth. Change, she demanded. But it was too late. A dozen possible reactions and scenarios buffeted me. I could attack, but they'd set fire to the house. I could run inside, but they'd set fire to the house. I could "Hi. My name's Angelina." The vamps froze, an unearthly stillness in the fluttering flames. The stillness of death. His head moving slowly, Leo looked up, from me to the veranda above. "I like the fire. Can I come play?" Leo breathed in, scenting her. Scenting child and witch. His body tensed. Held. The eyes of Leo's scions flickered to their blood-master, then to me. I saw uncertainty, worry. Clearly they hadn't signed on for killing a child. Two vamps retracted their fangs with little snicks. The one with the open kerosene container looked at it, then back up at the little girl, deliberate and measured. His pupils contracted and he swiveled his head to Leo. Waiting. "What's your name?" she said, her footsteps pattering out to the edge of the veranda, directly above my head. "Are you Aunt Jane's new friends?" "Angie, go inside," I said, striving for calm and not succeeding. My heart raced like a doe in flight. Like prey. I knew they could smell my terror. Leo pulled in another breath, his chest rising, then falling, the sound of the breath whispering through his fangs. We were balanced on the blade of a knife. Leo could go either way: kill his son's murderer and the witches he now smelled in my home, or withdraw and save the child. The Vampira Carta prohibited the killing of children, even witch children, and killing a witch could revoke the unstable peace between the races. But his grief was out of control. Had been for days now. And witches were the sworn enemies of vampires, though I didn't yet know why. "Are you a vampire?" Angelina asked, for once ignoring me. The torches flickered in a sudden gust, bringing her scent down from the upper porch. Bubble bath and the warmth of her skin caught in the humid night breezes, swirling down to the ground to mix with vamp pheromones and smoke. The vamps with Leo each took a step back. "Mama says you eat people." Leo swallowed. "We do not eat people," he said, his voice carefully neutral, laced with his refined, formal French accent. "And you may not play with fire. It is dangerous. We . . . we will return to visit at a later time," he said. He looked at me, his hatred so bright it burned in his black eyes. "This is not finished. My son will be avenged." "I already avenged your son," I said. "I killed his murderer. I paid his blood debt and left you the body of your enemy." I had said the words before the last time he'd visited me, insane with grief. They had worked then. I could hope they worked now. Leo blinked. The fire in his eyes seemed to flicker and die. Something else filled the void, a hint of some softer emotion confusion, uncertainty, perhaps swimming through the grief. He met my

eyes, held my gaze with that hypnotic focus the very old ones have. And he was gone. Just . . . gone. Air currents swirled hard after his passage. The vamps stared up at the child on the porch above. "Come inside, Angie," Molly said from overhead, her voice rough with fear. "You too," she said to me, though she couldn't see me from her position. I heard boards creak, and the door to the veranda closed. "He would have led us to murder a child," a female vamp said. "He didn't know," another said, closing the kerosene container he had opened. "He is the master. He should have known," the female vamp insisted. "He should not have led us here." "Dolore," a third vamp said. I didn't know the word, but there was a hushed reverence in her voice that lent it importance. "We must decide." "I will not chain my master," the fourth vamp said. "I will not. I warn you now. There will be war." The four vamps looked from one to another. Then, as a unit, they turned to me.

And stared. I felt the weight of their eyes, holding me in place, my cross held high. "We will uphold the Vampira Carta," the woman said. "It is law." The pressure in the small yard drained away fast, as if a stopper had been pulled and the tension and anger sucked down. Much more slowly than Leo, but still faster than any human, the vamps left. Their scents weakened, dissipating on the erratic winds. Down the street, I heard a car start, the sound low, like a powerful growl. Headlights cut the misty dark as it passed my freebie house, and vanished into the night. I swiveled on a bare foot and went inside, pulling the door shut behind me. I leaned against it and remembered how to breathe, hearing my heart pound in my ears, an uneven pain in my chest. I dropped the cross around my neck, swept my hair out of the way, twisting it up high, and shoved the stakes into a makeshift bun. My fingers were quivering in the aftermath of near battle. A moment later, I felt the wards snap on over the house, the feel of magic a soft buzz on my skin. I knew Molly would be beating herself up for not activating them sooner tonight. I hadn't been ready for attack. I would never have thought that Leo would make such a public, violent move. Which was pretty stupid in my twenty-twenty hindsight. I went to my room and weaponed up, putting blades through their respective loops in my jeans and strapping on wrist and calf sheaths, checking and adding a new handgun in its shoulder holster, laying the shotgun across the foot of the bed. It wasn't overkill. It was necessary to cool my fear. Though the wards were back up on the house, and Molly and the kids were safe, I couldn't banish the vision of Leo, vamped out. If I'd been properly weaponed earlier, I might have had a fighting chance against the vamps in my yard. Well, I'd still likely have died, but I'd have taken a few of them with me. I'm good. Real good. Arguably, the best in the business. Just not good enough to take on a whole blood-family of vamped-out master monsters alone.

Monsters with fire. Hands shaking with the aftershock, I made the decision that I would go rogue hunting that night. If it wasn't too muggy, I'd wear a skintight skullcap, but that wasn't gonna happen. I used the hair as a weapon holder instead, shoving in stakes that looked like hair sticks, making sure I grabbed silver-tipped ones for maximum damage. I felt better with each weapon, calmer, more secure. The kettle on the gas stove emitted a soft, steamy whistle, the precursor to the piercing one that would push through soon. It seemed like aeons since I had put it on. I stopped a moment, bracing a hand on the closet door. I closed my eyes and half prayed a single word of thanks. That had been close. I returned to the kitchen and turned off the gas, pouring the water over the tea leaves in the strainer, into the white enamel pot beneath. I stared at the steam rising from the tiny hole in the whistler spout as shock boiled up in me like the steam in the kettle.

Leo Pellissier had come to burn down my house. He had brought gallons of kerosene, torches, and his undead scions to carry out the burning. He had wanted me to die in the fire. He had been prepared to break windows, pour in accelerant, and torch the place. Literally. I shivered in the night air and put down the kettle. It was almost never cold in the Vieux Carre, the French Quarter of the old town, but the hurricane had brought cooler, wet air from the gulf. At least that was what I told myself. Uncertain, I pulled the elk-horn hilt of my favorite vamp-killer, its silvered blade shining blue in the light of the hurricane lamp. I resheathed the weapon, making sure it was loose and easy to draw. Knowing tea would help calm me, I poured two cups of hot chai, added sugar and a generous dollop of room-temp whipped cream to each, and placed them on a tray with a stack of cookies and the lit lantern. Moving in a cone of light, I carried them to the front of the house. Another hurricane lamp flickered at the top of the stairs. I set the lamp from the kitchen on the ground floor near the staircase, the flames tossing amber light into the rooms, peaceful and safe, a bright counterpoint to the conflagration that nearly was. Carefully, carrying the tray, I walked up the shadowy steps. The children's room was over my own, to the left of the stairs. Tonight it was dark, the wide space unlit by the lion-shaped night-light. Yet, even dark, the room fairly crackled with wards and witch power. In addition to her warning and protective wards over the property to deflect intruders, Molly had set wards over the children for health and healing. There was a third type of ward Mol called a hedge of thorns around the rocks in my garden. It was quiescent; the trigger to activate it was my blood, poured over the ground. Pretty

macabre, but she wanted to protect me even after she was back home in the mountains, and the hedge was a last-ditch shielding, one that would seal me in over the rocks where I could shift into Beast form and heal, if

I found myself in life-threatening danger. Beast was the only animal I could shift into without effort, and without having genetic material from which to take the pattern. She was something outside my skinwalker magic something I thought a typical skinwalker wouldn't carry within her. Beast was another soul living inside me, revenant of a mountain lion whose skin I had hidden in for far, far too long, and she had her own goals, memories, needs, and secrets. She wasn't always easy to live with, but she did help keep me alive. The inside ward over Angie's and Little Evan's room was shaped so that even I couldn't enter without setting off an alarm. But I could check in, making sure the kids were okay. I'm not the motherly sort, so it felt strange to have children in my home, and even more strange to feel protective. Fiercely, violently protective, as Beast's maternal instincts, so different from my own, spilled over into my human consciousness. With my

exceptional night vision, I could see well enough into the dim room. Little Evan was stretched out, covers thrown off, his fists tightly balled, arms to either side, his cheeks puffing with each breath. On the bed closer to the door, Angelina was curled into a ball beneath the covers, her face as angelic as her name. Both were, amazingly, already asleep. Kids. "They won't disappear in a wisp of smoke," a soft voice said behind me. I smiled, feeling rueful, wondering if Molly had set a ward I had never detected, one that notified her when someone even approached the children's doorway. Probably. "Just checking," I said. Holding the tray in front of me, I turned, finding Molly in the shadows of the wide hallway. Her long, thin nightgown fluttered in the air from the open windows, her red ringlets hung down her back. She looked like something from the nineteenth hundreds, except for the iPod around her neck. I set the tray on a little spindled table in the hall and offered her one of the mugs. Molly crossed the wide hallway on bare feet and took it. "No one can get in,"

she said, sipping. "Not through my ward. Or at least not without fireworks going off. You don't have to prowl the house with butcher knives." I pulled and flipped a knife. The blade caught the lamp, bright and glittering, the narrow, deep flukes along the blade appearing almost ornamental with their silvering, making the weapon strong, flexible, lightweight, beautiful, the blade's silver plating poisonous to vampires. A work of art. It was a new blade. I really liked it. "Not a butcher knife. It's a vamp-killer." "It's a claw, is what it is," she said, the wry tone becoming drier, sharper. "I counted. You're wearing ten. Just like your Beast's front paw claws." I shrugged. It was true, I had ten. As a skinwalker, I had a preference for big cats puma, African

lion, leopards, but mostly for the mountain lion form. It was easiest to be Beast. If I ever discovered a skinwalker psychiatrist, I'm sure he'd apply some Jungian or Freudian school of thought to me, and the weapons I chose would be a big part of the analysis. "Are you going hunting in human form?" she asked, her voice now carefully emotionless. When I nodded, she said, quietly, "Be careful, Big Cat. He's not finished grieving. If he has laid a trap, you might slip past him as Beast, but not as Jane." "I know," I said. "But I have a job to do. And the sooner I get it done, the better." I slid the vamp-killer into its loop. "I still wish you and the kids would go back home." She hesitated for an instant, clearly remembering Leo Pellissier and his vamp goons. She shook her head. "Not until Big Evan gets back from Brazil and the contractor has the new room closed in. A house with no walls means I can't ward it properly." She held up a hand to stop my protests. "We're in less danger here than we are in the hills without Big Evan. And you know we've had . . . trouble lately. My kind aren't exactly popular. I'll go back in two weeks like we planned. Besides" her tone had turned ironic, and she sipped her tea "you actually need us now. Angie's the reason why Leo didn't burn the house down around you. He won't be back, at least until he can make sure of killing only you and not a houseful of children. And the wards will never be down again." I flinched just the tiniest bit. She had a point.

"Okay," I said. "I'll be careful." I took my own mug in hand, the stoneware warm and oddly comforting. "See you in the morning. Night, Molly." "Night, Big Cat." Downstairs, while I sipped hot tea, I put on my silvered chain-mail collar over the gold-nugget and chain necklace I never took off, added a couple more crosses, tied and strapped on my new steel-toed boots, and a thick denim jacket I'd picked up in a shop catering to farmers to replace the leather jacket lost in my last vamp fight. Another was on order, but until it arrived, denim would have to do. I holstered my big-ass shotgun across my back. I tugged on my hair to make sure it was difficult to grab. Long hair made a handy-dandy handle to pull in a fight, and once an opponent had it, the fight was over. Rapists and vamps liked victims with long hair. Made them easy to control. I could cut it, but I'd never shifted with short hair and didn't know if that would alter the process.

Dressed for hunting, I left the house, feeling the wards sizzle across my skin, heatless and bright, like holiday sparklers in the hands of Molly's children. I helmeted up, fired up Bitsa my bastard Harley, put together from bits of this and bits of that and opened the side gate. I relocked the new padlock with my new

key which hadn't kept out the vamps and pulled into the street. Note to self: Find out how high vamps can jump. Build brick walls and gate higher. I guided Bitsa through the streets heading vaguely north. Streetlights were out in most of the city, the few hanging traffic lights swinging slowly on their supports. Trash was piled in corners, fluttering or soaked. Signs were down. Water gurgled down gutters from roofs, raced along street gutters, and in some low-lying places flowed along the streets, hiding the pavement. I watched the curbs when I traversed these, keeping Bitsa out of deeper water. I didn't want to drown her out.

Though most everything was closed bars, restaurants, shops, and dance clubs cars were parked all over, along the streets, in the tiny, privately owned parking lots scattered through the Quarter. Lanterns, lamps, and candles lit windows. People sat at tables on second-story balconies, by lamplight, and the smell of food wafted down. Tinny music came from open windows, battery-powered boom boxes perched on ledges shared a soft dissonance of musical tastes. Live music, a guitar, saxophone, and drum came through an open bar door. Tables inside were lit with candles, a generator roaring in back. Small businesses that depended on the tourist trade twenty-four/seven, just to make the rent, were opening, despite the lack of city power. More generators began to hum. As power was restored in some areas, neon lights appeared here and there, advertising food, liquor, and entertainment. I motored out of the Quarter, past the church I attended most Sundays though not today, no thanks to Ada and quickly into less fashionable areas. I had been in New Orleans' version of the projects before, when I was taking down two young-rogue vamps who were feeding indiscriminately and killing their prey. Rogues came in two varieties, the very, very young, and the very, very old. But both were whacked-out, hungry, and deadly. These young rogues were feral for a different reason from the old ones. Vamps spent the first decade of life chained in a basement figuratively speaking as Louisiana had few basements because of the high water table nutty as fruitcakes and dangerously wild. A good master cared for his young until they cured properly regained sanity and memories or staked them if they didn't. My contract said I was supposed to find the vamp breaking vampire law and tradition and take him out. Or her. I would be paid a bounty for every young rogue I staked and beheaded, and the vamp council had a cleanup crew on standby to dispose of bodies and scrub kill sites, should I need their services. The council wanted to avoid any police involvement, so I wasn't supposed to call in the cops unless there was just no help for it. Since I had taken down this sire's progeny a young male and his even younger mate only recently, I had an old trail to follow, but that meant I needed to find safe passage through the projects while I hunted. Which meant I had to talk to some men. Dangerous men. The half-familiar streets had been dark enough when I last came through here. That time I had been overdressed for the locale, underdressed for the job of hunting vamps. It was a lot darker now, the night lit only by the twinkle of lanterns, flashlights, and candles as I advertised my arrival with Bitsa's guttural snarl. The place smelled better than last time, the hurricane having washed away the odors of urine, garbage, cooked cabbage, rats, roaches, and deep-fried foods. The smells of poverty and a food-stamp diet. I passed a heavily graffitied sign that might have said Iberville Housing at one time. I couldn't see anyone, but I felt eyes on me as I motored past, looking tough, well armed, and full of moxie. All of that wouldn't keep me alive, but it might make the locals pause just to see what kind of fool came into their territory at night and alone. When I was pretty sure I had the right housing unit, or at least close to it, I slowed to a stop and killed the motor. Knees knocking, a fine tremor in my hands, I unhelmeted, secured the helmet to the bike, and pulled a vamp-killer and shotgun. It was loaded for vamp, but the hand-packed silver flchette rounds would kill humans too. Shouting, I called into the darkness, "I'm looking for Derek Lee, ex-marine, if a marine can ever be called ex. Did two tours in Afghanistan, one in Iraq." My voice echoed in the night. From a house behind me, I heard the distinctive sh-thunk of a bolt-action rifle being readied for firing. Presentation de l'diteurView our feature on Faith Hunters Blood Cross. Jane Yellowrock is back on the prowl against the children of the night... The vampire council has hired skinwalker Jane Yellowrock to hunt and kill one of their own who has broken sacred ancient rules- but Jane quickly realizes that in a community that is thousands of years old, loyalties run deep...