



Pretty When She *Pits*

A Vampire Novel

Rhiannon Frater

PRETTY WHEN SHE DIES

A VAMPIRE NOVEL

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Cover Art by Rose Munoz

<http://www.myspace.com/excentricvision>

Edited by Connie Frater and Kody Boye

Proof Copy Editing by Julie Murray

Paperback version published through Createspace and available at Amazon.com and through the author's online store located off her blog at www.rhiannonfrater.blogspot.com

ISBN/EAN13: 1440429634 /9781440429637

This is a work of fiction. The characters and situations are from the author's imagination.

For all the vampire lovers out there

Special thanks to Kayda and Ceres for giving me their insights into the original draft of this novel

As always, dedicated to my two most ardent supporters, my mother and my husband.



Glossary of Names

These are a few names you will encounter in the novel.

This is how the character would pronounce their name.

Amaliya- ah mal lee yha

Cian- key inn

Etzli-its lee

Innocente – inn oh cent tay

Santos- sahn toes

Sergio- surg ee oh

Sumner-sum nor

The Beginning..

Chapter One

When she began to stir from her deep slumber, she had no idea she was buried under several feet of moist, dark earth. Curled into a tight ball with one hand over her face, she shivered as her brain slowly switched on. Flashes of random memories full of distorted images burst through her mind.

Time to wake up, a voice whispered.

Her eyelids fluttered.

Before she could fully awaken, her body was seized tight in a spasm of pain. Her body contorted in on itself as her hands trembled around her face. The seizure released her and, slowly, she opened her eyes.

Darkness greeted her.

Trembling, she strained to see into the blackness that enshrouded her. She could barely make out the outline of her fingers curled over her face. Something heavy and moist was pressing down on her.

Suddenly claustrophobic, she thrust her left arm upward in a desperate attempt to throw off whatever was covering her.

Dirt poured into the tiny space around her face and filled her mouth and nose. Terrified, she plunged her arm into the earth, trying to push it away. She tried to roll onto her back and shoved upward with her other hand. Warm, wet earth pressed down all around her body.

For a horrible moment, she had no sense of up or down and feared she was frantically tunneling deeper into the ground. Shoving fear

aside, she clawed at the dirt desperate to be free.

To her relief, her hands and arms broke through the soil and into the empty space above her. Managing to get her feet under her, she shoved her body through the earth. She broke the surface of the forest floor and stood, blinking in the moonlight. Standing in what was left of the hole that had been her prison. She raised trembling hands to sweep back her raven hair. Her blue-gray eyes blinking hard, she tried to take a deep breath. She choked and gagged, then fell onto her hands as she threw up streams of muddy liquid. Coughing, she wiped her mouth with her dirty fingers and let out a whimper.

Around her, the night whispered softly. Tiny animals scurried through the underbrush around her. An owl hooted in a tree nearby. The moon shone down brightly, its full face glowing in the sky. Falling onto her hip, she lay in silence for a long moment.

Try as she might, she could not draw her thoughts together. She wasn't even certain of her name. How she had come to be buried alive in the forest was beyond her comprehension.

Pulling her legs slowly out of the grave that had entrapped her, she lay on the ground shivering.

Her long, milky-white fingers clawed at the ground beside her and she looked at her hand in dazed confusion.

Need to go home, she thought.

Slowly, she rolled to her knees and bowed in silence, almost appearing to pray. Pressing down on the ground with her hands, she slowly rose to her feet. Her muddled brain took in her soiled jeans and boots slowly. Her white T-shirt was caked with dirt and what appeared to be dried blood. Her hair fell unfettered to her waist, full of clumps of dirt, twigs and bugs. Shaking her head vigorously, she tried to get the

forest crude out of her tresses.

“Home,” she whispered.

Her own voice startled her.

Her first step was hesitant. She wasn't even sure her legs would support her, but amazingly, they did. Slowly, she made her way down through the trees. Her stride became increasingly steady as she walked forward in the direction that felt “right.”

Her hand fluttered over her hair as she walked. She could not remember her name, but a dim memory of extraordinary pleasure filled her mind. Scrunching up her nose a little, she hesitated and stood looking around her in confusion.

A glow over the treetops called to her.

Home lay that way.

Feeling a bit steadier, she trudged on. Her jeans were stiff with all sorts of crap. She craved a hot shower.

My brain isn't working. This isn't how I should be reacting.

She wasn't sure what her own thoughts meant.

As she reached the bottom of the hill, buildings bathed in soft light swam out of the darkness.

The college, she thought.

She stood at the edge of a pool of light and gazed dreamily through the limbs of the trees. Voices whispered in the distance and, somewhere, music was playing. Suddenly, horribly aware of her appearance, she decided not to venture down to the sidewalk below. Home lay nearby, but she could reach it by staying in the shadows.

Not certain how she knew where she lived, but not her own name, she frowned deeply. Once more, she ran a hand over her soiled hair, then moved down into the shadows of the large red brick buildings of the

college.

It was relatively easy to avoid people and she hid whenever anyone walked down the crisscrossing sidewalks that connected the buildings.

It's Easter weekend, she thought. No one is here.

A long narrow building beckoned to her with its familiarity. She trudged toward it through the gloom. Most of the windows were dark. The dirty yellow light, from the broken outdoor lamp fastened over the double doors, was a welcome glow.

Stepping out of the cover of the trees, she shivered as she was suddenly exposed to the view of anyone cutting across the courtyard. She hugged herself tightly and peered through the glass panes of the doors into the long narrow hallway beyond. It was intimidating in its length, and only the dark, chipped dorm doors surrounded by stickers, posters, photos and other ornamentation broke up the impression of it being never-ending.

She took a breath and tried to open the door. It was firmly locked. Confused at first, she jiggled the doorknob. Reason pushed through her murky thoughts and she fished in her jean pockets. A simple ring with a few keys was in her right one. Slowly, she tried each key in the battered lock until, at last, one slipped in easily. The knob turned.

A slow, icy chill flowed down her back. She tossed her hair back from her face looking sharply behind her. The sensation of being watched pricked over her skin. She pushed the door open and took refuge in the long, stark hallway. Nothing stirred out in the courtyard except a pink flyer. It must have torn loose from a bulletin board and now danced in the night wind.

Fear trembling at the bottom of her stomach, she turned and moved away from the locked doors. The narrow hallway was strangely

familiar. Her footsteps echoed around her as she walked. In the distance, she heard the very soft hum of someone's radio. It seemed to take forever to reach the middle of the long hall. A small room crammed full of vending machines sat at the base of the stairs. The handicap elevator stood open. She glanced inside to see that it was empty before starting up the narrow staircase that led to the second and third floors. The ugly, faded, formerly buttercup-yellow paint on the walls was covered in flyers and posters for events around the campus. She briefly glanced at them as she trudged upwards. The words and pictures were nonsense to her numb brain.

The second floor hall lights were flickering when she reached the landing. Feeling another cold shiver of fear, she looked up and down the stairwell, but there was no sign of another person.

Home was nearby.

She started to turn right, then corrected herself and turned left.

Drawn toward the end of the hallway, she shuddered. Fear once again gripped her tightly and, for a moment, a vivid thought flashed through her mind.

I'm dead. There is nothing here for me.

She froze in mid-step and reached out to stabilize herself. The thought repeated itself over and over again until she let out a desperate sound and pushed it down. Insanity lay in that sort of thinking.

Gathering up her strength, she pushed on until she reached a door surrounded by stickers of sexy devil women, vamps and an assortment of band photos. Sid Vicious snarled out of her from one, while Ozzy Osbourne howled at the devil in another. Laying her hand on the doorway, she read the name stenciled onto red paper in black marker and taped with electric tape to the door.

“Amaliya,” she breathed. It was her name. Her grimy fingers traced over the letters. She whispered the name again. Yes, that was her name. She remembered people called her Amal. That nickname bugged her.

Pulling out the ring of keys, she leaned against the door, a sense of relief washing over her. Her mind felt full of thick muddy water with flashes of light beneath the waves. But she couldn't concentrate too long on those flashes or her whole body began to hurt.

She needed to bathe, then it would be okay.

The key with the skull sticker slid into the lock and she pushed open the door. Her room was very narrow and sat at the end of a long, dark hallway. It was simply furnished with a twin bed in one corner, a desk under the long window, and a battered dresser on the wall across from the bed. The walls were covered in posters of long-haired rock stars. None of them seemed familiar. An enormous poster of Angelina Jolie was on one wall. Around it was pictures clipped out of magazines of other beautiful women dressed in sexy outfits.

Amaliya shut the door behind her, drinking in the familiarity of the room. She remembered every detail. Its battered furniture. The tiny fridge tucked at the end of the bed that made gawdawful noises when she tried to sleep. The dirty laundry thrown at the bottom of her closet. This was her personal space and she felt her shoulders sag with relief.

Her one luxury in the dorm was her very tiny bathroom. It was one of the perks of paying more money and being on the second floor.

She walked down the narrow little hallway, past the open sliding doors of her closet, and into the room itself. Shoes, most of them pretty battered, were strewn at her feet. Her bed was a crumpled mess. Silently, she leaned over and pushed the button on her old

stereo. Johnny Cash's voice filled the room. On her bathroom door was an enormous poster of the Man in Black. She automatically touched the brim of an imaginary hat to salute him. His somber, craggy face did not change as she shoved open the bathroom door.

The bathroom was so small the door barely missed hitting the toilet and the bathtub when she opened it. All she could think of was the bath. She was caked in dirt and grime. Leaves, twigs, dirt, and a few insects were twisted around in her hair. Her body was so filthy she could barely see her creamy, pale skin.

“Yuck,” was all she could think to say.

When she turned on the hot water in the shower, a tremor rocked the center of her body. It started just above her stomach, then rolled through her chest and limbs. She slightly gagged, then leaned over the tub and threw up again. Mucous and mud trailed from her lips. Again, she shuddered and fell into the tub, fully clothed, the warming water sloshing over her.

Tears exploded from her eyes and she let out a desperate wail. The seizure arched her back and sent her sprawling before abruptly releasing her. She lay there, on the cold, chipped bottom of her tub for a few minutes before she felt strong enough to wiggle out of her clothes. The jeans were hard to get off. She struggled with her boots. Finally, she was naked and the water was hot.

Standing up slowly, she reached out, grabbed the showerhead, and pulled the tiny switch so the hot water would stream over her. She didn't let go, but held on for dear life. The hot water sluiced over her, washing away the muddy remains of her grave. She closed her eyes and tried not to focus too hard on the memories trembling just below the thin layer of confusion. If she tried to think too hard, it only hurt.

Using nearly half of the shower gel and a good portion of

shampoo, she scrubbed her body and hair clean. The scalding water and loofah soon had her skin looking red and raw, but it felt better than before. Her fingers traced over the tattoo decorating the lower portion of her belly. Intricate vines and flowers made a lovely pattern against her skin.

Why the hell would you do that to your body? Do you want to look like a whore? The male voice whispered, then faded away.

She dragged her long hand over the tattoo perched on her upper arm. It was an intricate design with vines and roses with little cherubs holding scrolls that read “Beloved Mother.” Frowning, her fingers slid over the rough scar in the center of the tattoo. There had been something here, she remembered that.

Tears began to stream down her cheeks as she remembered the pain of getting this tattoo. Her heart had hurt so badly the pain of the needle had not mattered to her. It had been for her mother, her broken, sweet mother. The one who had named her Amaliya. There had been-

“A cross,” she whispered, her fingers tracing over the roughened edges of the white scar.

Sliding the clear shower curtain back, she stared from the depths of the shower into the fogged mirror over the sink. For a moment, she thought nothing was reflected in the mirror.

Stumbling out of the shower, she ran her hand over the mirror, her blue-gray eyes coming into focus. Her clean, black hair hung loosely around her face, framing a face with a strong chin, high cheekbones, a sharp slightly hooked nose, and full, bruised looking lips.

Her fingers slid down over her features, then over her neck, down to her breasts. The piercings in both nipples glinted in the florescent light. Slowly, she turned and looked over her shoulder to see her back

was still adorned by angel wings, her freshest tattoos. Her waist tucked in above her full hips. She ran a hand over her curvy right cheek slowly.

Need to lose weight, she thought.

For a moment, she was filled with self-loathing. Her upper body was long and lean, with shapely breasts and a small waist. Her lower body was fuller, but her legs seemed too short for her body. Endless jogging, avoiding potatoes and other starches had never rid her of her wider hips.

She started laughing. It was a startling sound to her ears when she heard it, and she sank against the wall, cold and wet.

I'm insane, she thought. *I've lost my mind*.

Forcing the crazed giggles away, she dried off, then checked the mirror again. The tiny diamond tucked into the side of her nose twinkled back at her. She slid her dark hair back behind her ears. The six hoops in each ear were intact. Her fingers pulled back her hair and she studied her roots intently. A faint line of gold was visible along the part.

She would have to dye her hair again soon. At least her eyebrows were naturally dark.

Her legs were a little shaky as she walked into her room and pulled a pair of jeans out of the laundry basket resting on the cluttered dresser. A pair of pink bikini-briefs came with them and she pulled both items on. Rummaging around in the basket, she found a white tank top and shrugged it on. Collapsing onto the bed, she leaned over and opened the refrigerator. The tiny thing creaked open and revealed it was empty, save for a soda and bottled water.

She was hungry. Very hungry. Famished.

Shoving the door shut, she ran her hands over her damp hair and stared down at her feet. The chipped red polish on her toenails was the norm. They were cut short and slightly ragged. Shrugging, she leaned down and snagged a pair of battered Bettie Page heels. She always tried to wear heels to make up for her shorter legs.

Her stomach coiled tightly as she stood. She gasped in pain. Her vision swam and she stumbled forward.

She needed to eat, and soon.

Looking up into the battered mirror above her dresser, she stared into an empty room. She gasped then, suddenly, her reflection winked into view. Blinking hard, she watched it blink out again, then shimmer back slowly.

Terror gripped her. She grabbed her keys off the floor and rushed to the door. She would eat and then she would be fine. She'd stop feeling like this and she would understand what had happened to her.

She just needed to eat.

That would do it.

Yes, to eat. That would be salvation.

She just needed to...feed.

Amaliya felt weak as she maneuvered down the stairs, then trudged down the long dim corridor to the outside world. Beyond her feebleness, she felt strangely unreal. It was as if she was moving through a dream where nothing felt connected to her in any way. Her surroundings seemed faintly familiar to her hazy mind, but instinct drew her toward her destination, not memory.

Her high heels clicked against the sidewalk as she moved toward-

She stopped for a moment, her thoughts shifting, then she remembered.

The parking lot lay beyond the jumble of buildings nearby. And she had a truck, a beat up blue truck. She nodded and started walking again.

A door opened to a nearby building, where a young Asian man hurried out. He didn't even glance at her as he moved around her, hastily walked toward one of the far buildings.

Turning slowly, she stared after him. No, she didn't know him, but he made her feel warm inside. She considered following him, but then shook her head.

He was not enough to make her hunger go away.

Frowning, unsure of her own thoughts, she turned her attention back to her destination and started walking again.

The old, red brick buildings of the college rose around her, imposing in their aged facades. A few more modern buildings were tucked back behind them, squat and ugly. She looked at the darkened windows with trepidation

Turning a corner, the long sidewalk wound between buildings. In the distance, she could see the lights that illuminated the parking lot.

Rubbing her arms with her hands, she moved through the shadows.

Music, jarring with its tribal beat, glided on the night wind, where it swirled around her. Tilting her head, she listened. The music grew louder as she concentrated. For some reason, she felt drawn to the pulsating beat. Turning toward the source, she saw that it was one of the fraternity houses that sat on the edges of the campus. The windows were darkened, but music still drifted from the building.

Something dark and desperate whispered through her mind that she needed to go there. It was important. It would make her feel better. It would make her feel real.

Scowling slightly, she moved across the wide green lawn, toward the old Georgian style house. Her heels sunk into the damp earth. The smell of dew filled her nostrils. Her drying hair flowed around her shoulders and down her back as she walked.

Again, a slow chill slid down her spine and she turned sharply. Only shadows trailed over the sidewalk. There was no sign of anyone anywhere, and yet, she knew, deep inside, she was being watched.

With that horrible feeling tormenting her, she made haste toward the fraternity house. Ducking under tree branches that lined the side yard, she maneuvered cautiously over the roots gnarled at the base of the trees. Her heels crunched across the gravel drive as she followed the sound of the compelling music. Moving into the darkness looming around the structure, she easily found the side door to the imposing house. It opened easily for her and she slipped inside. A large, very dirty kitchen greeted her, but it gave her no feeling of belonging. There was no sense of familiarity at all. And yet she felt drawn to go deeper into the house.

She stepped into the hallway that led from the kitchen and looked up as she realized the music was coming from above. Moving through the darkness, she found her way to a staircase and slowly ascended.

Another tremor rolled up through her body. She gripped the banister as her vision swam. She needed to eat soon. She was famished. Her stomach clenched inside of her. It hurt so terribly she could barely concentrate.

If I'm hungry, I should go to the kitchen.

But the driving force inside of her told her otherwise. She began to climb the stairs again. The hallway at the top of the stairs was dark and empty. All the doors leading off of it were closed. Hesitantly, she took a step forward, not sure where to go. The music was louder now, but all she could hear was its heavy tribal beat.

This place was not familiar, yet she knew she had to be here. Something here held the answer to what was happening to her. Turning her head, she suddenly knew where the music was coming from. She could feel it in her jawbone and in her fingertips. The sensation was odd, almost painful.

Walking down the hall, her gaze fell on a large oak bookcase at the end of it. It was loaded up with books, DVDs and magazines. As she drew near, she felt the music began to pulse in her chest. She slowly ran her fingertips over her lips. Looking behind her, she stared down the hallway to the other end. The door on the other side was closed and solitary.

Her gaze returned to the bookcase. She reached out to grip the side of it. She pulled and it slowly swung forward, like a door. Though not visible from the front, there were wheels under the bottom of the bookcase. As it rolled away from the wall, a doorway became visible.

Biting her bottom lip, she touched the doorknob. She could feel the beat of the music pulsating through it. Gripping the knob tightly, she tried to turn it, but it resisted. She tried again, and still, it resisted.

Desperation gripped her, nonsensical but overwhelming. She banged her hands against the door.

“Please,” she whispered, but did not know what she was asking for. The door swung open from within. A striking black man stared out at her. His brow crinkled as he studied her, obviously mystified by her

presence.

“What the hell are you doing here, freak?”

She parted her lips to answer, but the words would not come. She wasn't even sure why she was here. All she knew was that whatever was in this room, she needed it. Reaching out, she gripped the back of his neck with one long hand and leaned into him. He looked startled, but did not resist her.

“I need,” was all she could manage to say.

“Damn, girl. What are you on?” He stared at her face, into her eyes, then slowly smiled. “Well, who invited you?”

His skin felt warm and inviting under her hand. She slowly became aware of the fact that he was only wearing a very skimpy silk thong. She stared down at the obvious erection pressing against the fabric, then slowly dragged her gaze over his muscled chest, up to his face.

“You,” she answered.

Grinning, he drew her into the room and shut the door.

“Well, I always thought you looked kinda freaky with all your tats and piercings. But tonight, damn Amal, you look hot. What did you do to yourself?” His hands were sliding up and down over her body as he pulled her further into the room.

It was full of people in various states of undress or just plain nude. The smell of wine, pot and sex filled her nostrils. A red glow filled the room. She realized that the source was all the crimson light bulbs in the lamps and overhead lights. The sheets on two massive king-size beds shoved together were also crimson. All around her bodies were writhing and intertwining.

She smiled. This was exactly what her father thought college was.

One big orgy.

The young man nuzzled her neck and ran his hand up her stomach to

cup her breast. She tilted her head away from him and closed her eyes as his lips played with her skin. A shiver of excitement swirled through her as he licked her throat, then nibbled.

Yes, this is it, she thought. What I need.

Gliding around in his arms, she wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him down for a long deep kiss. His strong arms enfolded her. His hands grabbed her buttocks, drawing her sharply against him. Her sense of reality was weakening. All she could feel was a terrible ache in her mouth and stomach. She licked his lips.

“You're a total freak, aren't you?” the young man said with delight.

She smiled at him and said, “You say freak too much,” then she buried her face in his neck, breathing him in. Her nails dug into his back as she took a bit of his flesh between her teeth. He shuddered.

“Oh, yeah, bite me, vamp babe,” he said huskily.

And she did.

Before she knew it, her mouth was full of his flesh and she was sucking hard. Rich, thick warmth filled her mouth. He staggered back, gripping her tightly against him. They hit a wall. He moaned with delight as she pulled harder on his neck.

I'm so hungry. This is what I need.

She took more and more from him as he writhed against her, grinding his hard cock against her belly. His blood filled her, overwhelmed her, but she needed more. She was so hungry, so very hungry.

He was spent and gone the next minute, her t-shirt wet where he had come hard as he died. She turned and looked into the darkness of the room.

Yes, what she needed was here.

She moved easily across the room, stepping over people, moving

toward the bed. In the midst of desperate, crazed sex was the quarterback of the school with a pretty little blond. Gripping his shoulder, she yanked him off the girl. Startled, he began to protest. Then she was on him, her mouth consuming his in a hungry kiss. His hands gripped her to tear her away, but then he melted into her touch as she overwhelmed his senses. Beneath them, the girl twisted and screamed at them.

Amaliya ignored her and pulled the young man's head to one side, biting deeply. She hit his jugular. Blood sprayed the blond. The angry girl let out a startled sound, then realized what was happening and began to shriek.

With deadly swiftness, Amaliya gripped the girl's throat in one hand and dragged her upright. Without hesitation, she bit the girl as the quarterback fell back from her grasp.

It was then the others in the room realized what was happening. They saw the raven-haired girl perched on their leader, drinking hard from the throat of the blond, and the body of their famed quarterback with his throat ripped open. The stampede to the door began immediately as screams filled the room.

But a darkly garbed man who smiled with feral delight met them at the door as they drew near.

“Now, now,” he said in proper British tones. “You mustn't leave. She's not full yet.”

Chapter Two

Amaliya gasped with delight as her body was finally sated. The hunger was gone and she felt wonderful and strong. Arching her back, she knelt on the bed, running her hands over her blood soaked clothing, up over her breasts.

Strong, cold hands gripped her thighs. She gasped as a long tongue trailed up her stomach before biting one nipple through her top.

Those same hands gripped her hair and dragged her against a strong chest.

Mesmerized, she gazed into the dark blue eyes of the man holding her. His white-blond hair fell over his brow as he peered down at her.

“I know you,” she whispered softly.

“Yes, you do,” he answered.

Falling back on the blood soaked bed, she wrapped her arms around the one who made her. She clung to him as he hastily undressed her. Her drunken mind struggled to understand, but she could not fully comprehend this insane, wild dream.

He had made her; she was his.

He was so lovely, with short fair hair, pale skin, and beautiful eyes.

He kissed her body, then bit her neck. His body was so cold when he pushed deep into her, making her drink from him.

This isn't real, she thought.

Her voice was ragged with passion and need as he fucked her

senseless. When he finally came hard into her, she let out a desperate, terrified scream.

Then the darkness came.

“We are death,” a proper British voice said into her formless dream.

Wakefulness tugged at her eyes. Slowly, she opened them.

What am I doing here?

The room made no sense to her. Her last memory was of meeting Professor Sumner for coffee. They had been walking back to his car and then-

“It is our instinct, you see. To feed. We need to feed. Especially when we are first reborn,” Professor Sumner's voice continued.

Slowly, she sat up. Her body felt oddly refreshed, yet crusty with some vile substance. The room smelled odd, like copper.

“It is not uncommon for a newly-transformed vampire to be completely mad with the hunger. Sometimes, they do not ever recover, even after feeding. So, how are you, dear? Are you mad?”

Amaliya looked toward the sound of his voice. He sat in a chair next to the bed. His suit was completely black, even the shirt beneath it. His blond hair was swept back from his high forehead and his keen eyes were resting firmly on her face. For months, he had been her secret obsession. His every class had been like worship to her. She adored him. When he had asked her to coffee, all she had wanted to do was rip his clothes off and find out if everything she dreamed about was true.

For twenty-four, she was at times, incredibly stupid.

“Where am I? What the hell are you talking about?” she said in a low voice.

“You are in a fraternity house on the edge of campus. What the hell I

am talking about is about what you are now. Three nights ago, correction, four nights ago, I killed you and buried you in the woods.”

Like a slap, the memory of her date with him returned with brutal clarity. He had seduced her behind the dorm. Shoved her up against the wall and had frenzied sex with her. She remembered how cold he had been against her. At some point, she had become afraid and tried to push him off of her. He had not relented and drove his teeth into her.

“You bit me,” she said softly.

“Yes, I did.” His voice, always so melodic and warm, was still mesmerizing, but now it seemed cruel. “I drank from you as I had for two nights before our little date when you were sleeping. But this time was much more interesting because you fought me. And this time, you died.”

Blinking slowly, she remembered how her life drained away. The disbelief she had felt as his sharp teeth had ravaged her and her blood spilled over her breasts. It had not felt real, yet her world had grown dark. Her vision had narrowed as her heart became sluggish. Her life had become a narrow little window of consciousness, a window that had been filled with the handsome face of her killer.

“As your heart beat slower and slower, I gave you my blood. It doesn't always create the change. I wasn't too sure if I had actually managed to feed you in time. You died faster than I thought. Then I took you into the woods and I buried you. And I waited. Waited for you to rise. And you did, last night.”

“You're my Psychology professor,” she protested.

None of this was making sense, yet it was. Memories of her fight out of her grave filled her mind. The shower to remove the grime from her body, the strange flashing in and out of reality her reflection had

done in the mirror; she remembered it all.

“And now your Master.”

“I don't understand,” she whispered. Her full lips trembled. Tears hovered on the edges of her lashes. She was lying. She did understand. She may not truly believe it, but she did understand.

“Now, this is the interesting part. What will you do next? You're in a room full of dead people. There are exactly thirteen bodies strewn about you. You're naked, covered in dried gore, full of fresh blood, and just awakening to this life.” He smiled, tilted his head, and settled back in the chair with his arms crossed over his chest.

She stared at him aghast. His strong aristocratic features seemed so cruel and harsh now. His beard made him look like a devil. Slowly, she looked around the room to see people lying around her.

Tears quivered in her eyes. She swallowed hard.

Looking down, she saw that she was covered in dried blood. Flakes of the brown stuff came off her skin as she drew back the covers.

Slowly, she understood. It all made sense. Her great need last night. Coming here where there were plenty of people from which to feed. She had hunted last night without realizing it, and now, they were all dead.

“Ah, I see you understand. You're awakening to the reality. Yes, last night you rose as I watched you. I followed you to see what you would do. I have to say you have reacted better than some of the others I have created. You went home, cleaned up, and then you hunted. Look at the wonders you found yourself. A secret orgy. Perfection.”

She tilted her head to regard the professor with growing horror.

“What did you do to me?”

“Why do you ask if you already know the answer?”

“What did you do to me?” Her voice was shrill.

He stood and brushed off his clothes. “Now to see what you will do. You know what you are. You are fully transformed now that you have fed. You are just at the beginning of your new existence. But, you have difficulties. Such as the room full of bodies and the inability to venture out in the sunlight.”

“It's night time,” she said, her dull reply automatic. She wasn't sure how she knew this, but she did.

He smiled slowly. “Yes, it is. Frankly, I am curious to see what you will do. Will you try to hold onto your old life as so many of my former children have? Or will you strike out on your own?”

Amaliya slid off the bed and looked around for her clothes. To her dismay, she saw they were soaked in blood. “Give me your jacket.”

“What?”

“Your jacket. Now.”

With a little smile, he slid it off and handed it to her. “Just this one time of assistance. No more.”

“Fuck you,” she answered. She pulled it on. Trying not to panic, she stepped over the bodies until she found her shoes. They were black, so blood was not immediately noticeable on them.

“You're not like them, you know? It's not the tattoos, the piercing or your rocker girl persona; it's your strength. How old were you when your mother died and your father married your cousin? Ten, was it? Living in a house full of boys and knowing that your father was fucking your cousin while your mother lay dying of cancer.”

“Shut up,” she growled. She had to escape this nightmare right now. Her thoughts were jumbled. She needed to get away to think.

“You went to work at what age? Thirteen, wasn't it? Saving for

college. But everyone made fun of you. That wasn't what the daughter of Samuel Vezorak was supposed to do, was it? No, no; you were supposed to get married and have babies. School grades were sufficient, but not enough to get you a scholarship. Yet you managed to get one through your drumming. Off you went to Austin, to the University of Texas, where you dyed your blond hair black, got a few nifty tattoos, and learned how to rock with the best of them.”

Buttoning up the coat, she brushed past him. She ignored the ache between her thighs. It was hard to forget how insanely good he had felt inside of her. Being around him made her feel weak and wanting. She had to get out of here. Away from him and this room of -

She stopped in her tracks.

“They're dead,” she whispered in shock. “I killed them.”

“It was when your younger sister, half sister really, got the terrible cancer, just like your poor mother, that you gave up your scholarship and went home. Now, years later, you are at a second rate college in East Texas, hoping to God it isn't too late to claw your way out of your bayou existence.”

Whirling around, Amaliya screamed, “Shut the fuck up!”

“You see, fate had other plans for you. I have never made a child with your background. I honestly have no idea how you will fare, though I'm absolutely excited to see what you will do.”

“Leave me alone!”

“Oh, I intend to. And that is the reality of it now, you see. You are on your own.” His fiendish smile made his attractive face much crueler.

How could bagging a hot professor end up this badly?

“I don't need you,” Amaliya snapped, pushing past him.

“We'll see,” he said in a mocking tone.

Not looking back, Amaliya whipped open the door and ran out. The professor smiled with satisfaction, tucked his hands behind his back, and followed.

Amaliya struggled across the vast lawn that led to her dorm. She stumbled every few steps as her heels sunk into the moist, dew drenched soil. When she reached the nearly-empty employee parking lot, her foot got caught in a small pothole and she tripped. She hit the asphalt on all fours. Grimacing at the pain, she pushed herself up on her battered hands. She managed to get her feet under her with a little difficulty. Brushing the grit off her bloodied knees, she began to run again.

The stinging in her hands and knees faded. Glancing down, she realized she had already healed. Only gravel and smears of blood remained on the smooth heels of her hands. The sight of her restored flesh horrified her. A quivering moan of despair fell from her lips. Her mind felt incapable of understanding what was happening to her. Behind her, she heard a car door open.

“Amaliya,” Professor Sumner's voice rang out.

Despite herself, she turned toward him. Her black hair flowed around her pale face. She stood trembling, hands held up before her. She dropped the bloodied clothes she had tucked under her arm. Her murderer was perfectly framed between her healed hands, and she clenched them into hard fists.

“Good luck,” he said with a rakish smile.

“Fuck off!” She gave him the finger to emphasize her words, then turned away.

His laughter tormented her as she snatched up her clothes. She darted behind a building and tried to put as much space between them as

possible.

The dorm windows were completely dark when she skirted around the building to the side entrance. Fishing her keys out of her blood-encrusted jeans, she bit her bottom lip. She rubbed the back of her hand over her eyes to wipe away her tears, fighting back a desperate sob of despair.

“Stay calm,” she whispered.

Her fingers shook as she tried to fit the key into the lock. She failed to line it up with the keyhole. Exasperated, she leaned her forehead against the door.

“Stay calm,” she uttered again, her hands steady. She pushed the key toward the tiny slot again.

The key slid into the lock. The knob turned.

She entered the dorm through the entrance under the stairs. It was empty and dark, with no sign of any of the other girls who inhabited the long, squat building. Quickly, she sprinted up the cement steps, her heels making a dreadful clunking noise the whole way up.

Reaching the second floor, she turned and ran down the hall, hoping to God no one would open their door to see what the noise was about.

It's Easter weekend, she thought. No one is here.

Shit!

She was supposed to have gone home Saturday night to attend services with her family on Sunday morning.

After unlocking her door and slipping into her room, she steadied herself with one hand against the wall. The room was still a mess, but now she saw the mud and gunk she had left behind the night before.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, moving down the narrow hallway into her bedroom.

Dirt littered the floor and bits of foliage skittered in front of her. It

had really happened. She had crawled out of her own forest grave. Slowly, her gaze descended to her body. She unfastened the jacket with quivering fingers. Beneath the black fabric, her pale skin was caked with blood.

Closing her eyes, she pressed her fingertips to her eyelids. She had killed tonight. Hunted down and killed people for blood. She had done that.

Sinking to the floor, she whimpered as the tears that she had tried so hard to hold back began to fall.

The phone rang near the bed. She ignored it as she fell over onto her side and curled up into a tight little ball. The harsh sound of the ringing phone made her head hurt. She covered her ears with her hands.

Finally, the archaic answering machine clicked on.

“You've reached Amaliya Vezorak. I can't come to the phone right now. So leave a message and if I feel like it, I'll call you back. And if this is you, Jimmy, you owe me 20 bucks.” Her voice sounded rough and a little slurred. She had recorded it drunk and just left it as it was. “Amal, it's your Daddy. Where the hell are you? We waited all day for you. Your Grandmama is not happy about you not showing up for church. I'm not happy about you not getting my truck back here. Our agreement was that you could borrow it until you got your student loan. You got your damn money so buy your own clunker and get mine back here, girl. Where the hell are you? If this is your attempt to get me to buy you one of those damn cellphones-”

The machine, thankfully, cut off the rest of his message.

Pushing herself up, Amaliya's hot tears returned. As far as her father was concerned, she was a fuck up. She laughed bitterly as she realized

she was now an undead fuck up. He would just love that.

Getting to her feet, she managed to get herself into the bathroom. The bathtub was ringed with grit. Stripping naked, she got into the shower and turned on the water. It hit her icy cold, but she didn't care anymore. She just wanted the dark brown blood off her body. Bracing her hands against the cold, scummy tiles, she wept as the water washed over her.

How had it come to this? How had her life spiraled so out of control? Sliding her fingers through her caked hair, she felt the matted strands give way with a painful tug. All she had wanted, her whole life, was to find her own path, to walk to the beat of her own drum, to live a life of adventure. But that had been continuously sidetracked by death, family drama and the severe lack of money. Nothing she had done to get her life out of the hole it was in had ever worked. She seemed forever doomed to just barely make it by.

Her fingers traced down her sternum. She drew in a quivering breath she wasn't even sure she needed as she sought out the beating of a living heart. Tears flowed down her face as she felt nothing for a terrible, panicking moment, and then she felt a thump.

“Oh, God,” she gasped with relief, falling back against the cold tiles. Both hands pressed tightly between her breasts, she both heard and felt the steady, slow beating of her heart. Swallowing hard, cold tears slid down her cheeks to mingle with the hot water. Looking down, she saw that her tears were turning the water a slight pinkish color. Frightened, she rubbed her fingertips under one eye and drew them back from her face. They were tinged with what looked like blood before the hot water washed it away.

Crying out with the sheer terror, she fell to her knees and laid her forehead against the stained bottom of the tub. The hot water beat

down on her as she gave in to the overwhelming despair inside of her.

The mirror was empty. Not a whisper of reflection was there. Amaliya blinked slowly. She stared into the empty mirror, willing herself to see her image. But there was nothing; just the empty shower behind her. Reaching out, she pressed her hand firmly to the fogged surface.

Nothing. Not a flicker.

She pushed harder, as if she could literally shove her reflection into the silvered glass, but nothing happened. Her hand remained against the empty mirror without a doppelgänger's hand pressing against her own.

Closing her eyes, she lowered her hand and slowly took hold of the sink. Her whole body trembled as she tried to gather her wits about her. The horror of her new reality washed over her, fresh and terrible. Opening her eyes, for a moment, she thought she saw her reflection. A brief, stark image of a woman with dyed, black hair laying heavy and wet against her neck and shoulders, staring with desperate need into nothingness. The image flashed out of existence. She reached out a desperate hand. The mirror shattered as her fingers slammed into the reflective surface. The shards tinkled into the sink. Sobbing, she sat sharply on the edge of the tub.

She ran a hand over her wet hair as she sat in silence, her lips quivering. She could just go to bed and go to sleep. This wasn't real. None of it was real. She was sick. Maybe she had the flu. It was all a dream. A horrible, terrible dream. There were no such things as vampires. She didn't even have sharp teeth! She couldn't be a murdering, bloodsucking fiend! Vampires didn't exist.

Shoving her fingers into her mouth, she ran the tips over her teeth to fearfully search for sharp little teeth. Nothing. She felt nothing. Just the smooth edges she should feel.

“I just need to go to bed and wake up,” she decided.

Pulling a towel securely around her body, she walked into her messy room and sprawled across the narrow twin bed. The alarm clock lay right in her view. Its bright red numbers stated it was nine o'clock.

Red like blood, she thought idly, then shoved the terrible allegory away from her thoughts.

Rolling onto her back, she stared up at the poster over her bed. Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails glowered down at her in all his dark beauty. Closing her eyes, she lay her hand over her face and willed herself to sleep. If she slept this would all go away. She would wake up and...

What?

She would suddenly not be living dead? Her battle to be out of the grave would suddenly not exist? Her blood soaked clothes wouldn't lie in a heap on the floor?

“Dammit!” She sat up and shook her head.

Drops of water splattered over the wall and clock as her wet hair fanned around her. Gripping her hair with both her hands, she pulled it over her shoulders and held onto it as she rocked back and forth. She could not stay here. She knew it. Too many questions would be asked. They would find the bodies. For all she knew, they would be able to track her to the scene. The police had all sorts of fancy ways of tracking down killers nowadays.

Oh, God, she was a killer. Her teeth had torn into the flesh of humans and she had drunk blood.

Blood!

The memory of that first bite filled her thoughts. Instead of repulsion, she felt the sting of pleasure. It had been exquisite. An erotic pulse of power rippled through her as she leaned back slowly on her bed. The lovely sensations she had felt as she had fed overwhelmed her senses. Her panic faded away. She relished the memory of the blood, the fear, the power; it had been delicious and wonderful.

Her tongue scraped against something sharp in her mouth. She bolted upright. She shoved her fingertips into her mouth again. She gasped as something sharp tore them open. Staring at her bloodied fingers, she ran her tongue slowly along her teeth. Amaliya shivered as the tip of it discovered two sharp teeth pressing down on either side of her mouth.

“Fuck,” she blurted, launching herself off the bed.

What had just happened to her? She had lost herself in the memory of her feeding. Dammit, she had enjoyed killing and she knew it. Looking back at the event through the bloody pleasure of her need, she felt no remorse. Panicking, she pulled deep inside of herself to find guilt and fear. She mentally shoved away the part of her that had relished her killing bites.

“I have to get the hell out of here,” she muttered.

In a frenzy, she shoved clothes, underwear, shoes, and anything else that looked remotely useful into her large duffel bag. Realizing she was naked, she dropped the bag. She snagged a clean pair of jeans and a tank top from the laundry basket. She looked around the room, trying to collect her thoughts into a workable plan. As she slid her tank top on, she abruptly remembered her father's phone call. Her student loan had come in!

“Oh, yeah,” Amaliya breathed.

She fell to her knees beside the dresser. Pulling out a drawer, she felt

under it for the envelope that she had duct taped under it. Her searching fingers found it and yanked it off with a sharp tearing sound. Inside the little envelope was over \$5,000 of student loan money. It was all the money she had in the world. In her bank account was just a few dollars. Her paycheck from her work-study wouldn't hit until tomorrow.

Opening the envelope, she quickly recounted the money, then thrust it into her jeans. It would have to do for now.

Shoving a few more pairs of thong underwear into her bag, her gaze swept over the room one last time. The bloodied clothes and forest grime lay at her feet. She started to reach down, then hesitated.

Unsure, her hand hovered over the bundle.

She was a vampire now. Fuck it. Let them come after her. She must have some sort of superpowers. Besides, maybe if she left her clothes here, they would think she was dead.

Tears were threatening again, but she fought them.

Time to go home. Time to get help. Time to-

She hesitated as she picked up her keys.

“Time to sort this shit out,” she decided, heaving the bag over her shoulder.

She walked out of her dorm room for the last time.

Chapter Three

The road was nearly empty of cars. It was still early; people weren't heading home from their Easter festivities. It would be a late night for a lot of families, as they enjoyed barbecues and family time.

Sweeping her hair back from her face, her gaze flicked to the rear view mirror. A sole car followed behind her. Biting her bottom lip, she drew her bag a little closer to her. The possessions shoved in her bag were all she owned in this world. She felt fragile and afraid.

You're a vampire, the professor's voice taunted.

Her tongue slid over her teeth for the hundredth time. The sharp teeth she had felt earlier were now gone. Maybe they only came out when she was hungry.

The steady hum of the road was soothing to her frayed nerves. She resisted the urge to turn on the radio. The wind pouring in through the rolled-down windows tossed her hair into disarray around her face, but was effectively blow-drying her tresses.

The car tailing her flipped a turn signal on and disappeared down a side road. The road was barren and dark behind the truck.

The night was so dark. She couldn't remember it being this foreboding before, but maybe she was just working herself up again. Now that she thought about it, she could see very well. In fact, she could see perfectly into the velvet darkness surrounding her, but at the same time the world seemed-

“More ominous,” she decided.

It's him. He makes it like this. So horribly dark and wrong.

How could she have been so stupid? How could she have given into

him like that? And now her life was gone, just like those students at the frat house, she was dead, too. Nothing she had worked for mattered anymore. Her hard work, her sacrifices, her triumphs, her failures, everything she had ever done, was now wiped out. Years of saving for college swept away. The years she spent working at crap jobs, with hardly any pay and bosses' roving hands, were for nothing. The time sitting at her sister's side, nursing and loving her as she slowly faded from the world didn't seem worth it anymore. And her friends, having gone off to get married and have children, seemed like a cruel joke. She had sacrificed her own happiness, but for what?

"He owes me," she hissed.

She realized as soon as the words left her lips that she was talking about her father. Not Professor Sumner.

He had guilt-tripped her into going home from Austin when her sister had been diagnosed with cancer. Her brave little sister had actually insisted that Amaliya stay in Austin and finish her schooling. Despite her sister's urgings to remain in school, Amaliya had been so devastated by her father's berating that she had come home.

What followed was three years of sheer hell. She watched her sister struggle to win a battle that she seemed destined to lose from the moment she was diagnosed. It had been the hardest thing Amaliya had ever done. Throughout the ordeal, she had told herself that she would one day go back to the University of Texas and get her degree in psychology, but her sister's illness hung on and her scholarship expired.

Amaliya had stayed out of love for sister, but also because her father had made it damn clear that it was her responsibility to take care of her sister. After losing his first wife to cancer, Samuel had wanted nothing to do with his youngest daughter's treatment. He had

staunchly avoided even dealing with the illness and rarely visited his sick daughter. In the end, little Rachel had died wondering if her father loved her.

Wiping a tear away and letting out an angry noise, Amaliya set her jaw. She would go home, tell him to sign over the truck, tell him not to say he had seen her if the police asked, then instruct him to forget she existed.

Cold tears began to flow down her cheeks. It had always been like this with her family. Tense and coarse. They both had little or no tolerance for each other and lived in an uneasy truce. She believed he loved her, but hated who she was. She had always been different from everyone else in the family. It wasn't just because she was the only girl until her sister Rachel had been born; her entire being just seemed at odds with her family's culture.

“Spic blood,” someone had once said to her father. “It just made her lazy and weird.”

Amaliya hadn't understood what the neighbor had meant. It wasn't until her teen years that she finally understood that her grandmother's Hispanic heritage was blamed for a lot of what was wrong with her. Her beloved mother was revered, but Amaliya was considered off. What no one seemed to realize was that it was Marlena who had encouraged her daughter to embrace her uniqueness. Her mother had sacrificed her own dreams to marry the man she loved. She spent her whole life playing the role he had determined for her. It wasn't until her death that Amaliya had understood how her mother had subjugated her hopes and dreams to her handsome, East Texan husband.

That lesson had stayed with Amaliya. It had spurred her to aspire to an education and take risks in her life.

Maybe too many risks, she thought.

She had been enthralled with her secret date with Professor Sumner, but now her life was over.

The highway began to fill up as other cars began to turn off country roads as people began to make their way home to the bigger towns and Houston. The landscape, even at night, was familiar. It made her weary. Going home was never a pleasant experience for her.

Her slim fingers found the turn signal. She flipped it upwards. The familiar clicking seemed abnormally loud when she maneuvered the vehicle off the highway and down a long country road. The old Wilson house listing in an overgrown field brought back so many memories. She slightly smiled as she remembered tearing across the field after her brothers had tried to lock her in the “haunted house.” She had been so terrified; her fear had infected them. They had all run home screaming. Her mother had tanned their behinds something fierce, then spent a half-hour on the phone laughing with the neighbor over it.

A burned-out blue trailer was her next childhood landmark. It had been the home of her best friend, until the fried chicken cooking on the old stove had started a grease fire. Luckily, everyone had survived, but her best friend, Leslie, had moved far away to the big city of Houston.

She took a right and the truck barreled down the narrow lane that lead to her family's property.

The Vezoraks had lived in East Texas for years since they had come over from Europe. A twenty-acre piece of land was now whittled down to five. The old farmhouse met its end after the elements had worn it down and a strong wind finished it off. Her Dad's new place was a double-wide trailer with multiple additions built onto it. The

smell of barbecue smoke and wet earth filled the truck when she turned down the drive.

Her brother, Damon, was standing near the “Y” in the drive. His manufactured home was well lit. Behind him, a few of his kids were running around with sparklers, playing happily. Up near her Dad's home, the lights were dim where she suspected things were winding down. Her Dad was an early-to-bed type.

Waving to Damon, she drove past him. Her brother's fierce, hawkish face looked solemn. He barely nodded in acknowledgment. His look said it all.

She was in deep shit.

A fence separated her father's homestead from the rest of the property. A few of his cars sat to one side in various stages of disrepair or repair, depending on how you looked at it. The big porch was empty of people. The big barrel next to the steps was loaded with used paper plates and cups. The party was over.

She parked near the fence and took a deep breath. Curious, she did it again, feeling her lungs expand, then contract. She sat in silence, letting her body decide what to do next. Her lungs stayed still, but she didn't feel as though she was suffocating.

“Yep, dead,” she whispered.

The porch light flicked on. She reached over to snag her cowboy hat. It was a bit battered, but she liked it. Tucking it onto her head, she dared to look toward the screen door.

Samuel Vezorak stood on the front steps, arms folded, his face hidden in shadow.

“Hey, Dad,” she said, feeling all her desire to tell him off flow away from her like a fast current. Tears stung her eyes. To her surprise, she

just wanted him to hug her and tell her it would be all right. Dragging her bag out behind her, she slid out of the truck and landed with a heavy *thunk!*

“Finally decided to show up,” his thickly accented voice boomed.

“I...something went wrong,” she said.

“Always does,” he answered, and turned back into the house. The screen door slammed shut behind him as its tight spring popped it into place. He left the inner door open.

Shouldering her bag, she walked over the sand driveway to the front porch. Two old dogs were lying near the stairs, chewing on bones. When she approached, they both looked up, startled.

“Hey, Codger and Shithead,” she said softly.

Shithead whimpered and Codger growled.

Tears blinded her as she realized they knew what she was and were threatened by her presence.

“It's okay. It's okay.”

With a yelp, they both dashed off, leaving their chewed-up bones behind.

“What did you do to my dogs?” her Aunt's fierce voice demanded.

Amaliya turned to see her Aunt/Step-grandmother in the doorway. A wisp of a woman, Mae was not to be trifled with. She had a fierce temper and was one of the worst control freaks Amaliya had ever encountered. Dressed in a faded pink housedress and slippers, Mae shoved the screen door open.

“They just ran off,” Amaliya answered, feeling even more depressed and intimidated.

“Right. I'm sure they did,” Mae snapped. She didn't have but three teeth left and her dentures were definitely not in. No one spoke about it, but it was pretty well known that Amaliya's long dead uncle had

busted them out with a baseball bat. Evidently, Mae had burned his dinner. The lack of teeth made her mouth tiny, where it pinched under her long nose and intense gaze. “Your Grandmama already left for West Texas with your cousin Felipe. You're late, girl, and screwing things up as usual. ”

“Nice to see you, too,” Amaliya muttered, but did feel bad about her grandmother already being gone. It was a long trip for her to come out this far and see them. Most likely, they'd be staying over in Dallas.

Mae automatically smacked her arm as her niece passed by her. “None of your lip.”

The living room was dimly lit by the TV and a lamp on one battered end table. The furniture was rather nice, but the wear and tear of grandkids coming in and out was showing. The big leather sofa had an ugly afghan tossed over the back where her Dad sat on one end. Her cousin/stepmother sat in the lounge, busily knitting. She was always knitting. Amaliya was sure it was some sort of weird addiction. She was also sure it couldn't compare to her stepmother's well-known addiction to Jack Daniels. Yarn and liquor. Nice combination. That was probably what was responsible for the ugly afghan.

“Kelly Ann, look who's here,” Mae said. She shuffled over to sit in a big pink recliner she had insisted on being in the living room.

Her cousin-turned-stepmother glanced up with feigned interest. “Oh, hey, girl,” she said. She immediately went back to studying her stitches and listening to the news.

“What's yer excuse this time?” her Dad asked in a low voice. His lean form was sprawled on the sofa, a beer in one hand, and the remote in the other.

Dropping the bag at her feet, she placed her hands on her hips and took a breath. “Dad, some shit went down at the college.”

“You doing drugs?”

“No! No. Nothing like that.”

“Cops involved?”

Tears filled her eyes once more, but she didn't dare shed them. They would be filled with blood. The blood of the people she killed.

“Probably soon.”

Her Dad finally took his gaze from the TV. “What the hell does that mean?”

Fidgeting, she glanced toward the TV, then back at him. “This Professor there, he...he did something bad...”

Her father's face became even sterner. “He did what?”

“What the hell did you do girl?” Mae's voice was shrill.

“I didn't do anything, but have coffee with him!” Her voice was harsh and full of emotion. “He did something horrible to me. He's dangerous. Evil! I had to run.”

“Are you pregnant? Did you fuck your teacher and get pregnant?”

Mae's voice was full of venom. It always was when she talked to Amaliya.

“Why do you always think the worst of me?” Amaliya exclaimed with frustration.

“Are you?” her Dad's firm voice asked.

The TV went abruptly silent.

“No.” She shook her head vehemently. “No, Dad. No. But I'm in bad trouble and I gotta leave school and I gotta-”

“It's drugs,” Mae decided.

“Sounds like it,” Kelly Ann agreed, but kept on knitting.

“Is it drugs?” Samuel asked in his cold, unwavering voice.

“No. No. It's not drugs. He did something...” Her voice faltered. How could she explain? What would she say? Hey, Dad, I'm a vampire? That was not going to work. “I need the truck,” she said instead.

“We had an agreement.” Her father set his beer down and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his bony knees.

“This is all a scam to get the truck,” Mae decided.

“Sounds like it,” her stepmother agreed. She studied her work before beginning to knit again.

“Dad, please.”

“What the hell did you do?” Damon asked from behind her. The screen door screeched as he opened it, then slammed hard behind him.

“She's pulling a scam to get the truck,” Mae answered.

“Figures.” Damon moved around Amaliya. “In trouble again?”

“I don't get into trouble all the time like you make it sound.” She felt cornered and angry.

“What happened with this professor? Why do you need my truck?” Samuel regarded her from beneath his salt and pepper brows. His keen eyes were studying her with a well-known and intimidating intensity.

Swallowing hard, Amaliya tried to focus her thoughts. She felt her hands trembling at her sides. All she wanted was to find comfort with her family, for them to tell her it would all be better, but she had been foolish. Her role in her family was the outcast. The failure. The disappointment.

“I need the truck. I need to get away. Something bad went down and I can't stay in school and I can't stay here. I wish for once you would

listen to me and believe me.” As she finished speaking, she looked toward her father.

His expression was thoughtful, but grim. “I do listen to you,” he finally answered. “I listen to you, but you never make any damn sense!”

“You’re such a fuck up,” Damon snickered, taking a drag of his cigarette. “Damn, girl.”

“She’s always been like her mother and her mother got the bad genes in my family,” Mae declared. “Always talking nonsense and daydreaming-”

“Never had any sense,” Kelly Ann agreed.

It hurt Amaliya to no end to see her father nod. “I tried to raise you right, but you never have your head screwed on right. What did you do this time? Did you sleep with this here professor and get expelled? Is that it?”

No, he killed me, she thought angrily. But she could not say those words. “Can I have the truck?”

“Don’t let her have the truck. She’ll just run off and do something stupid with it,” Damon said. He popped another bottle of beer open on his belt buckle.

“Shut up,” Amaliya growled. “This isn’t your business.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah! You have no idea at all what I’ve been through!”

“You whored around and got thrown out of school. Big fucking whoopee do! I always knew you would end up pregnant and living on welfare. Traveling the world my ass.”

She hit Damon before she realized what she was doing. It was more of a shove than an actual punch. She hit him hard on the shoulder

and sent him smacking into the wall five feet behind him. He hit it so hard the entire trailer, and all its added on rooms, shivered. Damon slid over onto his side, his eyes slightly open, and blood trickled out of his mouth.

“What the hell are you on?” Her father's voice roared as he moved quickly to tower over her.

Mae and Kelly Ann scrambled across the room to Damon, hurling insults at Amaliya as they passed her. She was too horrified of her own actions to even respond. She gazed up at her father. She wished one last time he would understand that she needed him and for once be there for her.

The back of his dry warm hand impacted with her cheekbone and all hope drained out of her.

“What have you done? What the hell are you on?”

His voice rang accusations down on her as Mae and Kelly Ann managed to rouse Damon. Her brother came to and began swearing under his breath as he spit blood. Her gaze swept from her brother to her father. She took in his enraged countenance as his words pushed hard and deep into the core of her. They lay waste to her dream of one day finding comfort in his arms.

“I'm not on anything,” she hissed at him. “I didn't do anything wrong!” Well, she had killed a roomful of people, but she had no choice. “Why can't you for once believe me?”

“Because you're a fuck up, Amal. And you'll always be a fuck up.”

This time, she knew what she was doing as she did it. Amaliya pushed her tall, imposing father as hard as she could. She felt his body resist for a second before hurtling across the length of the living room, crashing into the flimsy bedroom door.

“I'm your fucking daughter! You asshole! I came here for help

because you're my Dad!" Flinging the keys at her cowering father as hard she could, she felt satisfied when he ducked and they lodged in the wall. "Here is your gawddamn truck keys. Fuck you! Fuck all you!"

"You no-good little whore-"

"Shut up, you toothless old bag!" She whirled on Mae, her eyes flashing red fire. She had no idea her eyes had burned red for a moment, so when her three family members shrank away in terror, confusion swept over her. "You made my life a living hell when my Mama, your sister, died. How could you hate her so much that you have to try to ruin my life?"

Mae's mouth opened, but Kelly Ann screamed at Amaliya, "Leave my Mama alone, you whore."

"At least I didn't sleep with my dying Aunt's husband."

The room fell into silence as the truth spewed out of Amaliya.

"You bitch!" Kelly Ann screamed at her.

A deep moan from her father drew her attention to him as he tried to get to his knees. "You ain't got no right to say that."

"You slept with my eighteen year old cousin and I saw you, Dad. I saw you!"

"Is that why you hate me?"

His voice sounded so broken, it startled her. Her anger faded, but her hurt pulsed through her like lava.

"No," she said softly. "I don't hate you. I just wanted you to love me."

"Fat chance of that, you crazy bitch," Damon slurred as he wiped blood from his face.

The sight of blood made her body tremble. She felt an ache in her teeth and a deep need unfurl inside of her. She took a step toward her brother, as her gaze grew deadly. All she wanted to do was run her

tongue over his wound and taste the exquisite elixir seeping from it.

“Oh, sweet Jesus,” Mae whispered in horror.

What Amaliya did not know was that her eyes had turned completely red as she drew near her huddled kinfolk.

“Amaliya!” her father shouted.

She whirled toward him and hissed.

“What the hell happened to you?” her father exclaimed, his expression of horror widening his eyes.

Overwhelmed, she grabbed her bag up in her arms and stood trembling before them.

“What the hell are you? Possessed by the devil?” Kelly Ann gasped.

With a soft sob, Amaliya shook her head. “I don't know.”

“Get out.” Samuel's voice was low and hard. “Get out of my house!”

Bloody tears running down her face, Amaliya slowly backed toward the door.

“You're not wanted here anymore! Get out!”

As though shoved by an invisible hand, Amaliya suddenly lost her footing and slid right out of the door with a terrified shout. Thrown onto the porch, she lay there gasping.

“Get the shotgun!” Mae screamed.

Scrambling to her feet, Amaliya grabbed her bag and leaped off the porch. She landed a good fifteen feet from the house. She whirled around to see her Dad rushing out the door. In his hand was a rifle.

“Daddy, please,” she cried.

“Get out of here, you whore of the devil!”

“He raped me and killed me! He did this to me!” Her voice was a shriek of anger and fear that tore through the night.

“Get out!”

He fired once over her head and that was enough.

She fled.

Chapter Four

Her bag weighed heavily on her shoulder as she walked down the long country road. The night air was cool and fresh, though the heat coming off the asphalt spoke of a hot day. Sighing, Amaliya tilted her hat back on her head. She felt like she needed a checklist of cheesy vampire *clichés* to start checking off. So far she had fangs, superhuman strength and agility, and blood lust to put a nice big red checkmark next to. Standing still, the lights of her old home twinkled behind her. She wondered if she could see the sun. The heat from its unyielding glare during the day had made the road very warm beneath her feet. She bent down and laid a hand against the ground. Again, tears sprang up, but she fought them back.

The sound of a car broke her reverie. She looked up to see headlights approaching. The rumble of the motor spoke of an old sports car. When the ancient Mustang drew up next to her, she let out a sigh of relief. Pete must have been hanging out with Damon and heard the commotion at her Dad's place. Pete and her had gotten along pretty well all through their lives. He was more Damon's friend than hers, but he never treated her wrong. They had never dated, but had gone out with friends to shoot pool and drink beers back when Damon had yet to fall under his step-grandmother's sway. After Damon had decided Amaliya was a whore for sleeping with one of his friend's when she was seventeen, Pete had remained her friend.

"I heard it got bad," Pete's rich voice said out of the darkness filling

the car.

Leaning down, she saw his pleasant features illuminated by the pale glow of the dashboard. His black hair was a tangled mess of curls on his forehead and his blue eyes were warm and inviting. His goatee was neatly trimmed. He smelled of beer, barbecue and aftershave.

“Doesn't it always?”

“They're really drunk this time. I heard the shotgun go off and Mae is telling everyone you're possessed.”

“Great,” Amaliya sighed, averting her gaze, trying to look harmless.

“Mae's a toothless bitch.”

Amaliya laughed bitterly, then nodded. “Yeah. Without a doubt.”

Pete looked at her evenly. “You've been putting up with that shit a long time. You know, it's okay to walk away.”

“I didn't have a choice *but* to walk away. I got tossed out. They didn't want me.”

“Yeah, but they don't get you. And never will.”

“Truer words have never been spoken.” She sighed softly and shrugged. “I'll be okay. I'll find a place where I am wanted.” She tried to sound light-hearted, but she knew her voice was thick with emotion.

“You're wanted, Amal,” Pete assured her. “People do care about you. I know I do.”

She tucked her hair behind one ear and smiled at him. “You're always sweet to me.”

Pete looked a little embarrassed. He gave her a sheepish smile.

“Need a ride somewhere?”

Amaliya leaned her elbow on the edge of the passenger window and looked at him for a long time. He smelled of good things; it made her

feel safe all at once. “Yeah. Yeah,” she decided. “I can't stay here.”

“I can take you anywhere you want. I got nothing planned tonight, but going to bed.”

“That sounds good,” she decided. “Take me to the Dixie Motel.”

Pete nodded slowly, his lips pressed together, his eyes on her face.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I am very damn sure.” She was tired of walking. All she wanted to do was rest.

He looked startled for some reason, and said quickly, “Okay, sounds like a plan.”

Yanking the door open, Amaliya tossed her bag into the back seat and slid in. “I don't know why I bothered coming home.”

“Home is home,” Pete answered. “For better or for worse. It's where you came from.”

“And what you're trying to escape,” Amaliya added.

“Some of us. I like my home. Did you know I'm building out on the acre my Daddy gave me?”

“Really?”

“Yep. Three bedroom house and a big ol' porch,” Pete grinned. “I remember playing house when we were kids. You always said a three bedroom house was a rich person's house.”

“I shared a room with two brothers.” She laughed. “Having a canopy bed and a Barbie were rich folk stuff.”

Shifting gears, Pete pulled the rumbling Mustang back onto the road. The scene at her Dad's house faded to the back of her mind. Her family didn't matter anymore; they didn't want her and she didn't want them. She was on her own now and she knew it. It was okay. With the wind in her hair and the roar of the engine filling her ears,

she felt safe again.

“Yeah, well, your Daddy is doing much better now. I'm sorry he doesn't help you out more. Or your brothers. I told Damon and Ray to give you a break. They don't know what all is going on with you and they don't have a right to hold you back from your education. I know it's always been real important to you. It used to be all you talked about.”

“Well, it was a way of getting away from them,” she answered. She set her battered cowboy hat on her lap before it could blow away.

“Yeah, I know,” Pete said.

And he did know. She had run to him and told him she had caught her cousin and her Dad doing married folk stuff in the barn. It was Pete who told her not to tell anyone least her Momma in the hospital find out. And Amaliya could not hurt her mother with the truth as she lay dying. So she had kept silent.

“What about you? How are you doing since I left?”

“Got that job down at the refinery. Manager. My experience and those classes I took down at the community college paid off. That's why I'm building my house.”

“That's good! Real good!” Amaliya grinned at him with a flash of white teeth. To her surprise, he seemed a little dazzled by her and despite the dark, she could see him blush.

“I like the black hair,” he said after a moment of silence. “It looks good. I remember you had it like that when you got back from Austin.”

“Yeah, Dad threw a shitfit so I dyed it back to blond. But I figured I'm twenty-four and I can do what I like since I don't live under his roof.”

“Liking school?”

Turning her head away from him, she slightly nodded. “Yeah. I liked

school, but it's been rough lately.”

“Classes are a bitch. But I was never as smart as you. You were always making B's and I was barely getting D's.” He laughed his rich, wonderful laugh. “You always were smart.”

“Not smart enough at times,” she answered softly.

The Dixie Motel sign flickered into view up ahead. Its bright pink and blue lights stood out against the black relief of the trees towering over the road. The faux, German-style hotel was lit up with pale blue lights that blinked on and off as bugs buzzed around them. A large sign announced the \$39.95 per night rate and Amaliya inwardly grimaced as she thought of her small cache of money.

“Pete, thanks for doing this,” she said. “For picking me up. You could have stayed back there drinking.”

“I'd rather stay here with you,” he answered with a shy smile. The car rumbled to a stop. He flipped off the headlights and turned off the car. “I think you're a good person. And you got a raw deal. Besides, I kinda like your fiery Mexican streak that only comes out when you're pissed.”

She laughed and shook her head, her black hair falling around her face. “Sad that the only Spanish I know are swear words.”

When he touched her shoulder, she turned to look at him. His kindness touched her, as did his warm smile. She smiled back at him, and once more, he seemed stunned by her expression. He *did* grin back though.

“I'll go get us a room,” he said, and leaped out of the car.

“What?”

The door slammed shut just as she spoke. He jogged off toward the front office.

Blinking, she sat back in the bucket seat and furrowed her brow. “Oh,

shit.” Reflecting back on their conversation, she realized he had misunderstood her. She had inadvertently picked up Pete. Covering her face with her hands, she let out a little laugh. “Oh, God.” Giggling, she ran a hand through her hair and looked out toward the office. Pete's jolly little walk and wave made her laugh once more.

Considering how gawdawful this night had started and kept going, she was surprised to feel any levity at all. He made her feel real again. The nightmare at the college seemed like a dim memory. The showdown with her father was a fading bad taste in her mouth.

Propping her feet up on the dashboard, she leaned back in the chair and forced herself to relax. Okay, she was a vampire. A strong one at that. She could do things she never dreamed. But she was still Amaliya Vezorak, from the city of Spooner deep in the wilds of East Texas. Despite it all, she was still wearing her shitkickers, her beat-up jeans, and she was still wanting her Daddy to love her and her Momma to be alive. Whatever had changed inside of her had not taken that away.

Closing her eyes, she silently considered whether or not to sleep with Pete. She would have to toss him out before the sun came up. She wasn't sure how that was all going to work yet. But she felt good and alive in this moment despite everything and she didn't want it to fade. A little sex might do her good. Make her feel alive and wanted.

Realizing she wasn't breathing again, she put her hand against her chest to feel a very slow thud. Frowning a little, she waited for the next beat and her brow furrowed even more as it seemed to take far too long to come.

“Okay, I got the room, but its Mr. Rusk in the office. So, I'll drive up as close as I can to the room and you sneak in super fast.”

Amaliya laughed. “You're still afraid of our Sunday School teacher?”

“Yeah,” Pete answered and grinned. “Aren't you?”

“Actually, yeah. He was a scary old coot! But won't he think its weird you're staying here?”

“I told him that I'm tired of sleeping on an air mattress at my sister's house while the house is being built,” Pete said with a wink.

“You're good at this,” she said with playfully-narrowed eyes.

“You have no idea,” he answered, kissing her lips.

She smiled against the kiss, pushing him back. “Let's go for it!”

With glee, they jumped out of the car and ran toward the rooms at the far end of the motel. Amaliya almost overshot the room, but Pete grabbed her wrist and yanked her against him. He swiped the card and shoved the door open with so much gusto he almost fell in.

Tripping over his feet, Amaliya stumbled into the hotel room and managed to land on the edge of the bed.

“You're such a dork,” she chided with a wicked smile.

“Yeah, yeah, I am,” he answered, and shut the door.

Again, she could have no idea of how alluring she was with her luminous blue-gray eyes, flushed cheeks, and red lips. Her change had altered her in ways she could not know. Her skin was very smooth and almost translucent. Her black hair looked silky against the rough fabric of her tank top and it glistened like raven's feathers.

“Oh, wow,” Pete whispered.

“What?”

“You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this,” he breathed.

“What?” She narrowed her eyes at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I've had such a crush on you since we were kids.” Trembling a little, he drew near her. Gentle, roughened fingers caressed her cheek. She leaned into him.

“No, you didn't.”

“Yes, I did. A terrible crush.” Sitting next to her, he traced the lines of her face with quivering fingertips. His soft expression and strong body caused a little shiver in her own. Deep inside of her, a great need was born.

“Do you still?” she asked, kissing his lips ever so gently.

“Yeah,” he breathed, kissing her deeply.

“God, yes,” she whispered into his hair, moaning as he pushed harder into her. She moved her hips against his, grabbing his dark, curly hair, pulling his face against her neck. He was big and heavy and wonderful. The sound of their lovemaking filled her ears. She loved the sound of his gasps, his moans, was enthralled by his gentle touch and brutal thrusts. She gasped and moaned with each delightful thrust.

They were on their third bout of lovemaking on the torn-apart queen-size bed. They had fallen onto the floor at one point and managed to keep going. She now believed him when he said he had wanted her all those years. He was like a man possessed and not able to get enough of her.

“Oh, God,” he murmured against her collarbone, then dragged his mouth down to her right breast.

With a wild little laugh, she arched up to him and gasped when he bit her hard, pierced nipple.

Dragging her off the bed, he pulled her close to him, her legs around his waist as he kissed her hungrily. She teased him by pulling back

from him and licking his lips.

“I’m building the house for you,” he whispered, and managed to grab her hair and pull her close to him.

“What?” She shivered as he licked up her neck, his tongue playing with one of her silver earrings.

“I am building the house for you, waiting for you to come back,” Pete whispered. He turned and pushed her against the wall, sliding his cock deeper into her. “Waiting for you to come back and see if ain’t all bad out here.”

Biting her bottom lip, she dug her nails into his shoulders as she came closer to climax. Lost in the moment, she urged him to shove harder, rocking him with her legs, and gasping as he lightly bit her throat. Lost in the frenzy of the moment, she couldn't fully fathom his words as he murmured them against her cheek. It wasn't until he collapsed against her, coming hard inside of her cool body, that she realized he had been whispering that he loved her.

“Stay here,” he's voice said, his voice a husky purr in her ear. “Something went bad at the school. I know it. But stay here. I'll buy you a big ol' pink canopy.”

Her hands slid over his cheeks and stroked the softness of his goatee. Gazing into his eyes through the darkness, she could see his need for her to say yes.

“I have a good job. The house will be done soon. We'll not deal with your family bullshit and have a good life. Amal, I waited for a whole year for you to come back here and see that I can give you a good life. I should have spoke up before you left, but I could see that if you didn't go, you'd hate me forever.”

“This is so unexpected,” she said. “I never knew.”

“Everyone, but you knew,” he laughed, and stroked her skin. “I

almost drove down to see if you would consider it when you got out of school. I don't care if you got piercings on your nipples or the one down there. Your tattoos are pretty. I just want you here, Amal. And when I saw you tonight, I knew I had to say something now or lose you.”

Cupping his face in her hands, she stared into his lovely eyes and wondered how she had never seen it before. A hard and terrible pang of regret sliced through her.

Sensing that something was changing between them quickly, Pete kissed her lips, then her forehead. Holding her tight, he whispered, “Say yes.”

“I can't.” Her voice was agony, tears sprang to her eyes. If only this had happened last weekend, before the date from hell.

“Yes, you can.”

“No, I can't. I can't!” She tried to push him away.

“No, Amal! You can stay. Look at us! We're good together. Damn, that was the best sex I've ever had. And you feel so good even if your skin is so cold and your body...your face...your eyes...Amal, please.”

Trembling hard, she pushed at him again, but he held her close.

“I know that people are rough on you, but I think you're amazing,” he said firmly. “Look at you! Look at us! We're perfect together.”

Before she realized what he was doing, he flipped the light on and pointed to the mirror over the small vanity and sink.

She literally felt his heart stop as he gazed into the mirror where only his naked reflection stared back. His gaze shot from the mirror to her face. Terrified, he pushed back from her, pulling his flaccid cock from her body with a disheartening tug. Immediately, she felt empty and alone. In silence, she watched his eyes flick back and forth between

her and the mirror. He bolted toward his clothes and the door.

“Pete!”

He almost fell over trying to get his jeans on while trying to fumble for his keys.

“Pete, please,” she whispered.

“No! No! This-” his gaze moved to the mirror and his sole reflection again. “This isn't real!”

“Don't go, please,” she said again.

Please tell me you love me and that the house is for me and we can pretend that we're happy.

“You're not real,” he said again, his eyes so wide he looked crazed.

In a flash, she was across the room and pinned him to the door. Amaliya was startled at how the room had seemed to slide sharply toward her when she moved. She had Pete firmly in her grip and she dismissed the weirdness of her movements. She concentrated her gaze on him.

“I need you to believe I'm real,” she said softly. “Please, believe that I'm real.”

He wouldn't even look at her. He just gazed at the mirror over her shoulder.

“Look at me,” Amaliya hissed. “Look at me and believe I'm real.”

He shook his head. The horror in his eyes was beyond anything she had ever seen and his body was violently trembling.

“Look at me!” Her voice rose sharply and he struggled to get away from her. Holding him easily to the door, she sobbed with desperate need. “Please. Please. Look at me.”

“No! No!”

With a growl of anger, she flung him toward the bed they had just

spent two glorious hours on and leaped onto him. His eyes flashed even wider as she hissed in his face. The throbbing in her teeth let her know her sharp little teeth were now visible. "I'm still me! I'm still me!"

"Let me go! Let me go!" He was slobbering. Bits of saliva struck her face.

The dark need inside of her began to unfurl. She could feel it spreading through her like ice water.

"Stop, please stop," she sobbed, but he kept pushing at her. He was beyond fear now. He was mad with terror.

He pushed at her desperately, trying to pry her off, but her naked body was stronger than his now and she shoved him down. Not even speaking words anymore, his hands scrabbled at the bed as he tried to twist away from her.

The terrible, wonderful power of her need filled her totally and her voice growled out, "Stop." He abruptly stopped grabbing at the mattress and lay still. Acting on purely instinct, she turned his face toward her and hissed, "Sleep."

She should have been surprised, but she wasn't when he closed his eyes and his body went limp.

Sliding off, she sat trembling next to him. Her body was covered in his sweat and her blood tears. Licking her lips, she pushed away the desire to dominate him and feed from him, sitting in silence instead.

She didn't move for hours.

Chapter Five

Amaliya woke up with a start. Confused by the furnishings in the dimly lit room, it took her a few moments to collect her thoughts and remember where she was. Squeezed into the narrow walk space between the bed and wall, she was covered in a scratchy blanket. On the bed lay Pete. His eyes were closed. He did not seem to have moved since she ordered him to sleep hours before. If not for his steady breathing and occasional snort, she could almost believe he was dead.

Beyond the bed was the big window with its ugly curtains. Light was seeping in around the edges of the thick fabric, where a sunbeam played along the top of the air-conditioning unit under the window. She had remembered to put the “Do Not Disturb” on the door before the sun rose. She had also barricaded the door with the cheap table and chairs that had been tucked into a corner of the room. Rubbing her eyes, she felt the crusty remains of her tears and frowned.

After Pete had fallen under her spell, she had sat in a chair watching him until she began to feel heavy and sleepy. At last she had showered. She had then curled up in the corner of the room, afraid to lie on the bed beside him. If he woke up and saw her, it could cause trouble quickly. She could imagine him screaming and someone busting in the door. The sun would pour in and she would be set on fire.

If she could actually catch on fire.

Could she?

Well, considering that she could leap long distances, manhandle big

men like nothing, and bespell someone to do her bidding, catching on fire seemed about the right sort of payback. It all had to balance out somehow, didn't it?

Sliding to her feet, she tugged her panties down over her butt so they weren't hitched up anymore, then stretched. She felt lethargic, almost drugged, but she had woken up for a reason. Leaning over, she checked Pete's pulse. A tight pull of desire slipped through her as she felt Pete's pulse beating under her fingers. Drawing back, she licked her lips and tried not to think of his delicious skin.

A narrow band of light cut across the carpet not too far from the bed. She gazed at it fearfully. A part of her desperately wanted to reach out to touch the sunbeam and watch the tiny motes play over her skin.

Or watch her skin burst into flame.

She wondered which would happen.

Rubbing her stomach, her gaze slid to Pete again. He had been so sweet and passionate last night, and for what? It had gotten so fucked up so fast. He had said such wonderful things to her, things she had craved her whole life to hear and then it had all gone to hell.

She cast a dark look at the mirror and stuck her tongue out at the emptiness of it. She had not even thought about the mirror last night when they had entered the room. It had betrayed her and that horrible look on Pete's face when he saw he alone inhabited the reflection was something she would never forget.

The long strip of sunlight beckoned to her.

Seriously, would she really get burned? Was it possible?

Of course, she had crawled out of her own grave, slaughtered a room full of innocents, and thrown her Dad across his living room. At this

point, anything seemed possible.

Slowly, she stepped toward the swatch of sunlight and watched it flicker as the curtain swayed in the currents of the air conditioning.

“I won't know if I don't try,” she mused, then took another step forward.

She could now feel the heat of the sun pressing against the glass of the window tucked behind the ugly curtains. Timidly, she edged toward the wavering line of sunlight. Sinking to her knees, her fingers twitched with anticipation. Just her fingertips. That was all. She would just slide the very tips of her fingers into the sunbeam and see what happened.

“How bad could it hurt?” she pondered. “After all, I've already been killed.”

After taking what she now knew was an unnecessary deep breath, she slid her fingers into the light.

A second ticked by and nothing happened.

“Ha!” She grinned triumphantly.

Searing, terrible pain made her cry out as her fingers blackened and cracked. Falling back, she grabbed her wounded hand close to her and shoved herself backward with her feet. The pain was nearly unbearable as she pushed herself back to the vanity.

“Dammit,” she hissed through gritted teeth. She tried to fight off the waves of agony flowing up her hand. “Heal, dammit,” she muttered, and willed it to happen. She could almost feel her chilled blood churning through her veins sluggishly, trying to heal her. She had noticed as she was falling asleep in the early hours of the morning that her heart was barely beating, and now she felt as if it was completely stilled.

“Heal,” she muttered in an agonized voice. Slowly, the blackened skin

began to peel and ooze. Biting her bottom lip, she grimaced as the crisped flesh fell off and fresh new skin knitted itself into existence. It was not until the skin was pink and smooth once more that the pain at last subsided.

The hunger hit her in a wave of desperate need. It knocked her back and left her gasping as it churned to life inside of her. In a split second, she was on the bed and crouched over Pete. She could feel her veins contracting as they yearned for blood to flow through them again. Her gut clenched and her mouth ached as her long teeth descended. She needed to eat now and Pete's heartbeat sang in her ears.

“Sorry,” she whispered and, without hesitation, she fed.

The second time Amaliya woke, the room was dark with only an edging of light around the window. Pete still lay on the bed, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling in shallow breaths. His pale skin and waxy looks frightened her. She knew she had taken far too much of his blood. To her disgust, she wanted to take more. She was growing hungry; the need was beginning to claw at her. How she had managed to tear away from his throat, she wasn't too sure. Through the red haze of her feeding, she had managed to grasp hold of her desire not to destroy Pete. She had pulled herself away from the killing droughts she had desperately wanted to take.

Climbing to her feet, she stood next to the bed, pale in the darkness in her tank top and panties. Her black hair fell over one shoulder in a tumble of waves. She rubbed her brow with one hand. He looked so quiet and so sweet lying there. His words from the night before still whispered through her, stirring the false hopes of a normal life.

“Shit,” she muttered, and turned away. She needed to get the hell out

of here.

Grabbing her bag, she headed into the small, white bathroom. She was anxious to get away now that the sun was setting. Pete needed medical attention. She would have to call 911 and get the hell out of the motel as fast as she could. Besides, she needed to feed again. The great need gnawed at her insides and she knew instinctively that it would only grow more demanding.

The shower was quick and to the point. Fifteen minutes later, she sat on the toilet, combing out her wet hair. She noticed the lack of split ends with a dull wonder and examined her much longer nails. They were sharp and strong. Her hands almost did not look like hers, except for the badly chipped nail polish. As she drew the comb through her hair over and over again, she wondered what she looked like now. Pete had looked at her as if she was gorgeous, while her family had regarded her with fear. Did she look radically different? Maybe a better version of herself? There was no way to know.

“Fucking mirror,” she growled under her breath.

With a heavy sigh, she shoved the comb in the bag along with the rest of her clothes. Not caring to arrange it neatly, she shoved stuff around until the bag closed right. Pete's phone began to ring.

She had a feeling her time was nearly up.

Walking to where he lay, she stared at him, feeling the throb of her hunger deep inside. Her heart was beating slowly in her chest, her veins felt hollow, but she could hold off her hunger a bit longer. Sweeping her hair back from her face, she leaned over him, trying not to look at the two pale wounds on his neck. They looked like bug bites. She wondered if there was something inside of her saliva that had stopped the bleeding and promoted healing.

“Pete,” she whispered.

To her surprise, his eyelids quivered.

Steadying herself with one hand, she moved a little closer. "Pete."

His thick eyelashes fluttered as he slowly opened his eyes.

It hurt her to see the fear there.

"I'm leaving. Your phone is right here," she said, and shoved the small device into one of his hands. "Call 911."

"What did you...do to me?" he managed to whisper through pale lips.

The dark powering churning in her gut began to flow into her limbs and she could feel her eyes beginning to burn. This was the force she had felt last night when she had commanded him to sleep. Looking at him intently, she willed that power into him.

"You got sick. You never saw me. You came here to rest. You never saw me," she ordered him in a voice that was raw and thick with her new ability.

"I...got...sick," he whispered.

"Yes," she answered with a sad smile. "You did. Call 911 when I leave. The second that door shuts forget about me. Understand?"

She could literally feel her power overwhelming him, her desire pushing into his mind, reshaping his memory.

He nodded mutely, gazing at her through his eyelashes as if she were a goddess.

Tears threatening, she leaned over and kissed his lips. "Bye, Pete."

Standing up, she heaved her bag over her shoulder and headed to the door. She could feel his gaze on her and turned to look at him.

Despite his fear, she could see a sliver of yearning in his eyes as he strained to watch her go. In his gaze, she could see her great beauty and presence. She self-consciously ran a hand over the peach and white vintage skirt that swung around the tops of her knees. A white

tank top with the word “Bitch” in gold studs and cowboy boots topped off the outfit. Snatching her cowboy hat off the dresser, she sighed sadly.

But she couldn't lie to herself. She wouldn't have come back here for Pete and stayed. It was a wonderful sentiment on his part, even if he had asked her, she would have said no. Spooner, Texas was not the world where she wanted to live. The terrible thing was she had never known what world she had wanted to live in. She had just known she didn't belong.

Desperate to get out of the room, she shoved the table and chairs back to their spots. She moved to open the door.

“Amaliya,” Pete's voice rasped.

She turned toward him and saw his hand was reaching toward her. His expression was full of desire and fear.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “For what...you are.”

“Me, too. Me, too.” She yanked the door open before she burst into tears and stepped out slowly. Looking both ways, she saw the parking lot was empty of people. Turning, she saw Pete's gaze was still fastened to her. “Forget me, then call 911.”

He nodded slowly, mesmerized.

She slammed the door shut.

Chapter Six

Skirting the edge of the motel parking lot, she managed to make it to the road without anyone noticing her. Though she could feel the heaviness of the bag on her back, it didn't cause her any discomfort as she maneuvered through the darkness with greater ease than she ever had before. Her money tucked safely in her boot, she strode on toward the main highway and away from the hotel. The tiny town of Spooner lay ten miles down the road and she was glad to have it behind her. She hadn't even seen it this trip, but she had no desire to see its dying downtown or the old Sonic where she had worked diligently for years.

In the tall trees edging the road, she could hear the nocturnal animals making their rounds, hunting or scavenging for food. A few times, the forest fell silent when she drew too close to it. It was only one more confirmation that she was now a predator.

The low rumble of trucks sounded nearby and she picked up her pace. A few cars passed her, but no one seemed to take notice of her striding along the edge of the trees. The intersection with the highway was brightly lit and a truck roared by on its way to Louisiana. Shreveport wasn't that far over the Texas border and for a moment she pondered trying to make it to New Orleans. Wasn't that where the vampires were supposed to live? Rubbing her long nose, she took this into careful consideration as she tried to remember the vampire novels she had read during her teens. New Orleans and France, maybe.

But she wanted to see her Grandmama. That was one thing she was sure of now that she was away from the motel. She wanted to see the only part of her family that seemed to give a damn about her. She wanted to see her grandmother and her cousin, Sergio. She wanted to say goodbye to them. And that meant heading to West Texas.

Adjusting her skirt just a little to make it shorter, she began to walk along the shoulder of the highway. She hadn't hitchhiked in ages. She had gotten into so much trouble with her Dad when he had found out she had run away as far as Nacogdoches. The lecture she had received her thirteenth summer of life still rang in her ears. But times were different now. Yes, the world was more dangerous, but she was too.

A few cars passed her without even slowing down. She could clearly see the passengers glance at her, then quickly away. They pretended she wasn't there so they wouldn't have to worry about a young woman stranded in the darkness. Nice.

Her boots scraped along the gravel shoulder as she hoisted her bag higher. Trying to look as non-threatening as possible, she raised her hand and put out her thumb as another car rolled by. This time the car slowed slightly, but the man in the expensive vehicle, which reeked of human power, kept going. She could still feel his eyes on her when the car passed. She turned to flip him off, hoping he'd catch her in the review mirror.

Another twenty minutes went by and she trudged along the highway wondering if anyone gave a damn anymore about young women stranded in the middle of nowhere. Well, not actually the middle of nowhere, since a town lay ten miles in both directions, but still it kind of made her wonder.

It was a beat up truck spray-painted turquoise that finally pulled over. Its broken taillight still worked and the bright bulb inside the plastic beckoned to her as the tires spit off gravel as it stopped. Hurrying to the passenger door, she took in the garbage-strewn back of the truck and the smell of cat piss. The truck was so old the warped door was a bitch to open. It seemed to want to stay shut and it groaned as she yanked it hard.

Inside a woman stared out at her through the gloom occasionally illuminated by the headlights of a passing car. She had tangled red hair tied back from a haggard face that looked both cruel and desperate. A cigarette dangled from between the nicotine-stained fingers that gripped the steering wheel as she beckoned to Amaliya with her other hand.

“Get in.”

Sliding in, Amaliya said, “Thanks.”

The woman nodded slightly. “No prob.” She fished a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of her plaid shirt and offered her one.

“Thanks,” Amaliya said with relief, and snagged one. She had tried to quit, but that seemed a moot point now. Lighting up, she took a deep drag and sank back into the seat with its gnarled springs and torn vinyl.

“Where you headed?”

“Dallas/Fort Worth, and then west from there,” Amaliya answered.

“Yeah?” The woman pulled back onto the highway. “I’m headed to Greenville.”

“That’s some ways away,” Amaliya answered.

“Yeah, but its where my kids are.” The woman shrugged. “I’m going up there to get my kids back from my idiot husband.”

“Ah,” Amaliya answered, and took another drag.

The stench of beer and anger filled the cab.

Weird, she could smell anger. Or sense it.

“Yeah, he’s a sonnabitch and I’m going to get my kids back and get them home to Corrigan.”

Amaliya nodded and tried to find a comfortable spot on the seat.

“I needed company, but no one would come with me. I'm glad you are here. What is your name?”

She hesitated, then said, “Liya.”

“That's weird. It Mexican? Lots of Mexicans up here now. Not that I don't like Mexicans, just lots of 'em here now.”

“It's Russian, I think. My Mom had a thing for names.”

“I'm Ruth.”

Amaliya nodded and wished the woman would shut up. It was now obvious that she was drunk and should not be on the road at all. Plus she reeked of liquor and cat urine.

“We'll be in Greenville in five hours, I think.”

“I can't go to Greenville,” Amaliya said softly. “Just drop me off near Dallas.”

“If you are in my gawddamn truck, you're going to gawddamn Greenville!” The woman's voice was shrill and demanding.

“Hey, aren't you supposed to wait a few hours before you act crazy,” Amaliya snapped back.

“Don't you dare speak to me like that in my fucking truck! You're in my truck and you will do as I say!”

“You're out of your freaking mind.”

“You will do as I say or I will get you!”

The truck was now weaving all over the road.

Amaliya couldn't believe that not even five minutes had passed and now she had to deal with a batshit crazy woman.

“You got in my gawddamn truck so you'll do as I say. I'm going to go shoot the sonnabitch and get my kids.”

“Great! You're a homicidal crazy drunk.” Amaliya shook her head.

“Just fucking great.”

How the hell had she ended up with the craziest woman in the area? It was good to see her luck was holding up.

“Look, whore, you're the one pimping yourself out by the side of the road begging to get fucked and killed. You're lucky I stopped and saved you from that!” Flecks of spittle hit the windshield as the woman screeched at her.

Amaliya looked down at the woman's feet to see a shotgun tucked down on the floorboard. With wry amusement, she saw the woman was wearing socks with plastic shoes.

“Oh, fuck this.”

Amaliya grabbed the wheel with one hand and punched the woman as hard as she could with the other. There was a sickening sound as the woman's head snapped back and she collapsed against the driver's door. Quickly sliding over toward the woman, Amaliya tried not to pay attention to the stench and pushed her foot onto the accelerator.

“That went downhill fast,” she muttered. But then again, who was going to pick up someone on a darkened road other than someone who was crazy?

With a little effort, Amaliya managed to keep the truck moving until she saw a turnoff. It was a narrow country road and she almost had to sit on the smelly woman's lap to maneuver onto it. The old truck sputtered along until she found a place to pull off under a canopy of trees. Shoving the vehicle into park, she slid back down the seat to the passenger side and sat there staring out at the night.

This had always been her luck. How she had not been beaten and raped when she had hitchhiked as a kid was beyond her. She had hoped to get to Dallas tonight, but this was not a good sign. Checking the clock, she saw it was nearly nine o'clock. It was four to five hours to Dallas depending on traffic and construction. Once there she would

have to find a place to stay during the day.

Beside her, the awful woman was gurgling and snorting. Blood was trickling out of her nose and something was off about her breathing.

Turning on the overhead light, Amaliya saw more blood than she expected and flinched. She was stronger now and had to remember that. Despite the horrible smell emanating from the woman, the blood filled her senses with a heady promise. Flipping the light back off, Amaliya sat back in her seat and pondered the situation. She was a vampire, she needed to eat, and she needed to get to Dallas.

“Ah, fuck.” She sighed and eyed the woman.

The woman was slowly dying beside her. Her shallow breathing was annoying and the gurgling that occasionally came from her throat didn't sound good, but Amaliya was beyond caring. From the sound of the woman's heart, she would be dead soon. The stench of her was making Amaliya feel nauseous, but it was a relief to feel the woman's blood in her veins. Life filled her and she relished it.

Shoving the door open, Amaliya pulled her bag out and looked back at the crazed woman. It was better this way. The battered, stained and mutilated divorce decree that Amaliya had found on the floor revealed how warped the woman was. The kids and the ex-husband were safer with her gone.

Slamming the passenger door shut, she walked back toward the highway. There was no way in hell she was taking the old beat up truck. It stank too much and she didn't want to deal with the crazy bitch's body.

As she trudged along, her bag swinging against her back, she sighed. It was freaking hard to be a poor-ass Texan vampire. Nothing about it

was easy or fun.

Reaching the highway, she didn't even try to hitch. If someone stopped, good, if not, she'd keep walking until she got somewhere.

Though her mother had always wanted her to travel and experience life, she was sure this was not what Mom had hoped for.

An ambulance siren echoed out of the distance and she turned to watch it barrel down the road. With sad eyes, she wondered if it was Pete on the way to the big hospital in Nacogdoches. Silently, she prayed he would be okay. Or maybe it was more of a wish. She wasn't sure she could pray anymore.

She trudged along for almost twenty minutes before another small truck pulled over. The cab was crammed full of Mexicans as was the truck bed. They all looked tired and sweaty from a long day's work somewhere and two reached out to help her up into the back.

“Muchas gracias,” she said, hoping she didn't slaughter her Grandmother's language too bad.

They just smiled at her in response and then went back to staring into space as the truck sped back onto the highway. They all looked terribly fatigued and dirty. She was glad she had fed off the crazy woman and that their blood stained knuckles held no attraction for her now. She was sated and it was good.

Without her having to ask, the driver pulled into a truck stop that was brightly lit by huge lights that pierced into the darkness. Again, the men helped her down, and one handed her bag over. A few waved to her as the truck sped on and she raised a hand, feeling a hard lump in her throat at their kindness.

The heat from the truck stop was overwhelming. Massive semi-trucks sat growling in long rows. People were moving about, checking on

their vehicles as others moved toward the huge building that housed a restaurant and convenience store. Walking across the asphalt, she felt a cold trickle flow down her back.

Whirling about, she looked into the darkness, fear blossoming inside of her.

He was here.

She knew it.

Felt it.

Walking backward, she stared out into the night and listened to the cars speeding down the highway and the engines rumbling all around her. The whine of air brakes and the laughter of men filled her ears, but still she could hear the Professor's voice in her mind.

Still alive? Doing well? I'm impressed.

She turned around and fled to the building as fast as she could. Holding down her cowboy hat as she ran, she could feel the big bag beating against her back. In her haste, she tripped and fell smack into a puddle of oil and grimaced as it splattered her face. Terrified that she was being pursued, she quickly rolled onto her hip and looked behind her.

There was no sign of her tormentor.

Scrambling quickly to her feet, she rushed past a few truckers looking at her in surprise, shoved open the door to the building, and stumbled in.

A bored-looking girl, with her hair heavily gelled and pulled back into a very tight ponytail, looked up from where she was reading a tabloid behind the counter. There were a few truckers prowling the aisles, looking for snacks and other supplies. Through an arched doorway in the wall, Amaliya could see into the restaurant. Business seemed to be

better on that side.

“Showers are over there,” the girl said in a bored voice, and popped her bubblegum. She pointed across the heavily-stocked aisles to a large sign that read Restrooms and Showers.

Startled, Amaliya said, “Thanks,” and headed down an aisle, feeling embarrassed of her appearance. Inside the truck stop, it felt so normal and mundane. The ominous presence she had felt earlier was gone. She felt safe among the mortals.

Eh, she thought. I'm among mortals. Gawd, that's lame.

Her luck was definitely staying the course. She was covered in dirty oil and smelled like the crazy woman she had fed on.

The shelves around her were stocked with all sorts of things she didn't usually see at convenience stores. She hadn't realized so many products were personalized for the truckers on the road. A few of the drivers glanced toward her curiously, but mostly they just wandered the aisles looking at DVDs, mini-TVs, resin statues of Indians and clothes.

Sighing, she entered the room labeled Showers that had a silhouette of a woman over it. The only other occupant was a woman with curly black hair, blow drying her hair. As if by mutual agreement, they ignored each other. Amaliya headed to the end of the room and sat her bag on a bench. For the second time that night, she pulled out fresh clothes and her toiletries. She headed behind the curtained off area for a quick shower.

A few minutes later, she sat on the bench next to her bag and tugged on her boots. This time she was in black jeans and a black AC/DC t-shirt. The curly headed woman was now putting on makeup.

“Hitching?”

Amaliya looked up, startled.

“Huh?”

“You don't look like a driver. Either your hitching or you're a girlfriend or wife. And you don't look like either of those.” The woman's keen, dark eyes examined her.

Amaliya looked at the mirror behind the woman, suddenly afraid.

“I...yeah.” She didn't know what else to say. She was afraid the woman would notice her lack of reflection and call down the entire truck stop on her.

“Where you headed?”

“Dallas.”

“Just came through there. I'm on my way to New Orleans. Going home or running away?”

“Bad boyfriend,” Amaliya lied. Well, sort of. Did your murdering vampire professor count as a bad boyfriend?

“Hit you?”

“Worse.”

“If they are smart, they do it where it doesn't show,” the woman said.

“He's smart.” Amaliya sighed. She tried to keep at the edge of the bench and far away from the mirror.

“I'll see if anyone will give you a ride. Go get something to eat in the restaurant. What's your name?”

“Liya.”

“Nice to meet you Liya. I'm Tammy. I don't like a young woman just hanging out here. Most of the guys are decent, but one or two...well...you know.”

“They're smart?”

Tammy smiled slowly. "Yeah. They're smart." Shoving her blush into her makeup kit, she turned her back to Amaliya and began fussing with her bag.

Hastily, Amaliya escaped from the room with the evil mirrors and made her way to the restaurant. Her bag banged against her hip as she walked. A few men took note of her now that she wasn't covered in oil.

"Sit wherever you want," a forty-something waitress said to her when she passed into the restaurant.

Unlike some of the big cities in Texas, there wasn't a smoking ban here. The smell of stale cigarettes and fried eggs greeted her as she walked past the long counter lined with truck drivers. Sliding into a corner booth, she sat, nervously hoping that no one would see that the window beside her did not hold her reflection. Reaching out, she snagged the edge of a plaid curtain and tugged it over to obscure that fact and hoped for the best.

The same waitress reached her table, cocked her hip, and looked down at her. "Watcha getting?"

"Uh, coffee. Black," she told the woman. Her name tag read "Rhonda."

"That it? You're kinda a tiny thing. You need food." Though her words should have sounded concerned, they sounded more accusatory.

"I ate. On the road. A big burger from Dairy Queen," Amaliya answered. Lying was coming easier to her now.

"Um," the woman murmured, and walked away clearly not believing her.

Could she eat? Could she drink? She had no clue, but she was definitely not hungry.

Glancing out at the busy parking area, she watched several big trucks pull out as two more rumbled up to the fuel tanks. It was a whole different world and it felt safe for now. If the professor was still out there, she did not sense him. Maybe she had imagined his presence. But then again, he had said he would be watching her.

Playing with a sugar packet, she wondered how Pete was. He had not looked as bad as the crazy hag she was pretty sure she had killed. It somewhat bothered her that she felt no remorse for taking the woman's life, yet at the same time she couldn't figure out why she should. Pete was a sweetheart and she did feel bad about what happened between them. But the batshit crazy lady just did not make her feel bad. She had been food, smelly, gross food, but food. Beyond that, she had been a homicidal maniac on her way to kill her ex-husband and steal her kids.

Amaliya had a feeling that her morals were slipping fast and that she wasn't thinking clearly. But at the same time, it felt good to not really care. If she was going to have to feed, then she shouldn't have to feel bad, right?

But, still, poor Pete.

And she didn't even want to think about all those people at that party.

The coffee cup was set down in front of her abruptly. It rattled around on the saucer, before Rhonda poured the hot dark liquid into it.

“Thanks,” Amaliya said with a small smile.

Rhonda just gave her a long look, then walked away clutching the coffee pot. Amaliya stuck her tongue out at the woman's wide hips and watched as Rhonda began to refill the coffee cups at a table full of drivers. The waitress smiled for them and flirted a bit.

Amaliya made a face and began to tear open little blue packets of sweetener to pour them into the coffee.

“My name is Rob,” a voice boomed behind her.

She turned and looked at a huge man. His shirt was stretched over his enormous stomach and his face was jowly.

“I hear you are looking for a ride?”

“To Dallas, right.”

“Okay, I can give you a lift that far. Then I'm heading up to Wichita Falls.”

She smiled. “Do we need to go now?”

“Finish your coffee up and I'll meet you outside. Mine is the big blue truck right there.” Rob pointed, his expression a mixture of pride and nerves.

“Okay, great! I'll be right out.”

Nodding, the big man lumbered down to the cashier, his white ticket clutched in his hand.

Looking down at her coffee, Amaliya considered it, then slowly picked up the cup. Gingerly, she took a sip and let the hot fluid glide down her throat. It burned a little, but it seemed to settle down inside of her without an issue. Taking another slow sip, she looked up to see Rob disappear out the door, and she sighed with relief. She just needed to reach Dallas tonight, then Eastland tomorrow. It was a short drive from Eastland to the small town of DeLeon where her Grandmother lived. She could probably call her cousin Sergio for a ride.

Raising her hand, she motioned to Rhonda. The waitress sighed dramatically, and headed over to her. Obviously, Rhonda thought she was a hooker or something terrible from her expression on her face and her irritation.

“I need the check.”

“Rob took care of it. Says he's giving you a ride,” the waitress said in such a way that the word “ride” took on a whole new connotation.

“Yeah. To see my grandmother.” Amaliya stood up and glared at the woman. To her surprise, the older woman stepped back, looking startled. “I hope he didn't tip you. You've been a total bitch.”

Brushing past the woman, Amaliya headed out.

Stalking across the hot parking lot, she gave Rob a quick wave. She was used to people treating her differently because of her tats and her piercings, but the woman could have given her a freaking break.

“Thanks for the ride,” she said to the big man. She tossed her bag up into the cab.

“Need help?” Rob offered.

“Nah, I got it.”

She grabbed the handhold and lugged herself up into the seat. The special hydraulics in the seat shifted under her and she settled into the surprisingly comfortable chair.

Looking solemn, Rob climbed in and slammed the door shut.

Finally, Amaliya thought. *I'm out of here.*

Now if only her luck would improve.

Tammy entered the restaurant and looked around for the pretty tattooed girl with the raven hair. Hands on her generous hips, she looked over the tables and booths. There was no sign of the young woman and she looked over the counter at Rhonda, who was busy checking out a customer.

“You see a girl with pretty eyes and tattoos on one arm in here?”

“Yep,” Rhonda answered, and gave the tall man in the leather vest his

change. Nodding as the man handed her back a few ones, she looked toward Tammy. “She left with Rob.”

“You're kidding!”

“Nope.”

Tammy sighed and shook her head. “I told her to let me get her a ride. Jackson was going to take her.” She gestured toward an older black man with a scrubby gray beard. “Shit. I can't believe she got a ride with that asshole.”

Rhonda shrugged. “I have a feeling that kinda girl will do just fine with Rob.”

Looking a little disgusted with Rhonda's words, Tammy shook her head and headed out to tell Jackson his passenger was gone. She was startled when a tall man with broad shoulders and very pale blond hair bumped into her and jostled her a bit.

“Sorry, madam,” he said in a prim British accent.

Despite herself, Tammy blushed deeply. The man seemed very out of place with his fine black silk shirt and gray silk trousers. He was holding a cola in one hand and a DVD in the other.

“S'ok. I'm fine.”

The man smiled at her warmly. “Have a good evening,” he said and moved on to check out.

Despite herself and her husband back home, Tammy couldn't help but check out his posterior as he got in line. Feeling guilty in a good way, she moved on to talk to Jackson.

Chapter Seven

Propping her feet up on the dashboard, Amaliya played with the screw top of her soda that Rob had bought her. She thought it was a kind gesture, though she had no real desire to drink or eat. Once she had sated herself on the blood of the crazy woman, she had lost what she now defined as the “need.” Rubbing the side of her nose with her finger, she felt the tiny stud in it scratch her skin. It was a comforting feeling for some reason and she let it sink into her.

It felt good to be moving again. She had felt downright claustrophobic in the hotel room with Pete laying on the bed like that. Knowing she could not go outside during the day had eaten away at her nerves. The memory of her crisped fingers was a pungent memory and repulsive to her. Another thing from the movies that seemed to be true. How many more would join her slowly growing list?

“Why you going to Dallas?”

Rob's voice startled her. He had been so quiet for the last thirty minutes, she had slowly lost herself in her own thoughts.

“It's just a stop along the way back home,” she answered, and pretended to take a sip of her drink. She was growing more and more reluctant to talk about herself and what she was doing. The more lies she made up, the harder it was going to be. Of course, she could just make up one really good story and stick to it, but that thought depressed her somehow. Besides, most of her life she had just lived on a whim and went with the flow. The only thing she had ever staunchly planned for was going to college. Of course, when she got

there, she had no idea what to study or do with herself.

“Most people hitching a ride are doing it cause they're running from something,” Rob said softly, but his voice seemed big and full and filled the cab.

Well, that summed her up pretty well. She was notorious for running from any situation she didn't like. It was her natural instinct. Flee.

“Well, I'm running to something,” she decided. “I want to see my Grandmama before its too late.”

Rob nodded. “Gotcha.” He sank back into silence, his big meaty hands holding tightly to the steering wheel as the big truck rumbled down the long highway.

Glancing into the line of mirrors out the window, Amaliya studied the row of cars behind them. Most were jockeying for positions to pass the big truck and she wondered briefly if Professor Sumner was in any of them. He had told her he would watch her and she believed him. Smiling slightly, she wondered what her score was so far. Was he taking notes? He was a damn psychology professor. Was he picking her apart? Examining her motives?

A rat in a maze. She had a feeling that was what she was to him.

“Married?”

“No,” she answered softly. “Almost was...once.” Well, technically Pete and her had never been engaged or even dated, but if things had gone differently maybe there would have been a chance. Probably not, but maybe. She could console herself with maybe. Even if she was inclined to believe she would live up to her reputation and would have bolted.

“I was married, but she died almost two years ago,” he said.

“Sorry.”

“It happens.” Again, the man went silent and seemed to turn all his attention to the road.

The silence was strangely comforting and she snuggled down in the seat to stare up at the stars. Her fingertips lightly stroked the scar where a rosary had been tattooed into her arm. The rough skin was strangely comforting despite what it meant. She could heal and heal well now, so she wondered how it had happened. Maybe when she had transformed into what she was now. She did remember vaguely an incredible amount of pain when she had woken up buried in the earth.

“We'll be there soon. Dallas. I'm feeling pretty damn tired. I think I'll just pull over and get a motel room. I guess you got folks to pick you up? Or do you need a room for the night?”

Amaliya looked toward the man with his big bland face and slightly smiled. “Not going to Wichita Falls then?”

“Too tired. I'm gonna crash for a few hours here, and then head up through Wichita to Oklahoma.”

“You don't sleep back there?” she asked, motioning over her shoulder.

“It ain't too good on my back after awhile. I'm feeling my last few hauls in my bones. 'sides, a shower sounds good.” He gave her a big toothy grin. “You're good company. You don't talk much.”

“Not much to say. Okay, cool. Find a motel.” She nodded her head and tapped a little rhythm on her knees. “I could use some rest.”

The big man shifted gears and the truck switched lanes as a sign to Dallas flashed by. The sight of the white lettering on the green sign was a comfort. She was halfway to her Grandmama's. Then she could tell her grandmother goodbye and figure out what the hell she was going to do next.

The motel near Dallas' downtown was packed with families in transit after the long Easter weekend and a few big trucks sat idling in the parking lot. The night had cooled off quite a bit, but the heat coming off the highway rolled in waves over the asphalt parking lot. As she walked beside Rob toward the office, his whole body quivered. The man was not only impressive in height, but girth. He had barely spoken after their brief interchange and that had been fine with her. She needed time to think and figure out what the hell was going on with her.

A part of her was afraid that her reaction to everything happening around her was wrong, that her transformation had altered something inside of her forever, that she was so changed she could not even fathom what it was that had died inside of her.

Lighting a cigarette she had bummed off Rob, she exhaled slowly. She didn't feel like slipping inside the building just yet. The night felt good. There was energy in the air. Maybe it was because they were so close to Deep Ellum, the Dallas hot spot for entertainment.

“Coming?”

Exhaling, she shook her head. “Nah, I'm going to take a moment out here, then I'll head in.” She gazed out over the Dallas skyline and smiled slightly. She always loved the way cities looked at night with their flashy lights and fancy glass buildings. It had been a far departure from the four block downtown of her small home town.

Rob hesitated, then nodded. “Okay. Well, catch you later.”

“Thanks for the ride,” she said with a wide smile. “I really appreciate it.”

The man abruptly smiled, his teeth flashing under his mustache. “Was a pleasure.”

He turned and disappeared through the door that took him into the

office. She could see him approaching the battered front desk through the window and turned away slowly to look down the highway.

Tucking one hand into her jeans pocket, Amaliya watched the cars speeding past the motel. If Professor Sumner was around, she couldn't feel him. But then again, maybe she could only feel him when he wanted her to. Frowning slightly, she took another deep drag on her cigarette and crouched down next to her bag. Pretending to take her money out of her bag, she actually took it out of her boot, then stood up.

A few more drags had her cigarette burning low. She exhaled slowly as she dropped the butt to the ground and ground it out.

“Night,” Rob said emerging from the office and moving past her, heading toward his truck to get his stuff.

“Night, Rob. Thanks again,” she said, then headed inside.

The very dark man behind the counter looked like he could be Indian or Pakistani. He was listening to exotic music she had never heard before. He eyeballed her thoughtfully as she approached and gave him a wide smile.

“I need a room,” she said.

Amaliya leaned against the counter on her elbows and looked up at him from under the brim of her hat.

“You got one,” he answered. He slid a little white envelope toward her with a card tucked inside.

“Thanks,” she said, and pulled out her wad of money. “How much?”

“Paid for by your boyfriend,” the man answered, and turned to fuss with his reservation cards.

“The big guy?”

“Yes, he paid for you. Said you are his girlfriend and need your own

room to be respectful to your father.” He looked at her as if he didn't believe she could ever be respectful.

“Oh, well, thanks,” she said, and took the card.

Walking back out into the night, Amaliya felt as if maybe her luck was changing. First a good, clean ride into Dallas and now a free hotel room. She had yet to spend any of the money she had brought with her. Heaving her bag onto her back, she trudged up the stairs to the second floor. She started scanning doors for her hotel room number. Her hearing seemed to be keener than before for she could clearly hear what was going on behind each door. When she heard two burly male voices urging each other on for hotter sex followed by a room with a family reading the Bible, she struggled not to burst out laughing.

Finding her room at the far end and tucked a little out of the way, she slipped the card into the slot on the electronic device on the door. The little light turned green and she shoved the door open. She sighed as a room, nearly identical to the one she had left Pete in, swung into view. The door clicked shut behind her. She threw the bag on the first bed, walked over to the second queen size bed, and grabbed the comforter.

Yanking the ugly thing off the bed, Amaliya carried it to the vanity. She frowned at the empty room in the mirror. She easily jumped onto the counter and worked at getting the comforter adjusted over the mirror. It was a little hard since it was bolted to the wall, but she managed to get it tucked around the corners. Jumping back down, she looked at the ugly bedspread covering the mirror with satisfaction. She did not need to deal with staring into an empty mirror tonight.

Kicking off her boots, she sprawled on one of the beds and turned on the TV. Some late night news show was on and to her surprise, her old college was being shown in stock photos. But then again, how

could she be surprised? She knew this was coming. Chewing on her thumbnail, she turned up the sound as video of body bags being carried out of the frat house filled the screen.

“Well, you know, man, they were in a secret room. That's just weird,” a student was saying to a reporter.

“Did you know anyone who was killed?”

“No, no, but that one guy was like the football star. We're gonna lose all the games next season, that's for sure.”

“Did you hear rumors about a cult being on campus?”

“Satanists are everywhere, man. I saw it at my church camp. They had a video,” the guy said confidently.

Amaliya rolled her eyes.

“There is still no official word on the cause of death, but many speculate that this could have been a ritual killing. Whether or not the deceased were willing participants, remains to be determined. Sources close to the investigation say that the room held evidence of-” the female reporter hesitated “evidence of an orgy and drug use. The authorities and school officials ask that students call in to the number on the screen. They are still trying to estimate how many students may still be missing. As stated earlier, there is a report of an unmarked grave being discovered in the forest behind the school. The grave held the body of a young woman that has yet to be identified. Authorities are now searching the woods as a report of yet another grave being discovered has surfaced. This one was supposedly empty.”

“He killed another girl?” Amaliya blinked. “Shit.”

She rolled onto her back and killed the sound. So far she was safe from suspicion. The satanic cult theory would take awhile to disprove and she knew that people would cling to it like crazy. Satanists were

easier to believe in than vampires. Slowly, she worked her socks off her feet using her toes as she lay on the bed staring at the ceiling. She almost felt angry and jealous that the Professor had killed another girl and just not her. She wondered why the other girl hadn't changed like she had.

Probably her bad luck...again.

“Well, fuck it,” she muttered, and slid off the bed. Shoving her jeans down over her hips, she pulled the covers down on the second queen size bed in the room. Dancing her way out of her pant legs, she collapsed on the bed and stared at her toes. Her toe nails were looking wicked sharp, too.

Grabbing her toiletry bag, she headed over to the vanity to brush her teeth and wash her face. Maybe both things were totally unnecessary now, but she felt the need to do something normal. She was leaning over the sink, scrubbing away when she heard the door open behind her. Whirling around, she was startled to see Rob standing in the doorway staring at her with his usual blank look. In utter silence, he shut the door and walked over and sat down on the bed she had turned down. Spitting out the toothpaste and quickly rinsing out her mouth, she tried to process his strange appearance in the room.

“Uh, Rob? What are you doing here?”

Sitting with his hands on his knees, he turned his head and looked at her calmly. “I paid for the room. They gave me a card.”

“Yeah, but why are you here?” She put her hands on her hips and tried not to be intimidated by the fact she was standing in her pink and black bikini underwear and AC/DC tank.

He slowly smiled. “You're a nice girl.”

She snorted slightly, and shook her head. “Okay, maybe, but why the hell are you in my hotel room?”

Shifting his massive weight, he adjusted himself and gave her a surprisingly sly expression. “You know.”

“Aw, fuck,” she said, and threw up her hands. “My luck so freaking sucks.”

“I think you need to get over here and get to sucking,” Rob said with a sure smile.

“Fuck you.”

“Get to it.”

She flipped him off and walked toward him. “Get out. Now!”

“Not until we're done,” he said firmly. His expression was fading from blank to incredibly forceful.

She moved past him, intending to open the door, and usher him out. He snagged her wrist, yanked her off her feet, and onto his lap. He was suddenly all over her, his hands creeping under her shirt and down her panties. He was massive and his girth seemed to consume her smaller frame. She began to panic.

“Just don't fight and it will be okay,” he whispered in her ear and licked it.

Her elbow came up and hit him hard in the sternum as her anger flared. To her surprise, he fell back, stunned and gasping. Realizing she had the upper hand, she leaped to her feet and kicked his huge gut hard.

“Do not fuck with me, asshole.”

To her surprise, he kicked back, hitting her square in the stomach with his big boot, and knocked her back into the TV. If she had been a breathing mortal, she would have had the wind knocked out of her. But she wasn't breathing and she wasn't mortal. As he sat up gasping, he reached for her, and she stood with her feet apart.

“I'm warning you,” she said in a low voice.

“Get on your knees,” he snarled, and unzipped his jeans. His face was flushed and angry.

Scowling, she drew her fist back and punched him square in the jaw. His head rocked back as he let out a startled cry. Reaching down, she grabbed him by his belt buckle, and heaved him off the bed. Despite his massive weight, he came up easily. She whirled him around and reared back her fist. He was choking and foaming at the mouth as he tried to talk. Spitting out a few of his teeth, he reached desperately for her neck. Slamming her fist into his nose, she felt it break, then slide back into his meaty face. He hit the ground with a resounding thunk. Licking the blood off her fingers, she stood over him, her gaze cold and cruel.

“Don't fuck with me,” she repeated.

Reaching down, she heaved the dying man up and bared long, terrible teeth, and drove them into his fatty neck.

Chapter Eight

“Sergio, I'm coming home,” her voice sounded shaky, even to her.

“You okay?” her cousin's rich voice asked, his West Texas accent thick and strong.

“Yeah, I'm just having a rough time right now,” she answered. She tried not to look at the mauled man on the floor of the hotel room.

“Yeah, I saw what went down at your college. Scary shit. Satanists doing stuff like that. Are you okay? Did you know anyone who died?”

Combing her fingers through the edges of her hair, she said, “Yeah, I knew someone.”

“Were they close to you?” Sergio's voice asked.

Tears in her eyes, she looked over at the ravaged body. “Yeah. She was. I'm coming to see Grandmama. The bus leaves Dallas at 9:45. Can you pick me up around 11:30 in Eastland?”

“In the morning?”

“No, at night. I'm still...on my way.”

“Yeah, sure. I could get you then. Grandmama will still be up watching the late night talk shows. You know how she is about them,” he said with a laugh. “But she said she missed you on Easter. More drama, huh?”

“You know how it is with our family.”

“You mean how our Aunt drove to East Texas with her floozy eighteen

year old daughter to help take care of her dying sister and how said floozy cousin then slept with your Dad? The way that is?"

"Yep." She wiped more tears away.

"Gotcha. I can't stand Kelly Ann either and she's family. Don't get me started on Aunt Mae."

Despite herself, Amaliya laughed and held the phone closer. The voice of her cousin made her feel safer somehow. Safe from what though? The bogeyman wasn't outside the door. The monster was in the room and already living inside of her.

"I think she has less teeth now than before."

"Maybe Kelly Ann is punching them out," Sergio suggested. "You know, she's a lot like our dead Uncle."

"Violent and stupid?"

"And ugly."

"True dat," Amaliya agreed.

She looked over at the body. It was amazing how little blood there was, but then again, she had drained him dry. She couldn't stay here any longer though. If Rob's truck stayed idling out in the parking lot, it would get hairy for her real quick. Especially if the sun was out.

"Okay, so I'll get you tomorrow night," Sergio said, realizing the conversation was at an end.

"Thanks again," she whispered.

"Hey, it's what family is for."

"You always were my favorite," she confessed.

"You say that to all the cousins," he teased, then said in a more serious tone, "take care of yourself. Get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

The loud buzzing that followed the click of the phone being set down

made her sigh. She hung up the phone. It was probably stupid to call her cousin, but she had used what little remained of a phone card she had at the bottom of her bag. Hopefully, by the time the police traced it, she would have said goodbye to her grandmother and sworn her cousin to secrecy.

Sliding off the bed, she looked down at Rob's body. The rage she had felt earlier still burned in her. She felt shame that she could kill without remorse.

Rubbing the side of her nose with one finger, she cocked her hip, and stood over Rob, looking down at him with intense hatred. She now fully understood what she was capable doing. Somehow, the slaughter of the people in the fraternity did not seem like her actions. It was as if she was another person doing unspeakable things. Even draining the crazy woman earlier in the night had not made her feel inhuman. In her mind, she had rationalized that she had saved the woman's children from having their crazy mom barge into their home and murder their father.

But this...

She subconsciously licked her teeth.

"I enjoyed this," she said softly.

It shamed her how much she had enjoyed killing Rob, but she could not deny it. The last two nights were a blur of bad luck and terrible actions. This one incident had taught her one thing for certain. She liked what she was now. For the first time in her life she knew exactly what she wanted.

She needed to find another of her kind. Someone to teach her how to control her powers and guide her as to what she should or should not do. Fuck Professor Sumner. She would find her own damn way and show him a thing or two about survival.

Tugging on her black jeans, she formulated a plan in her mind. It would take some time, but she was sure she could find one of her own kind. Hell, she'd go to freaking New Orleans if she had to. Fishing around on the floor, she found her socks and glared at the dead man as she pulled them on.

Maybe she was fucked up, but she had been fucked up ever since she walked in on her Dad doing her slutty cousin. Stomping her feet to get her boots on all the way, she glanced at the covered mirror. Flipping it off she walked over Rob's body and quickly packed up her bag.

Hot anger filled her once more as she thought of Rob grabbing her and trying to rape her. It was far too reminiscent of what had happened between her and Professor Sumner. She would not let herself ever be in that situation again.

Picking up the pack of cigarettes, she pulled one out and tucked it between her lips. She lit it and took a deep drag and savored the moment. After shoving her hat onto her head, she yanked the door open and walked outside. Impulsively, not even sure if it was the smart thing to do, she vaulted over the rail and landed with a thud on the ground below. Nothing hurt, nothing felt sprained, nothing felt wrong.

Looking up she saw the night clerk staring at her through the window in shock. Walking over to the door, she yanked it open. She felt the dark power inside of her swelling up, and she said in a low voice, "Sleep."

Without a word, the clerk fell face first onto the counter, hit it with a resounding smack, then slipped out of sight onto the floor. Sliding over the counter, Amaliya avoided landing on the man and headed for the small office visible beyond a cracked door. As she suspected, a

series of three monitors was set up and an ancient VCR whirred loudly as it taped the scenes. Hitting eject, the tape slid easily into her hand. She would destroy it later, once she was far away from here.

Climbing onto the counter, she sat and pondered her options. She could set Rob on fire and let the whole thing burn, but she had heard children in the other rooms. Her name wasn't recorded here and she could be a million different girls in Texas with her dark hair.

“Eh, fuck it,” she said. She slid off the counter and landed lightly on the floor.

She'd risk it. Besides, how could the cops ever think she could rip a man to bits?

Confident that she was okay, she walked out into the night and the glass door swung back with a soft whisper.

“We may have a serious problem,” Roberto decided as he stood, arms crossed over his chest, watching the large screen TV with great interest.

Cian looked up from where he sat at his glass and chrome desk nearby. His four flatscreen computer monitors were flashing a variety of images and text. His hazel eyes rimmed with dark lashes regarded the other man, then looked toward the TV. “What is it?”

“Cult killing in East Texas,” Roberto answered, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He was on the slim and petite side of the scale in appearance, but had broad shoulders. His dark hair was sleek and swept back from his high brow. His green eyes flicked toward Cian. “It looks highly suspicious.”

“Like something *he* would do?” Cian frowned and stood up sharply.

He was medium height despite his age. He was not exactly sure how old he was, but he was old enough. Clad in jeans and a black t-shirt,

he did not look like the man behind countless successful business and companies sprawled across Texas. He looked like a young man in his late twenties with short, scruffy, brown hair.

“Something he would definitely do,” Roberto answered. “It's mass confusion and people in complete terror of Satanists.”

Bare feet padding across the floor, Cian peered at the TV for a long moment, watching and listening to the repeat of the evening news. His ever faithful human servant, revenant, or whatever the latest tag was from some gawdawful game or book, stood next to him rubbing his chin, and looking deeply thoughtful. Emulating Roberto, Cian crossed his arms and looked equally disturbed.

“It sounds like a fledgling kill,” Roberto decided.

“I agree. He probably turned someone and let them loose.” Cian collapsed into a leather and steel chair and let his legs sprawl out in front of him.

“They are probably already dead by now if they are this insane.”

“Not a clean transformation, I don't think,” Cian answered in his light Irish lilt.

“Should I go and check it out?” Roberto asked.

“No, not if he is still out there. I don't want you risking it,” Cian said firmly. Rubbing his face with his hands, he looked more and more upset. “Dammit. It's been so long since he has been heard of I had hoped that someone had finally found a way to kill the bastard.”

“It's hard to kill someone so old,” Roberto said with a soft sigh and turned down the sound on the TV with the remote.

Cian nodded slowly, and then tilted his head back. The soft lights of his loft apartment in downtown Austin gave off a warm glow and gave a nice sheen to the hardwood floors. He loved his home, but the mere

thought of The Summoner being somewhere in Texas, no matter how big the state was, did not make him feel safe.

“God knows I tried to many times,” he finally said.

“I could go and see if the fledgling is still around and kill it before it causes more harm.”

“Too risky. You know the games he plays. He may be trying to lure me out of my territory. He'd use you as a pawn,” Cian answered.

“There may be more than one. They found one forest grave with an occupant and another that was empty.”

Cian shook his head and swore softly. His Gaelic accent was more pronounced when he was upset. “It sounds like he's either playing another one of his damn games or he is trying to lure me or someone else out. Someone who gives a damn about keeping us hidden behind the veil.”

Roberto sat in the chair across from him and leaned forward.

Steepling his fingers together, he peered over them intently. “If there is a fledgling and it is mad and out there killing-”

“I'm getting married in two months,” Cian said sharply. “I worked hard for this life. You know it. I'm not about to leave my city to go out there and hunt a fledgling down and kill it. Most likely the fledgling will get itself killed by the sun. It may already be dead.”

“What about those?” Roberto waved to the screen as it once more showed the parade of body bags being taken from the fraternity house.

“They won't rise unless blood was exchanged,” Cian assured him.

“But they could also rise as ghouls,” Roberto reminded him. “More dangerous than a fledgling at times.”

“I don't think so. Modern technology seems to have that phenomenon under control. Morgues, autopsies, and embalming. Pleasant ways to

deter the mindless undead.” Cian rubbed his fingers along the curved armrest of his chair. “Can we contact an independent contractor to deal with it?”

Roberto slowly sat back in his chair looking very thoughtful. His green eyes looked toward the Texas Capital building looming out of one of the windows. “Perhaps. I’ll make inquiries. Since the purge of ’78, not many want to deal with you.”

Cian shrugged. “You’ll figure it out.”

“We could call in Summerfield,” Roberto suggested.

“He died of cancer a few months ago, remember? His son is taking over the hunt. I don’t trust the son to keep my deal intact past his father’s death.”

“Have you met him?”

“No, not yet.” Cian shook his head once more with disbelief. “I don’t care for him to know my face. His father swore my file was destroyed and I believe him. It is best to keep quiet especially to keep Samantha safe.” The thought of his mortal fiancée made him sigh deeply. He had to keep her lovely innocence safe. It was tragic enough she was willing to take him on, despite knowing his true nature. But she drew out the good in him and he loved her for it.

“Find a necromancer if you can,” Cian said after a long beat. “The Summoner’s power is all based in death.”

“Agreed.” Roberto rose to his feet, hearing the clear order in his master’s voice.

“And keep an eye on the news statewide. If the fledgling is out there, I want to know where it is.”

Roberto nodded and elegantly walked away.

Cian, meanwhile, sprawled in his chair and let out a long, exaggerated

sigh. “Great, just freaking great.”

Chapter Nine

Amaliya felt relieved when Dallas finally faded away into the horizon. The bus felt warm despite the cold air from the air conditioning vent that brushed over her arm. She sat close to the window watching the terrain slide into the pitch blackness of the night.

Sweeping her hair back with one hand, she looked over at the young man snoring loudly on the seats across from her. There were not that many passengers on their way to Abilene, so the bus was relatively empty. Her feet tucked up on the armrest, she was nestled down in her chair, her back against the window, gazing off over her shoulder at the darkened landscape.

After leaving the motel the night before, she had found her way to another one and settled in for the day. She had picked up a roll of duct tape at a convenience store and used it to tape the curtains shut. Like before, she barricaded the door. She had slept soundly for most of the day.

Only when her dreams turned dark and disturbing had Amaliya forced herself awake. Sliding off the bed, she had curled up in the corner covered with the comforter, terrified of the sunlight pressing under the crack of the door. She had felt vulnerable and lost. She did not feel safe again until the sunlight slowly faded away and night had come.

Sliding her fingers through her hair, Amaliya tried not to think of the

nightmares. They were more memory than nightmare, and she knew it. In the dream, she had been pressed up against the outside wall of the dorm building. The professor savagely bit and pulled at her throat as she struggled. She had fought him valiantly, but he had kept her pinned easily as her blood flowed in a warm gush over her chest. The pain she had endured and her terror still lingered in her consciousness.

Rubbing her eyes, she pressed her lips tightly together. Tonight she felt more...human. Tonight her head felt clearer and she felt more connected to the world around her. Maybe it was being in the bus surrounded by other people trying to get home, but she felt more like herself. And she felt more vulnerable.

The blood lust from the previous night seemed like a dim memory. In fact the whole night seemed like a surreal blur. But it had happened. She remembered every moment with a hazy sort of recollection. And she remembered how much she had enjoyed her last kill of the night. Hell, she remember how much she enjoyed the killings in the dorm back at the college.

I could kill them all, she thought, looking around at the other passengers. If I wanted to, they would die at my hands and not be able to stop me.

Finding no solace in that thought, she looked away from the moonlight-drenched trees to the tips of her scuffed boots. Rubbing the side of her nose, she sighed, then started to fiddle with the stud tucked into her nostril.

Amaliya seriously hated what she had done at the frat house, but she was having trouble feeling guilt. It did bother her that she could be causing the same pain that Professor Sumner had caused her. Yet, she liked the feeling that she could take down someone as huge as Rob

and not feel an ounce of remorse.

“Seriously fucked up,” she muttered.

The newspaper was tucked under her legs. It had nothing about Rob's death, but a lot about the slaughter at the campus out East. The rumors of Satanists were getting even wilder. She noted that Professor Sumner was listed as one of the six missing people. She was also classified as missing. The media had printed her driver's license picture where she was twenty pounds heavier with her natural blond hair. It looked nothing like her. For once her aversion of getting her picture taken seemed to have worked for her.

As far as she could tell, she wasn't being searched for as a living person. They thought she was dead. Even her father had said he felt she was dead and gone. Obviously, he was lying through his teeth. She supposed after she tossed him and her brother around, he had figured out she wasn't alive. The final leap from the house had probably confirmed it.

The newspaper had a description of her open grave and described her dorm room as being riddled with mud and blood. The police finally had come out and said they believed she had been murdered and that her body had been taken with the killers. They couldn't explain her empty grave, but they were convinced the Satanists had carted off her dead body.

What her Grandmama and cousin thought of this, she had no clue. But she had a feeling Sergio was convinced she was running from the Satanists. He had probably reassured her grandmother that she was fine and on her way to see her. Of course, what was really happening was even more absurd. She was a vampire running from her killer and creator.

Closing her eyes, she listened to the symphony of the wind rushing

over the bus, the passengers breathing heavily or snoring as they slept, and the rumble of the bus' engine. In the old days, before she had been killed, she would have been munching on chips and drinking a diet soda. But she hadn't had food in days now and drink had little or no appeal to her. She was starting to miss food. The texture, the taste, the satisfaction from consuming something delicious. But food was too easily supplanted by blood now. It was warm, thick liquid that tasted divine as it filled her and renewed her. The memory of the taste of food was beginning to fade from her. It made her sad.

The sound of the air brakes stirred her from her reverie. She looked up to see the station coming into view as the bus slowed down. With remarkable ease and talent, the bus driver maneuvered the lumbering vehicle up into the station in Eastland. As the lights came on and the brakes whooshed, people stirred awake and began to move.

Amaliya grabbed up her bag and headed down the narrow aisle as fast as she could before she ended up at the end of the line. She easily beat out everyone disembarking. The bus driver sat silently in his chair rubbing his eyes as the passengers departed. She wondered briefly what it felt like to be tired. She didn't feel physically tired anymore.

As she came down the high steps, she caught sight of her very tall cousin. Whereas her mother and Mae had married men of good old German and Polish stock, the third sister, Sergio's mom Susan, had married Ruben Guerra. Sergio was tall, stockily built, with dark skin and curly black hair, but with striking Germanic facial features and green eyes. He stood looking very solemn, with his arms folded over his chest, until he saw her, then he smiled with relief.

Rushing to him, she knew he would sweep her up and hug her. And he did, crushing her tight, and kissing her cheek. She held tight to him for several seconds, then drew back, trying not to cry her blood

tears.

“You okay?” he asked softly, and grabbed up her bag.

“Yeah, I am now.”

“You're dead, you know,” he whispered. He slung his arm over her shoulder and guided her toward his big Ford truck.

“I saw that in the paper,” Amaliya confessed.

“Gawdawful picture of you,” Sergio mused. “Which I guess is a good thing. No one has recognized you?”

She shook her head and was relieved when he unlocked the truck and opened the door. “Does Grandmama know?”

“No, no. I kept her entertained all evening making an enormous feast for us. I even lied and told her Cynthia and the munchkins might join us,” Sergio said, referring to his wife and children. “Anything to keep her away from the TV until the late shows come on.” He slammed the door shut once she was inside, cutting the conversation short. He walked around the truck and climbed in on the other side. Starting it up, he said in a low voice, “What happened?”

Amaliya rubbed her face and shook her head. “I don't want to talk about it. I'll just tell Grandmama that I have to go away for awhile and not go into details.”

“Something really bad happened to you,” Sergio said in a grim voice. He was just a year or two older than her, but his maturity pressed down on her. He had a dad vibe that she didn't know how to take. “I think I deserve to know what.”

Shrugging slightly, she looked out the window, then decided to tell him the abbreviated truth. “I was attacked. And the person who did it buried me in the forest and I got out.”

“Shit,” Sergio exclaimed in shock. “Shit! You were buried alive?”

“I went back to the dorm room, packed and left,” she continued, leaving a whole huge chunk of the truth out. Like the fact that she was really dead.

“Does your Dad know?”

“I went straight to him to ask him for the truck so I could just disappear for awhile. So, yeah, he knows,” she sighed.

“He didn't give you the truck, huh?”

“Nope. Aunt Mae had to get her two cents in.”

Sergio shook his head and turned out onto the highway. “I thought it was bad enough when I heard that Pete Talbert had a heart attack, but this beats all.”

Amaliya quirked an eyebrow. “Pete had a heart attack?”

“Yep. They found him in a hotel room. He was pretty close to death, but he's okay now. At least they think it was a heart attack. Who knows.” Sergio drove with his arm propped up on the edge of the window, his strong fingers gripping the wheel tightly. “They called Felipe to let him know since they were old buddies since we were all kids. I remember how bad a crush Pete had on you. We used to tease him about it all the time whenever we visited ya'll out there.”

Amaliya sighed guiltily. “I didn't know.”

“Enough about Pete. Who the hell attacked you? Did you see them?”

Amaliya thought of the Professor and his charming smile. “Yeah. But I don't want to talk about it.”

“Amal, seriously, you gotta go to the police. I know you're scared and just want to run away, but you gotta-”

“I can't,” she said firmly. “I can't. Okay?”

Sergio shook his head. “You're so damn bullheaded.”

“Yeah, so? It's a family trait.”

With a sharp, nervous laugh, Sergio nodded. “True. True.”

The drive to her grandmother's home was not too long. The old family homestead was nestled close to DeLeon. The house was at least one hundred years old. Grandmama's family had come from a small town on the border and moved North when she was a little girl. Amaliya's grandfather was from Abilene and he had fallen for her grandmother at first sight, or so the story went. Her mother's family had been suspicious of the German immigrant at first, but finally let them marry in what Grandmama called a “big Mexican Catholic wedding.” Together they had Mae, Susan and Marlana, Amaliya's mother. Susan was Sergio's mother and she had died young, too. Only Mae seemed to have their grandmother's longevity built into her DNA.

Sadly, Amaliya wondered how long she would have lived if not for being killed.

The house was immaculate and most of the windows were lit up. The light pouring out of the windows illuminated the well-tended yard full of statues and beautiful flowerbeds. Behind the house was a garden full of vegetables and some fruit trees. Her grandmother's huge statue of the Virgin Mary standing near the fence made Amaliya's eyes burn and she turned away sharply.

Shit!

She had not considered how very Catholic her grandmother was.

“So, we just tell Grandmama that you were upset by what happened at the campus and that you are heading out on the road to recover, right?”

“Yeah. But I'm sure the cops will make it out here eventually or at least call to question her, don't you think?”

“No clue. They haven't talked to me. Evidently, they just talked to your Dad and our cousin-whore.”

“He likes to forget that Mom's side of the family exists, except for Mae and Kelly Ann.”

“That's cause he's an ass.”

Sergio drove the truck up the driveway. He parked it under the carport that had been added to the old house twenty years before. Their grandmother's Lincoln was tucked away in the garage that was built off to the side. She rarely drove it anymore. Their tiny little grandmother could barely see over the steering wheel, let alone maneuver a car as big as a boat. She still kept it gassed up, the registration current, got it inspected yearly, and did all the regular maintenance on it right on time. Which was ironic, considering she never drove it except to back it out of the driveway, then pull right back in. To keep the engine fresh, she said.

A blue light in the front window showed that she was still up and watching her late night shows. Probably with a bowl of popcorn sprinkled with chili with a dash of lime spritzed on top, and an ice tea, decaf of course, at her side on an end table loaded down with photos, mementos and little knickknacks.

Sliding out of the truck, Amaliya looked at Sergio as he got her bag out of the back. She wanted to tell him the whole truth, but even she was having trouble believing it. Ignoring the Virgin statue with all her might, she prepared herself for what lay inside the house.

Sergio unlocked the front door and pushed it open. “Grandmama, Amaliya is here!”

“I can hear you. I'm not deaf,” came her grandmother's accented voice.

Amaliya suddenly wanted to cry.

Stepping onto the front porch, she steeled herself. She moved

forward and found she couldn't enter the house. Startled, she tried to step over the threshold, but could not push her way in. It was as if an invisible wall was in front of her.

“Come on,” Sergio said.

“Come in, come in,” her grandmother said, waving to her from her lounge chair in the living room.

The unseen wall was gone abruptly and Amaliya stepped into the house, feeling a little shaken.

Struggling to get out of her chair, Grandmama slapped away Sergio's attempt to help her up. “Come here and hug me.”

Amaliya deftly avoided the shrine to the Holy Trinity and the Virgin Mary in the front hall and rushed to her grandmother. Her skin was pricking and she felt nauseous for the split second she was within a few feet of the holy relics. Reaching her grandmother, she flung her arms around the tiny little woman with the black hair shot through with silver and the keen hazel eyes.

Squeezing her tight, her grandmother gave her several hard kisses on the cheek, then drew back to look at her.

“You're too thin,” she decided. “And I don't like your hair black. I liked it blond.”

Sergio began to laugh and set the bag down on a chair. “Nice welcome, Grandmama.”

“Shut up, you,” the old woman said with a twinkle in her eye, then drew Amaliya down to kiss her cheek again. “Are you sick? You're very cold.”

“I had food poisoning,” Amaliya lied quickly as she remember what Sergio said about her grandmother preparing food.

“Ugh. It's that horrible fast food.” Grandmama headed toward the

brightly lit kitchen. She was clad in jeans and a t-shirt with the Texas flag on it. "I made good food. Good healthy food."

"Tamales aren't healthy, Grandmama," Sergio corrected her.

"Who told you to lip off," came the sharp reply.

Amaliya and Sergio looked at each other and giggled.

Following the old woman into the very clean and tidy kitchen, Amaliya sighed at the delicious smells in the room.

"I got spicy chicken tacos, pork tamales, the rice is ready and the beans almost are."

Amaliya grinned as she watched her grandmother at the stove, stirring the big pot of beans, and trying to reach to the back to pick up the skillet full of Mexican rice.

"I'll get that," Sergio offered quickly.

"Okay, nieto," she answered, surprising her grandchildren. She usually denied help. She pointed to the counter. "Right there."

Throwing down a pan holder for Sergio to set the hot skillet on, she turned and uncovered a bowl with fresh tortilla dough in it.

"You'll eat this and feel much better," her Grandmama assured her.

Amaliya sighed and wished desperately that she could eat.

With utter sadness shot through with a strange joy, she watched her grandmother's tiny hand roll, pound, and flatten out a fresh tortilla before throwing it onto the griddle to cook.

A weird sort of silence filled the room as Amaliya and Sergio watched the old lady deftly make tortillas. Her wrinkled fingers easily plucked the tortillas up off the griddle and flipped them until they were perfectly done. Soon a whole stack of the fluffy white tortillas was wrapped in a fresh kitchen towel and put on the table.

This was the way it had always been when she visited her

grandmother. She would sit in silence as her grandmother putzed around cooking a feast for her, then as soon as the elder woman sat down, the conversation would start as they ate.

Showing how well trained he was, Sergio pulled out a couple of glass bottles of soda from the refrigerator and popped them open. Her grandmother had a fetish for the Coca Cola from across the border and Sergio or Felipe would bring her milk cartons full of the refillable glass bottles. They also brought other exotic flavors that Amaliya was never particularly fond of.

“They still make it with real sugar. Not corn syrup like here,” Sergio said, handing Amaliya a bottle.

“I didn't know that.” She took a small swig and nodded to him.
“Good.”

A large photo of their German emigree grandfather and his tiny Mexican bride loomed over the table and it made Amaliya feel watched over. She felt relatively safe and comfortable at last except for one thing. It was hard to feel better when her skin was crawling because of the religious artifacts strewn around the house. It made her feel like there were ants under her skin.

Sliding into the chair across from her, Sergio nursed his own soda. Their grandmother finished warming up all the food and began to carry it to the table.

“Okay, now you eat and feel better.”

A huge plate filled with food was set down before Amaliya. The smell was amazing, but she didn't feel hunger. She wasn't even sure if she could eat it. She picked up a fork and poked gingerly at the steaming pile of ranchero beans. Across from her, Sergio ate with relish.

Carefully sitting down, favoring her arthritic hip, her grandmother gave her a thoughtful look.

“Eat.”

Amaliya hesitated and raised the fork, one bean stuck firmly to the tines.

“Grandmama, this is good,” Sergio said, scooping up a bunch of rice and beans and part of a piece of chicken with a bit of tortilla. He shoved the whole thing into his mouth with relish.

Her grandmother's eyes were quite intent as they gazed at her granddaughter. “Amaliya, eat. You look pale and your skin feels cold. You need nourishment.”

Hesitantly, Amaliya pushed the fork into her mouth, and the bean settled onto her tongue. Very slowly, she shifted it between her teeth and chewed.

Her grandmother smiled with satisfaction. “You need to eat.”

Amaliya nodded and swallowed. At least she tried to. The bean refused to go down. The more she tried to swallow, the more she gagged. Finally, she gulped as hard as she could and immediately began to cough. The chewed bean hurtled out of her throat and hit the wall.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

Her grandmother looked at the spot of bean slowly sliding down her clean wall and looked back at Amaliya sadly.

“So you are dead,” she said with strange satisfaction.

“Grandmama,” Sergio said in surprise. “I told you not to watch the news.”

“Oh, like that is going to stop me,” Grandmama responded.

Amaliya was so shocked she couldn't move. She pressed her hand against her throat as she stared aghast at her grandmother.

“On TV they said she was dead. Your Uncle Samuel told me the same

thing last night. And now she sits here, pale as a ghost, not able to eat, and as cold as the grave.”

“If she's dead, you are taking this really well,” Sergio joked, and shoved half a tortilla in his mouth.

“Unfinished business,” his grandmother assured him. “I watch TV. Touched by an Angel, Medium and the Ghost Whisperer. She has unfinished business.”

Slowly, Amaliya put down her fork. Her mind overwhelmed by her grandmother's words, she didn't know what to say.

Sergio rolled his eyes. “C'mon, Grandmama. She's sitting right across from us.”

“Did the bad Satanist kill you?” her grandmother asked in a soft voice. “Do you want us to tell the police who they are so you can go into the light.”

Amaliya opened her mouth to answer, then shut it, still not sure what to say.

“She's not dead,” Sergio said again.

“Yes, she is,” his grandmother answered, and looked very sad. “All my girls die young.”

“Mae is still alive,” Sergio pointed out. “And Kelly Ann.”

“Mae is too mean to die and Kelly Ann is too stupid,” their grandmother decided, and crossed her arms over her ample chest.

“You do realize that is your daughter and granddaughter you're talking about,” Sergio said with a smirk.

“Stop being a smarty,” Grandmama said and smacked his arm. Leaning toward the completely stunned Amaliya, she said once more, “Do you want us to tell the police who killed you?”

“Uh. No.”

Looking disappointed, her grandmother sat back. “Why not?”

“Uh.” Amaliya sat with her mouth hanging open, then shut it firmly. “I am not dead.”

“Exactly. She has a pulse.” Sergio leaned over and gripped Amaliya's wrist firmly. “See, Grandmama, she has a...” He hesitated, then looked at Amaliya with shock. “Where is your pulse?”

Amaliya stood up sharply and put her hands on her hips. She opened her mouth to talk, then closed it again.

“You need to go to the light,” her grandmother finally said.

“I can't,” Amaliya answered automatically.

“You're really dead,” Sergio said softly. “No way. We talked on the phone. I picked you up off the bus.”

“Maybe she thinks she's alive, so she acts alive,” Grandmama considered.

“I'm not....dead. Like that kinda dead.”

“But you're dead?” Sergio finally stopped eating. “No way.”

“Oh, shit, this wasn't the way I planned this to go down.”

“Don't swear,” her grandmother said automatically, pointing an accusing finger at her.

Pacing back and forth in the kitchen, Amaliya ran a hand over her hair. The holy relics were starting to make her want to run away. They weren't right next to her, but she could feel their power pushing on her. “This was supposed to be our tearful and emotional loving farewell.”

“Well, you still need to go to the light,” her grandmother said firmly.

“There is no light!”

Sergio looked terrified. “You mean the Pope was wrong?”

That got him a firm slap on the cheek. “Don't blaspheme.”

“I'm not!”

“Look! There was no light! Professor Sumner killed me and buried me in the forest! I woke up three days later and...and...”

“Your professor killed you?” Sergio looked ready to fall over. “What do you mean he killed you?”

“This is the part where she tells us what happened, then disappears,” their grandmother said confidently.

“He killed me! He....” she made slicing motions across her throat. “-killed me! And buried me! But I woke up in the grave, crawled out and...and...it all went to hell-sorry, Grandmama-it went to hell from there.”

Sergio took a long swig from his coke. “I don't believe it.”

Amaliya hesitated, then darted across the room, and grabbed his coke from his hand before he could set it down. The world had strangely stood still as she had willed herself to move faster than her family could see. By their sudden look of terror, she had moved too fast for them to track. Both Sergio and her grandmother jumped to their feet. Setting down the coke, Amaliya tucked her hair back from her face and looked at them sorrowfully.

They stared at her for a moment, and then they both ran out of the kitchen down the long hall to the living room.

“Oh, crap.”

Amaliya tentatively crept down the hallway to the living room, past photos of her two aunts and her mother as children, of all the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren. As she stepped into the living room, she found her grandmother and cousin standing in the

middle of the room, Sergio clutching an enormous crucifix from off the mantel over the fireplace.

Wincing, as she felt smacked by invisible white fire, she stepped back into the shadows of the hall. Her voice quivered when she said, "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Well, you kinda scared us shitless," Sergio answered, and that was followed by the sound of their grandmother smacking him.

"I was just trying to show you that I'm not what I was," Amaliya snapped. "You think I'm dead. Well, I am. I'm not a ghost. I'm something else and it's not any fun! I hate it!" She burst into tears and her sobs filled the narrow hallway. The pictures of her family, the living and the dead, bore her no comfort. "I hate it! Okay! I hate it! And I...I..."

"Put the cross away," her grandmother's voice said softly. "She's family."

"What if...we can't trust her," Sergio said in a stricken voice from the living room.

"Just put it away," Grandmama repeated. "If she wanted to hurt us, she would have killed you when she had you alone and already offed me when she got here."

Sliding down the wall, Amaliya covered her face with her hands and felt her body quivering. Her heart was sluggish and she would have to leave soon. The great need would come and she would have to feed.

"I don't want to kill anyone! All I wanted to do was say goodbye," she wailed softly. "To say I'm sorry for not being a better granddaughter." Tender, gnarled hands patted her hair gently. "You've been a good girl, Amal. You have. I'm so sorry you are...what you are."

"What is she?" Sergio whispered, and got smacked again.

Amaliya slowly raised her head to look up at them. Her pale face was streaked with blood tears. "I think I'm a vampire."

Sergio and Grandmama both took a step back, gripping each others hands. The fear in their eyes made Amaliya miserable and she sighed.

"I won't hurt you. I promise. I was a little fucked up, sorry, Grandmama, the last two nights, but tonight I'm much better," she said, trying to calm them.

Sergio raised one finger. "Define a little fucked up." He oofed as he got nailed in the stomach with an elbow.

"Remember Pete?"

"Yeah? What about hi-Oh," Sergio said, his eyes widening. He thought this over, then said slowly, "Well, at least you didn't kill him."

Amaliya stood up and wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. "I just wanted to come and tell you that I love you and I don't understand what is going on."

"Professor Sumner made you?" Her grandmother was clutching what looked like a rosary tight to her chest. It made Amaliya's head hurt.

"Yeah. He did. And then he just left. Told me to figure it out. So, I plan to go to Austin and try to find someone like me. And if that doesn't work, New Orleans, and maybe New York. I have to find out how to deal with this. I'm not even sure of what all I can or can't do."

"How are you going to get there?" Sergio asked.

"I guess the bus," Amaliya said, and looked down at her hands stained red from her tears. "I better go. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come here."

"No, no! You should come here!" Her grandmother grabbed her arm tightly and pulled her into the kitchen. "We are your family and we love you even if you are-is Dracula real?"

Amaliya laughed, then shook her head. “I don't know. I don't know anything!” She flung up her hands, then collapsed onto a kitchen chair. “That is the problem! I don't know anything! It's all been by instinct.”

“So, maybe you can get fixed!” Her grandmother rushed over to the kitchen counter and began to fuss with the flour jar. “You can go talk to another vampiro and ask them how to get back to normal.”

“Grandmama, I don't think it's that easy. He killed her! And all those people in the frat house.”

Amaliya looked at her nails and tried not to look guilty.

“Look at her! He did this to her. Killed her and left her for dead. She just happened to come back as a...hey, can I see your teeth?”

“No,” Amaliya said firmly, and shook her head. Sighing, she covered her face with one hand. This was not going the way she expected, but when did things ever go the way she planned? Her luck was notoriously bad. The last few days had proved that over and over again.

Sergio looked a little hurt by her refusal, but, by the way his body was tensed to flee, it was obvious his fear was the overriding emotion.

“Here, take this.” Grandmama thrust a wad of cash into her hands. “It will help you. Buy food--um...what you need. And take this.” She grabbed up a cellphone from the counter and unplugged the charger as well. “You buy minutes to put on it with a card and I don't think the policia can track it.”

Amaliya took the cash and the phone with a stricken look on her face. “Grandmama, I can't.”

“Hey, I gave you that phone,” Sergio protested.

“I never use it,” Grandmama said, dismissing his comment with a

wave of her hand. "Take it, Amal, and call me when you find out something."

"Here, keep the money," Amaliya said. She tried to hand it back to her grandmother, but was quickly rebuffed.

"Look, nieta, I know that something bad happened to you. I am sad that you aren't a ghost, because I think we could have fixed this a lot easier. But you are right. You need to go find answers and get this curse taken off of you so you can be at peace."

"I don't know if it can be fixed," Sergio said softly. "All the movies and the books-"

"I never watched those movies!" Amaliya shook her head with frustration. "I was terrified of vampires growing up, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. I remember that Felipe and I scared the crap out of you by wearing big plastic fangs that one time," Sergio said with a laugh, then saw her expression and stopped. "Sorry."

"So you go to Austin and you find a vampiro. Make them tell you everything, and then fix it. And if that doesn't work, maybe you should go to the Catholic church."

"They might stake her."

"Would that kill me?" Amaliya looked horrified.

"A stake through the heart would kill anyone," Sergio responded.

"No one stakes no one, okay? So you take my car and you go to Austin and you find a vampiro to help you." Grandmama shoved her car keys into Amaliya's hand. "You go find a way to find peace."

"I can't just take your car and your money and go to Austin!"

"Why not?"

“It's not like she did it when she was sixteen,” Sergio muttered under his breath.

“Hey, I wanted to see Ozzy in concert! And I was stupid. And your brother is the one who talked me into it!”

“Look, it doesn't matter. You go and find answers. Then you call me and tell me you are okay.”

Though they looked quite calm, Amaliya could feel the tension in her family members. They were both watching her like a hawk. She didn't blame them, not after the things she had done.

Standing up slowly, she tucked the money into her jeans. Amaliya looked sadly at her tiny grandmother. “I'm sorry I screwed up.”

“He killed you. And made you into a vampiro. You didn't ask for that. And, I have hope for you. You're not killing people left and right and doing bad. You're good in your heart.” Her grandmother made a step toward her, then hesitated. Seeing the hurt expression in Amaliya's eyes, she gave up caution and hugged her granddaughter tightly. “You go now. You go and take care of yourself.”

Amaliya clutched her grandmother to her and relished the soft, warm comforting feel of her little body. Kissing her grandmother's cheek firmly, she let out a soft sob, then drew back.

Sergio hesitated, then flung his arms around her and held her close. “Take care of yourself...and don't bite me.”

Laughing softly, Amaliya kissed his cheek, then drew back. “I love you, you know. Both of you.”

Her grandmother was still holding her rosary tightly and Amaliya realized it was glowing around her fingers. It sobered her considerably to see that. She had never considered the condition of her soul or the hereafter before, but, suddenly, she felt afraid.

“I need my bag,” she said softly.

“I’ll get it,” Sergio said quickly, and rushed down the hall.

“Grandmama,” Amaliya whispered softly. “I am trying very hard not to do anything bad.”

“I know, baby.” Her grandmother was looking down at her rosary.

“You always were a good girl, just lost.”

“I don't know how I always get into trouble,” she confessed.

“You don't think. You just do,” Sergio answered her as he reappeared with her bag.

“Do not.”

“Yeah, you do. You never think anything out. We used to have so much fun just suggesting random stuff just to see you go along with it. Amal, let's go jump off the roof. Amal, let's go grab the mule's tail. Amal, go stick your hand in-”

“Okay, okay,” she said with a pout. “Maybe I'm not too good at the whole plan type thing.”

“Going to Austin is a good plan,” Sergio said. “Just, you know, don't just...”

“Fuck up,” their grandmother said.

They both started and looked at her in shock.

“Well, other people screw up. Amaliya fucks up. I'm sorry, but it's true. She takes after her grandfather. Poor man was a sucker and fell for all the scams in the world. Now, you need to go. You need to get to Austin and find shelter before sunrise.”

Realizing the late hour, Amaliya knew this was true. Sadly, she kissed her grandmother once more on the cheek, then headed for the back door with her bag in her hand.

“Call me.”

“I will. And if the police call-”

“I never saw you,” her grandmother answered sadly.

Sergio walked out after Amaliya. His expression was one of worry and he rubbed his chin as she headed to the garage.

“Amal,” he said softly. He looked back to the window their grandmother was watching them through.

She turned and looked at him, her hand on the latch that would open the doors.

“I don't think this is going to be easy for you. I don't think there is any turning back.”

“I know.” She unlatched the door and swung it open revealing the black Lincoln tucked inside. It was from the 1970's and huge.

“If you...if you...change...anymore than you have now, don't come back here.”

She looked at him, startled.

“I don't want you to hurt anyone I love,” he said softly.

Pressing her lips together tightly, the sting of his words brought instant tears to her eyes. She fought them back knowing she shouldn't lose anymore of her precious blood. The hunger would come that much sooner.

“Okay.”

She opened the second door and walked into the darkness dwelling in the garage. Her vision adapted quickly. She unlocked the driver's door and swung it open. Tossing her bag in, she looked back at her cousin. His expression was agonized and his posture was tense.

“I love my family. I won't do anything to hurt any of you. I'd rather die than do that.”

“I know, Amal. I know. But all the vampires in the stories always end

up...twisted.” He sighed. “I believe in you, but I don't know what might happen to you.”

Nodding, she had to agree. She had no clue what would happen next. Silently, she slid into the car and turned it on. The highly-maintained engine caught immediately and purred loudly. Slamming the door shut, she switched gears and slowly backed out.

Her cousin moved to one side, his expression pained and somber as he watched her. Rolling down the window, she waved to him. He gave her a short wave back.

Driving down the long driveway to the road, Amaliya took one last look at her grandmother's house. Chances were, she would never come back and she knew it. Sighing, she turned the wheel, and the car pulled onto the road.

Tilting his head, The Summoner watched his newest creation speed away in the well-preserved Lincoln. He was impressed so far with her resourcefulness and luck. She hadn't floundered as badly as some of his offspring had. She was a bit messy and definitely working on instinct, but so far she had survived and not been revealed.

Returning his gaze to the house her cousin was disappearing into, he considered entering and destroying her support system. But even from where he stood under the peach tree, he could feel the power of the holy relics within. It repulsed him that he could not destroy the tiny old woman and her lumbering grandson, but even he had limits when it came to faith.

Tucking his hands behind his back, he somberly started off into the darkness.

Chapter Ten

Roberto was deep into his research at Cian's bank of computers, when Samantha appeared next to him, setting down a bag full of groceries on the glass desktop. He quickly minimized the screen. The petite blond was all about saving the environment and carried around the ugliest bags, made from recycled materials, to do her shopping. Setting her hands on her hips, she looked at the computer screen, then back at him as he gazed up at her with a blank expression on his face.

"I'm making you and me dinner," she declared, and eyeballed the tiny button for the minimized window. "Watcha doing?"

"Research for Cian," Roberto answered truthfully, but did not enlarge the window.

Samantha tossed back her shoulder length hair and flopped onto the second computer chair that Cian had bought just for her. She tended to lurk when he was on the computer. Bothered with her hanging over his shoulder, Cian had bought a chair for her to sit in. Samantha reacted like it was a sweet gesture, even if it was born out of annoyance. Cian was on the computer a lot lately. He was taking another online course to get yet another degree. Without a doubt, Roberto's master and Samantha's fiancé was an information whore. Or maybe he was just bored after being a alive for so long. Roberto wasn't sure which.

"You're hiding something," she chided Roberto. "Cian does his own homework."

“Not homework. Business related,” Roberto answered with a charming smile.

“You do remember the part where I am the Executive Vice President of one of his companies, right?”

“Of a company with ten people in it,” was his tart little answer.

“Oh, bosh. Semantics.” She exhaled dramatically, then continued in her Texas twang, “Well, at least the title makes my parents happy.” She leaned toward him, her cute little face looking so innocent and fresh. “Watcha doing?” she asked again.

“I am certainly not telling you,” Roberto said firmly. He was used to this game and growing more immune to her charms. Or lack thereof. He wasn't truly sure which.

“I'm marrying him,” she reminded Roberto, wrinkling her nose.

“I know.”

“And you're his best man friend servant thing. We shouldn't keep secrets from each other,” she declared with a bright smile. Slowly, she reached out for the mouse. As expected, Roberto took hold of her wrist and smiled at her charmingly.

“No?”

“No,” he answered. “Secrets are sometimes necessary.”

“You are so not fun when you keep secrets.”

“I do keep secrets, which is why I have been with him for nearly a hundred years,” Roberto said firmly, and turned off the monitor for good measure. He crossed his arms firmly across his chest and gave her a terse smile.

Looking toward the enclosed sleeping space Cian spent his days in, Samantha sighed. “A hundred years. Do you ever wish he could be

out during the day?”

“Yes,” Roberto answered simply.

“So you wouldn't have to deal with me?”

“Yes.”

“I'm not that bad!” She waved a hand at him and kicked off her shoes.

Roberto tried not to think about the probability that her shoes were from a discount store. Disgusting imitation leather. But Samantha tended to be cheap. She considered Dillards terribly expensive and he suspected most of her work clothes were from Target. He plucked at his Armani trousers, and then settled back in the chair waiting for her to retire to the kitchen.

“You're very much you and that is sufficient,” he finally answered.

With a snort, she grabbed up the bags, and padded barefoot to the state of the art kitchen. “I'm making you some enchiladas with verde sauce.”

“Sounds amazing,” he answered.

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“Me? Sarcastic?” Arching an eyebrow at her, he turned back to the screen.

She was now safely away from him among the teak wood cabinets and stainless steel of the kitchen, so it was time to get back to work. Maximizing the screen, he returned to his conversation with a bounty hunter that specialized in the supernatural. Ignoring Samantha's muttering, he typed in a few short sentences, then watched the scroll.

“You know, we're going to be in each other's lives for a long time. You're going to have to give in to my Texan charm eventually.” She stomped across the loft and into the bathroom on the far side. It was the same old routine. He ignored her, she sulked. They were both

devoted to Cian and both were sure they knew what was good for him. Of course, they did not necessarily think that the other one was good for him.

sleazydino: THERE WAS A MURDER IN DALLAS AT A MOTEL. I'M ALREADY SUSPECTING A FLEDGLING.

The bounty hunter always wrote in caps and Roberto wondered if he understood, that in Internet etiquette, it meant he was shouting. Probably not. Bounty hunters of supernatural creatures were odd humans. They were separated from their own kind and obeyed their own rules.

Roberto rubbed his chin before typing back and waited for an answer.

Sleazydino: THE MASTER OF DALLAS IS WAITING TO HEAR FROM HIS SPIES AT THE CORONER'S OFFICE BEFORE ISSUING A BLOODHUNT. BUT THE SECOND HE DOES, I'M ON IT.

“And it's not like I'm not nice to you,”

Samantha barged back into the room wearing what Roberto regarded as Austin hippy wear. A green, multi-layered skirt hung low on her hips and swung down around her knees. A tank top, adorned with Bob Marley's face, hugged her small breasts, and fell to just above her navel. Her blond hair was twisted up into two little ponytails on either side of her head. He was certain that it was very hard for the little blond firecracker to put on her corporate attire. She could never wait to get it off.

“You're very nice,” he admitted and typed in a few more sentences, then waited.

Sleazydino: I'LL CONTACT CIAN IF I HAVE TO PASS INTO HIS TERRITORY. AS FOR THE OTHER ONE, NO ONE WILL GO NEAR HIM. THERE IS NO WAY ANYONE WOULD RISK

THAT HIT.

Frowning slightly, Roberto began to type, then saw Samantha on her tip toes peering down over the screen. He minimized the window and looked up at her. “Yes?”

“Do you have an online girlfriend?” She raised her eyebrows.

“No.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Would that make you happy?”

She rolled her eyes and stomped off again.

Roberto opened the window and finished typing.

Sleazydino: I LOVE THE CHALLENGE BUT NO ONE EVER COMES BACK FROM HUNTING HIM. I HAVE A WIFE AND KID NOW. IF YOU NEED THAT TAKEN CARE OF, YOU'LL NEED TO GO TO SOMEONE ELSE.

With a sigh, Roberto typed in a few terse comments, then logged off. The Summoner's power was well known in the underworld. The damn creature walked through other's territories with ease and without fear of reprisals. And if he was once more in the States and in Texas, that mean Cian could possibly be in danger.

Samantha banged around in the kitchen, mumbling to herself as she waited for the slowly sinking sun to make its final exist for the evening. Outside the massive windows of the loft, the sky was a glorious mix of gold, purple and pink.

“Do you think you'll ever like me?” Samantha asked loudly.

“No,” Roberto answered truthfully. “But Cian loves you so that is enough for me.” That was a lie.

Frowning, she waved a knife covered in bits of onion at him. “I'm good for him. I make him feel human.”

“But he's not human,” Roberto answered, and fixed his cuffs. It was an old argument.

“But he was human. It's at his core.” She gave him a fierce look and turned on the radio.

With a weary sigh, Roberto stood and moved to the far end of the apartment. Cian kept an extensive library of books and Roberto looked over them thoughtfully. How could Cian, a man of such great wealth and intelligence, love such a simple, country bumpkin? She was hopelessly lower middle class and annoying.

He caught sight of what he was looking for and pulled an old journal from the top shelf. It was Cian's own recollection of The Summoner. It was time to reacquaint himself with the creature they had not encountered in nearly forty years.

Outside the tall windows, the sun slipped behind the wooded hills and the last vestiges of the purple and pink sunset lingered on the horizon.

There was a loud metallic sound, then the steady hum of a motor as the thick walls around Cian's sleeping chamber rose into the ceiling above. Roberto didn't even look up as he heard the quick, steady footfalls of Samantha running across the long loft to throw herself into Cian's arms. Her laughter and their soft voices made him scowl even more. Snapping the book shut, he calmly ascended the spiral staircase to the floor above, grateful that Cian had two of the lofts remodeled as one.

It gave him a safe place away from the annoying lovers.

Reaching Austin had been a huge relief. Amaliya had made it just an hour before sunrise. Seeing the familiar landmarks of the city had made her feel more hopeful than she had in a long while.

Austin was still suffering growing pains as it evolved from a college town to a full blown city. The capital city of Texas was finally stepping fully into its role. The downtown was growing rapidly with new high rises being built and the suburbs and surrounding towns were expanding rapidly. Its high tech industries were still a huge draw to countless people looking not only for a good place to live, but a high paying job. And yet, it was still a music capital, college town, and magnet for the artistic and wild at heart.

As she had driven past the University of Texas, she had felt a pang of remorse as she remembered her short time there as a student. If any time in her life had actually seemed good, it was the year she had spent in Austin attending the university.

She loved Austin and the old landmarks welcomed her. The UT Tower was illuminated orange and the dome of the Capitol Building glowed white in the darkness.

Just as early morning traffic had started up, she had found a hotel near downtown and paid for three nights in advance. As she had before, she duct taped the curtains to the wall, then hung up another blanket over it. This time she remembered the sunlight creeping in under the door and laid a rolled up towel up against the bottom of it. She had slept soundly and without interruption.

Tonight, when she had woken up, she had known she needed to feed soon. Her heart was sluggishly beating and she felt the growing need in the core of her. Rolling out of bed, she had wandered past the covered mirror into the bathroom for a shower. Staring at the toilet,

she realized she hadn't used one in days and it appeared she never would. With a shrug, she closed it and sat down on the cold lid. She contemplated her plans for the night.

Get something...err...someone to eat.

Go to the Goth club.

Find a vampire.

See, Sergio, she thought. I can make a plan.

After a quick shower, she found a black skirt with a skeleton dancing down the side of it buried at the bottom of her bag. It had a cool look: as if it strips of cloth had been sewn together just randomly. The skeleton glittered on it with a big grin and she loved it. A black lace tank top, black bra, and her high-heeled Mary Janes seemed like a good combo for a goth club. People mistook her for goth anyway with her black hair and fetish for black. Normal people never knew the difference between all the subcultures anyway.

Dressing quickly, she decided to try to put on makeup. She immediately realized it would not be an easy task. The mascara was relatively easy, but the eyeliner was a total bitch. She hoped it looked okay, because it felt wrong. Trying to figure out how much of her rose blush was too much was another challenge. Staring into the empty compacts was very disconcerting and she finally tossed the makeup back into her bag and tucked her money into her bra.

After pulling the furniture away from the door, she let herself out of the hotel room and headed to her car. There was actually quite a lot of people in the parking lot. A lot of them were young people that were probably in town for a concert or just to party. Walking to the Lincoln, she pulled out her lipstick from between her breasts and soon her lips were bright red. Tucking the tube back in her bra, she unlocked her car and got in.

Traffic to downtown Austin was picking up as people headed out to Austin's famous 6th Street to party away Hump Day. She knew from the past that the clubs had all sorts of specials throughout the week to keep people coming out even if they did have work in the morning. It would not be as crazy as it was Friday and Saturday night when the clubs and bars on both 6th Street and Warehouse District were overwhelmed by throngs of people heading out for fun.

She also knew from experience exactly where the Goth club, Elysium, was. She had hung out there a few times, when she was in college, with a few friends that skirted between all the alternative scenes.

Pulling into a parking lot a block from the club, she waited for a guy in the wheelchair to come over. Once she paid, he would hand her the slip of paper to put on her dashboard that would keep her car from being towed. He had a fistful of money and handed her the pink slip with a smile. Smiling back, she tucked it into a visible place on the dashboard, and then slid out of the car.

“Busy tonight?”

“Not like Saturday. That's five dollars,” he answered.

She fished a twenty out of her bra and handed it to him. Nonplussed by this, he counted out her change, and handed it to her. “Be careful.”

“Will do,” she assured him, and walked up the cracked sidewalk toward the club. Elysium sat on the corner a block from 6th Street and was painted entirely black. Ignoring the comments from the guys lurking outside the Salvation Army homeless shelter, she straightened her shoulders and prepared herself.

Maybe it was a cliché, but the only place she could think of to find a vampire was the Goth club. It just seemed like a place an undead fucker would hang out. Of course, she could be horribly wrong and he could be up at the cowboy club on Burnet street, but Elysium seemed

like a good place to start.

When she reached the large imposing bouncer sitting on his stool outside the club, she gave him a fierce look, and said, "I'm over twenty-one."

"Let me see your license," he answered.

Shit.

Her powers weren't working. And she was getting hungrier.

Sighing, she fished it out of her bra and handed it to him. She was terrified he would recognize her as the girl who was missing from the supposed Satanic massacre. He glanced at it and handed it back to her with a bored look on his face. She scurried inside as soon as he tagged her with a wrist band of orange florescent yuckiness and paid a pretty girl behind the counter to enter the club.

It seemed to be a slow night with only a few people out. Glancing to her left, as she walked toward the bar, she saw a few people dancing very slowly to Siouxsie and the Banshees. One tiny black girl with black braids seemed especially captivated by the music and it made Amaliya feel a pang of jealousy. She wished she could just dance the night away and not give a damn about what was going on in her life. But she had other things to do. She had to find out what was going on with her one way or the other.

Then she saw him. A man with long flowing red-blond hair and a reddish goatee leaning against the bar. He was wearing a red frock coat and black leather pants tucked into boots with pointy toes. His black poet shirt was dripping with lace and he even wore a jaunty hat that looked like something the Three Musketeers would have worn. His long nails were painted black and he had red tinted glasses on. Walking up to the bar, she took the stool next to him and sat waiting for him to talk to her. She was not the prettiest girl in the world, but

she could get attention when she wanted it.

Crossing her legs, she flashed a length of muscled leg and her tattoo of hearts and roses wrapped around her ankle. The man in the old-fashioned garb was deep in conversation with a guy with a simply stunning blue mohawk. Pouting slightly, she reached for the guy's pack of cigarettes and lighter.

“May I?”

He became aware of her and swung around. “Oh, my lady, of course. Allow me.” He quickly handed her a black clove cigarette and lit it with flourish. “I did not mean to be so rude.”

She smiled at him coyly and took a deep drag on the cigarette. It tasted better than she expected. “Thank you.”

The bartender appeared. “So, what will you have?”

“A glass of red wine and whatever the lady wants,” the man answered. Amaliya now realized he was younger than she originally thought. Maybe mid-twenties. He was dripping in jewelry, including what looked like a garnet encrusted ank.

“I’ll have a shot of vodka,” she answered.

The bartender nodded and spun away to quickly get their drinks.

“I’m Lord Carfax, my dear lady,” he said with great flourish, and swept his hat off his head to bow to her.

“I’m Liya,” she answered him, and wondered what his real name was.

“Charmed to meet you.” He took her hand and kissed it.

Amused, Amaliya tried to figure out if his hand was cool because he was nervous or if he was a vampire.

“Nice to meet you Carfax,” she answered with a sly smile.

Behind her more people came in and the music switched to Sisters of Mercy.

“It must be an oldies night, huh? Eighties or something?”

“Oh, it is the retro-goth night.” Lord Carfax quickly paid for their drinks as they arrived.

“Ah, I don't know much about Goth. Sorry.”

“You're not Goth?” Lord Carfax looked a little shocked. “But your clothes! Your hair!”

“I'm pretty much a rocker chick. I usually hang with the metalheads,” she confided.

“I see.” He looked a little disappointed, but tapped the edge of his wine glass against her shot glass anyway. “Well, at least you came here and I was able to meet you and enjoy your beauty.”

Giving him a bemused look, she downed her vodka and enjoyed the burn all the way down.

“Thanks. I just felt like getting out and meeting people,” she said to him after a beat.

“Oh, I am so glad you did. You are by far the most lovely woman in the club. Delectable.” He grinned and licked a fang.

She blinked slowly. She wasn't sure if they were real or not. If they were fake, they were a masterpiece of craftsmanship. “Nice teeth.”

“The better to bite you.” Lord Carfax chuckled and sipped more of his wine.

“So you fancy yourself a vampire?”

“My lady, I am a vampire,” he responded and pretended to take a little bite out of her neck.

She could hear his teeth chink together, then he drew away smiling.

“Ah, I see.”

“I do enjoy an occasional bite,” he confided. “And you do look tasty.”

Arching an eyebrow, she looked at his clothing, then back into his face. She could see now that he was wearing base and a bit of powder. “So...if you're a vampire, why are you dressed like you are? Wouldn't you want to blend in so you could get your prey?”

“Oh, no, dear lady, I want to embrace the time period from which I came. And by coming to this club, I can. Besides, I am a seducer, not a monster. I am a hunter of lovely throats and delicate limbs.”

She lifted her other eyebrow and motioned for another shot. “I see. So, vampires like to hang out in old fashioned clothes in Goth bars and pick up women for blood?”

“I'm sure your blood must be the most divine elixir,” Lord Carfax purred leaning toward her.

A short laugh next to her drew Amaliya's gaze to a man next to her. He wasn't any taller than her, five foot seven possibly, and he had short brownish hair that was a little on the messy side. Dressed in black jeans and a dress shirt that wasn't tucked in, he looked obscenely normal compared to Lord Carfax. He was drinking what smelled like Jack Daniels and his keen hazel eyes regarded her with bemusement.

“Hey, he thinks my blood should taste good,” she said, and re-crossed her legs.

“I just don't think a real vampire would be dressed like that and hitting on you, that's all,” the man answered her, and sipped more of his drink.

“So what would a real vampire be doing?” she asked him. She leaned her elbows on the bar and gaze at him curiously.

Lord Carfax skirted around her, realizing he had lost her attention. “Telling you of your great beauty and desiring to see you under the stars.”

“That’s a good one,” the other man said. He paid for Amaliya’s new shot of vodka.

Giving him a silent salute, Amaliya downed it, and smiled. “He speaks pretty.”

“He speaks rubbish,” the newcomer said, and winked. He really didn’t look like the sort that would hang out in a Goth club, but then again, she wasn’t really sure what Goth was anyway.

“Look here,” Lord Carfax said in a voice that didn’t sound so European and cultured now. “I am having a conversation with her and you need to fuck off.”

“Why don’t you take your fake fangs and bugger off?” The man had a light Irish inflection to his voice.

Amaliya arched both eyebrows. She signaled for another drink. She turned around on her stool so she could lean back against the bar, her elbows propped up on it. It made her cleavage and legs look outstanding.

Lord Carfax frowned deeply and appealed to Amaliya with his eyes. “Please, my lady, let us retire to a table where we can be free of this insolent peasant.”

A light touch on her arm drew her attention to the newcomer with the pretty hazel eyes. He lightly drew his finger across her skin and gave her the most alluring look. Her skin tingled where he had touched her and she smiled as she made up her mind.

“Um, I’d rather stay with the peasant,” Amaliya answered and swung around to put her back to the vampire wannabe. The fangs were fake, as was the accent, and she felt bitterly disappointed. At least she could spend a few minutes flirting with the new guy. He might be good to eat. She was getting hungrier.

An angry snort was followed by a tirade of swear words, and then the

frock coated man stomped off.

“He was amusing.” Amaliya said, and downed her new shot.

Again, the drink was paid for by the young man sitting next to her. He tucked his money clip away in his jeans and picked up his new drink. “He's a real bloodletter. He hurt a girl pretty bad a few months ago, but she didn't press charges.”

“Seriously?” She looked over at Carfax. “Takes the vampire stuff too seriously, huh?”

“Not all vampire officianos are bloodletters, but he is.” The man shrugged. “We don't care much for each other.”

“Well, he does try awfully hard,” Amaliya decided. “I bet some girls fall for it.”

“That's why he doesn't like me. I've stopped him on more than one occasion.”

“He's what gives Goths a bad name.”

“I don't care much for stereotypes anyway.” He graced her with a slight smile.

“Thanks for rescuing me. I'm Liya, by the way.” She extended her hand to him and was glad she had painted her nails.

He took it briefly and his skin was slightly cool to her touch. “Cian.”

“Huh? Key Inn? What?”

“Cian. It's Irish.”

“Oh,” she blushed slightly. “Nice name.”

“What are you doing in Austin?” he asked softly.

“I'm visiting. Having fun. Wait. How did you know-”

“I haven't seen you here before.” His gaze was steady as he took in her features and seemed to be reading her very thoughts. “I figured

you just moved here or are passing through. Which is it?"

"I don't know yet," she said vaguely. She began to feel uneasy. Great. She probably got rid of wanna be vampire boy just to deal with serial killer man. "I'm figuring it out as I go along."

"Really?"

He was definitely giving her the chills now. She nodded. "Yes, I am. Anyway, nice meeting you, Cian. Maybe I'll see you around."

Sliding off her chair, she headed across the club as quick as she could without giving herself away as a vampire. She was almost to the door when it dawned on her that she had nothing to fear. She could drain Cian dry and he couldn't stop her. Maybe it was good if he did follow her. She was getting a lot hungrier.

Stepping outside, she was hit by a blast of balmy air. She walked casually down the street hoping Cian would follow. If she remembered correctly, there was an alley nearby. She could duck down there and lure him after her if he was really going to give pursuit. Of course, the homeless would probably be tucked into the back doorways of the clubs. Maybe she could snag one of them if he didn't follow. She was getting hungry enough not to care if the person was dirty or smelly.

Turning the corner, she strolled toward I-35. Sensing she was being followed, she turned to see Cian on the sidewalk about ten feet behind her. Fighting down her unreasonable fear, she cut across the street and moved toward a more shadowed area. She could overtake him in the darkness, feed, and be done with this terrible need. Despite all the noise from the surrounding clubs and the nearby interstate, she could hear his footsteps behind her.

She was behind a small parking lot near a gas station when he caught

up to her and grabbed her arm. Startled at his strength, she cried out as he pulled her close.

“You're in my territory,” he hissed at her.

“Fuck off!” she snapped and tried to break away. To her surprise she could not. His hold on her was firm.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

Slowly, she began to understand what was really going on. As her long black hair rippled across her features, she truly looked at him. He was handsome in a very Celtic sort of way, but there was something subtly inhuman about him. His eyes flashed red as she stared into them.

“Fuck,” she whispered.

“Who are you?”

“Amaliya Vezorak,” she responded in a trembling voice. He was what she was. She had found one of her own kind and now she was terrified.

His eyebrows rose slowly. “One of the missing girls from the college campus,” he said softly, more to himself than to her.

“More like running away and hiding girl from the college campus.”

Cian studied her for a long moment, then nodded. “I understand.”

Then he hit her so hard, her head snapped back, and her body went limp.

Chapter Eleven

Cian carried Amaliya into the loft and set her against the wall. Holding her steady with one hand, he shut the door and entered the security code. He had pretended she was drunk all the way back to his place and no one had even taken notice of them. It wasn't an unusual thing to see some poor boyfriend carrying his drunk date back to his car.

The girl was still out cold, which didn't surprise him. She was very young and had not fed yet. Her powers were dim and her responses slow. As he lifted her up into his arms, he noted that she had an assortment of items tucked between the swell of her breasts. He found this particularly amusing.

Roberto was playing a CD of classical guitar music in Cian's absence and was tucked away in the library reading a book.

"We have company," Cian called out to his servant.

He carried Amaliya into the living room area. He laid her out on his leather and chrome sofa and stared down at her face. She was young, probably early twenties or so with fine Eastern-European features with a splash of something else exotic. Her skin was very pale, a sign of her not feeding, and her makeup was not the best job in the world. As a newbie vampire it must have been very hard for her to get it on right. She would learn after time.

Well, if she lived that long.

Roberto emerged from the stacks tucked into the corner of the loft and regarded the girl with some interest. "The fledgling?"

"I believe so. Amaliya Vezorak."

"One of the missing."

"I bet its her empty grave they found," Cian said, and sat across from

the girl on a chair.

“What are you going to do with her? Kill her?” Roberto sat down in the chair opposite of him and regarded the girl curiously.

“I don't know yet.”

“The Master of Dallas has issued a blood hunt on the fledgling killer,” Roberto reminded him.

“I rule Austin. It's my territory. I decide what happens here.” Cian sat back and ran a hand over his hair. “She was talking to Carfax. I think she may have thought he was really a vampire.”

“She's an idiot then,” Roberto decided coolly.

“She's newly transformed. Confused, still evolving. But the fact she was looking for another vampire speaks volumes about her. She's trying to adapt and not just panicking.”

“She's the Summoner's child. You know that nothing is uncomplicated with her,” Roberto reminded him.

Cian nodded mutely.

“You keep her alive and in your city it will only make things difficult. And you are getting married, remember?”

“You don't even like Samantha.”

“But you do.” Roberto sighed. “Keep her alive and you are risking yourself.”

“I was once as she is. Newly transformed, abandoned, afraid.”

Roberto slowly rose to his feet. “Yes, but you were wise enough to survive on your own. She has raised quite a ruckus.”

“It's a new age. Technology spreads word much quicker now.”

“You will do as you please despite my warnings.” Roberto sighed.

“Yes, I will. But I do value your thoughts.”

“What are you going to do?”

Cian shrugged slightly as he rubbed his hands together. “I don't know. I'll figure it out when she wakes up.”

“This,” Roberto said, looking at the girl's tattoos and dyed black hair “should be interesting.”

Amaliya slowly awakened from dreams drenched with blood. Surreal and brimming with insanity, she was glad to escape them.

The dull ache in her teeth let her know her fangs had descended from their hiding place. She opened her eyes and pushed her hair back from her face. The high ceiling, with its crisscrossing metal beams, made no sense to her muddled mind. Where the hell was she? She pulled herself upright. Staring through the dark hair falling over her face, she recognized the man seated across from her.

It was Cian, from the nightclub.

Sweeping her hair back from her face, she openly looked around. She was in an enormous loft apartment with amazing views of Austin. They were fairly high up and she could see down onto the tops of some of the other buildings clustered in the downtown area. There were several doors leading to other rooms and she could not be sure of where the front door was exactly.

“You kidnapped me,” she said finally.

“Yes,” he answered in a calm voice. He was sprawled in his chair, long lean legs askew, still clad in jeans, but he was now wearing a snug T-shirt that had Homer Simpson on it. Not exactly what she expected from a vampire, though the apartment seemed kind of close somehow.

“Why?”

“You're in my territory. I am the Master of Austin.”

She raised both her eyebrows. “What does that mean?”

“It means I am the oldest and most powerful vampire in Austin, and if any of my kind start to draw the attention of the mortals to our community, I deal with it.” He continued to stare at her with his mesmerizing hazel eyes.

“So, how big is our community?” She rubbed the side of her head. It still hurt where he had hit her.

“Including us?”

“Yeah.”

“Two.”

She laughed at that. “What?”

“Two vampires. You and me.” He shrugged. “I’ve been the only vampire in the city since the late Seventies.”

“Why?”

“The vampire hunters destroyed the cabal.”

“Cabal?”

“One of the terms used to describe a group of vampires living together.”

“So, the Van Helsing’s killed everyone, but you?” She arched both her eyebrows higher. “So we’re the only two vampires in Austin?”

Cian nodded. “Exactly.”

“And you didn’t make anymore vampires?”

He nodded again.

“And no other vampires even tried to move in?”

“Oh, no. A few did.”

“And what? They didn’t like you or something?” She pulled her skirt down over her thighs and looked around the room again. She noted

the paintings and old movie posters with some interest.

“No. I killed them.”

She jerked her chin toward him as her eyes widened. In an instant, she was on her feet and running for the nearest door. To her dismay, he grabbed her arm and whirled her around.

“Don't be foolish,” he snarled at her.

“I've already been killed once,” she cried out and slugged him.

He let her go and she backed away from him.

“I don't want to go through it again!”

Running down a long hallway, she saw a heavy metal door at the end. This seemed a likely exit and she pushed her body as hard as she could to make it to the door. She ran smack into Cian as he materialized in front of her.

“Shit,” she gasped.

He grabbed her upper arm firmly and hauled her back down the hall. It was obvious he was stronger and faster than she was. Going limp, she let him guide her, but knew she would bolt the second she got a chance. They were almost the same height, but he seemed to tower over her as he manhandled her back into the living room. He flung her back onto the sofa and pointed a stern finger in her face.

“Do not do that again,” he ordered. “I'm older and more powerful than you. Remember that.”

Impulsively, she kicked his ass as he turned to return to his chair and he whirled about to give her a piercing, red-flamed glare.

“Whoa,” she whispered. “Do my eyes do that?”

“Yes.”

“That explains a lot,” she muttered, remembering Mae, Damon and Kelly Ann's looks of horror.

He sat back down, crossed his legs at his ankles and folded his hands over his stomach. "Let's talk."

Rubbing her head again, she sunk back on the sofa and curled her legs up on the seat. "Why? So you can know who I am before you kill me?"

"I didn't say I was going to kill you. I said I had killed others. You didn't wait to hear why I killed them, did you?" His Irish brogue was coming out more. It had just been a hint earlier.

"So why did you kill them?"

"They were sloppy. They killed and left far too much evidence of what they were. They risked exposing all of our kind, so I killed them, which is my duty as the oldest in the city."

She licked her lips as she considered her own actions the last few nights.

Crap. I'm fucked, she thought dismally.

Cian studied her expression and sighed a little. "I know about what you did at the campus. The Satanic killings were actually you. As was the truck driver killed in Dallas." He lifted a couple of newspaper clippings off the table next to him. "And I have a feeling this woman who died in East Texas of mysterious causes was you."

"She was on her way to kill her ex-husband and kidnap her kids," Amaliya said defensively.

Cian smiled at this. "So it was you."

"Look, no one told me how to do this! I've been trying to figure it out for the last few days. I even burned my fingers trying to see if sunlight affects me! I didn't get a manual when this happened. I didn't get any sort of orientation or a workshop. I woke up buried alive! Okay? Alive in a stupid grave in the stupid forest! I was out of my freaking mind. I don't even know how I found that secret orgy and...and..." She licked her lips, remembering her first bite, the way the blood had filled her.

Unknown to her, her eyes flamed red at the memory. She limply sank back in her chair. “I didn't mean to kill all those people.”

Cian was stoic as he listened to her. “I know.”

“I just did what...what...”

“Felt natural.”

“Yeah.”

“I did the same thing. Half a plantation of slaves and their masters. I couldn't stop killing. I only stopped when the priest arrived and drove me back into the night.” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and rubbed his hands together. “I do understand.”

Blood tears started creeping down her face. “I don't feel bad though. But I should, right? I mean, I know what I did was wrong, but there is a part of me that is fine with it. What I did.”

“You were surviving. The first hunt is the most important. If you don't drink enough blood, you can go permanently mad.” His gaze leveled with hers and he seemed slightly less terrifying. “It is hard. The first nights. My hunger remained unquenched for four nights. By then I had most of Barbados hunting me. Since you killed at the college, how many times have you fed?”

Amaliya rubbed her brow and sighed. “Well, this guy named Pete. I didn't kill him though. He's a friend from my childhood. My cousin told me he's in the hospital.”

“Your cousin? You've had contact with your family?” Cian looked shocked.

“Yeah. I saw my grandma and my cousin last night. I saw my Dad and stepmom the night before along with my crazy Aunt Mae and my asshole brother, Damon.”

Cian looked completely startled by this. “And you didn't kill them?”

“Hell no! Well, I was tempted with my stupid Aunt, but no.”

“So you haven't been as famished as you were the first night?”

Shaking her head, Amaliya fiddled with her nose piercing again. “No. I did get really weak and hungry after I burned my fingers and healed them. That is why I bit Pete.”

“You woke up during the day?”

“Yeah. So?”

Cian's eyes narrowed. “That is rare. We usually cannot rise during the day at all. Only when we feel threatened and often we're not completely conscious.”

“Well, I woke up that second day. I was scared of the sunlight.”

“I see. And when did you feed again?”

“Um, that night.”

“The second night after you woke up?”

“Yeah. I drained that crazy ass woman who wanted to kill her ex and take the kids. And I felt okay for the rest of the night. I hitched a ride to Dallas with that guy Rob.” Her face clouded at the memory.

“Everything was fine until he got into my hotel room and started trying to...” She swept her hair back from her face. Her gaze grew distant as she remembered the horrible feel of his hands on her. “So I beat the shit out of him. And drank his blood. Then...” She looked at her longer nails. She had already chipped the polish on them. “I kinda tore him up. I was pissed.”

Cian blinked slowly, then said, “Okay.”

“Look, I didn't know these rules you're talking about, okay! He put his hand down into my panties and was trying to make me suck him off! There was no way I was doing that! And he had no trouble hitting me or kicking me!” The thought of the short-lived battle made her skin flush and her eyes began to glow again. “He had it coming to

him.”

“I agree,” Cian answered calmly.

“Oh,” Amaliya felt her defensiveness fade away slowly. “Oh. Well, yeah; he did.”

“And last night. Where did you feed?”

Fiddling with her skull ring this time, she answered softly, “I didn't. I went home and saw my Grandmama and my cousin Sergio. That's where I got the Lincoln to come here.”

“And they didn't freak out because you're supposed to be dead?” Cian's voice was sounding dangerous again.

“They think I'm on the run from the Satanists. That I escaped.” Somehow she knew that he could not know that her cousin and grandmother knew exactly what she was. It was dangerous for her and for them.

Cian rubbed his chin, then nodded. “That makes sense. Did they ask you why you hadn't gone to the police?”

“Yeah, but I told them I couldn't. I think...” she hesitated. “I told them cops were in the cult.”

“That was smart of you,” Cian said with a bemused smile.

“Hey, I'm not always stupid. Just sometimes.” And she thought bitterly of Professor Sumner's offer for coffee. Why on earth would a man like him be interested in a tattooed girl who was into metalheads?

“So you have not fed since the trucker?”

She shook her head, then rubbed her stomach. “I am getting hungry though. I should go, right?”

“No,” he answered coolly. “You shouldn't.”

Looking down at her hands, she felt tears swell up. She hadn't cried

this much in years and it was pissing her off to no end. “Look, I know I fucked up, but I didn't mean to. Please, don't kill me. I want to learn how to be...this.” She waved her hand distractedly at her tears and her mouth. Her fangs were still pressing down. She could feel them with her tongue now. She was growing hungrier.

“I'm not going to kill you.” He rubbed one hand over his short hair, mussing it up. It only seemed spikier and sexier. “Who made you Amaliya?”

She let out a slow, wavering sigh. “His name is Professor Sumner. He was supposed to be this bigwig psychologist from England. It was a big deal that he was teaching a psychology class and I signed up for it immediately. He was so smart and so sexy and I had the stupidest, biggest crush on him. Then one night he asked me out for coffee and I went with him.” Tears seeped down her face and dangled on her chin. “He killed me.” She wiped at her face with her fingers, smearing it with her bloody tears.

“And woke up buried in the forest?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see him at all? Did he speak to you?”

Blushing a little, she nodded. “He came to the room where the orgy was and I had already started to...eat. He blocked the door and wouldn't let anyone out as I killed them. Then he...” She rolled her eyes up toward the ceiling. “He took blood from me again. When I woke up he was talking to me. Telling me that I was now a vampire and he was anxious to see if I would survive or something like that. He wouldn't be helping me, but watching me from a distance. He did give me his coat to cover up, though. But he said that was all the help he would give me.” She slowly dropped her gaze back to Cian. “I think I feel him sometimes. And I get afraid.”

Cian pressed his lips together, then slowly lowered his head, rubbing the top of it again. "I see."

"I don't know the rules. I don't know what I can or can't do. I don't even know what my powers are! You gotta understand that!"

"I do. I do." Cian stood up and walked to a nearby window to stare out at the city. "We have the same creator. He said nearly those exact same words to me."

"So you know who the asshole is?"

"Yes, I do. Or at least the legend about him," Cian answered somberly.

Amaliya stood up and walked over to him. "You have to tell me. You can't leave me in the dark. He's stalking my ass."

Cian looked at her then sighed. "You're right. I will tell you..."

Cian stared into the blue-gray eyes of the young vampire and felt a pang of sorrow for her. She was terribly innocent despite her sultry, bad girl look. The fact that she had survived thus far was truly amazing. He was shocked that she wasn't still mad with the hunger, but actually quite lucid. She also seemed to have a good sense of self. Despite himself, he was kind of liking her.

"Well?" She crossed her arms. "Tell me."

"Very well. His real name is unknown, but he is called The Summoner. Legend says he is very ancient. A Chaldean necromancer of Sumeria. The story I was told was that he could manipulate the dead and have them do his bidding. He grew more and more powerful and terrified the king, who ordered his death. The king sent an armed regiment to kill The Summoner, but an army of the dead defeated them. And as each of the king's soldiers fell, they rose to defend The

Summoner as a dead warrior. The Summoner seemed to have the kingdom in the palm of his hand when a witch cursed him to die. He could not revoke the curse and he began to suffer a great illness. But he had heard of the living dead, those who drink blood to survive and wander the night.”

“This sounds like a bad horror movie,” Amaliya interjected.

“Maybe,” he conceded, and thought Bruce Campbell would be great in it. “But it may be the truth. Anyway, as I was saying, he had heard of vampires. He summoned one with a potent spell. Of course, the legend says it was one of the first vampires in creation, but it doesn't matter who it was. The terribleness of it was that The Summoner managed to capture a vampire and torture it. At last, the vampire revealed how The Summoner could become a vampire.”

“He should have kept his damn mouth shut.”

“Her mouth shut. It was a woman. A beautiful, ancient blood drinking goddess, so the story goes. He made her drink his blood, then sliced her throat and drank hers. And then he died. And when he died, all his dead companions died once more. The vampire screamed for three days and nights and all who dared to approach his haven could hear her. But no one would go in and rescue her. The Summoner rose on the third night, but he had forgotten the restrictions of his new existence.”

“He can't go out in sunlight.”

“Exactly. It took awhile for the King and his advisors to figure it out. But they began to notice that everyday the dead army vanished from their posts. They finally were brave enough to invade during the day. The Summoner was nearly burned to death by the invaders and his mortal servants barely managed to escape with him. No one knows

what happened to his prisoner. I suppose she was killed.”

“Poor thing. Being stuck with that sadistic sonnobitch her last nights on earth,” Amaliya decided.

“I agree. But the legend says that The Summoner was angered by his limitations. Daylight effectively destroyed all his spells cast by night. So he learned how to manipulate mankind through other means.”

“The games he plays with our heads,” Amaliya snorted.

“Exactly. A lot of the old vampires blame him for wars and pestilence and all sorts of troubles through the ages, but I think its just The Summoner giving himself credit to make him more terrifying to his own kind. He made me over three hundred years ago and spent a good time torturing me over that time. I am one of the few of his children that is still alive. He slaughters most of us. We're his pawns. His toys.” Cian could feel his bitterness rising once more. “I have spent a large portion of the last fifty years insuring he would leave me be.”

“Does he?”

Cian nodded. Of course, the price he had paid had been high. But now he was closer to his mortal existence than he had ever been throughout the centuries. At times, he felt almost human.

“Will he leave me alone?”

“No,” Cian said softly. “No he won't. It's only a few days into his game. He's seeing if you survive on your own. How strong you are. Do not doubt, he is watching you.” Cian's gaze swept over the city slowly.

“He is probably in Austin watching us at this very moment.”

The thought angered him and, for the thousandth time, he thought he should just kill Amaliya and spare her the torment that was to come. A large portion of that inclination was him feeling immensely selfish.

He had fought long and hard to remove himself from The Summoner's influence. Having Amaliya with him was just an invitation to have the ancient vampire back in his life.

Amaliya rested her forehead on the glass and stared down into the street below. People were on their way to the clubs, laughing and talking animatedly. Cian could almost read her thoughts and he saw the weariness settle into her shoulders. She understood and he was strangely comforted with that knowledge.

"It's like having the world's worst stalker on your case," she said at last.

"That it is," Cian admitted.

"Why does he do it? Make us then torture us? Stalk us? Not help us?"

"It amuses him. He's old and bored. He doesn't wield the power he did alive so he plays these games to make himself more powerful. Or at least that is my official diagnosis of his psychosis."

"Why don't the other vampires kill him?"

Her gaze was so soft and afraid. She almost looked human, but her skin was too pale and translucent and her eyes glittered.

"Most of the ancients are in Europe. There are a few in South and Central America, but they never travel this far north. America, and I'm including the U.S., Canada and Mexico, have much younger vampires. I am most likely one of the oldest here. He is thousands of years old and possibly one of the very first of our kind to walk the earth. Despite his limitations in his magic, he is quite dangerous. We all live with the knowledge that should he decide to wreck havoc on the earth, he could. By night, of course, but how much damage could an army of the dead do in one night against mortals?"

"Why hasn't he done it yet?"

Cian shrugged. “No one knows. Rumors are that he tried once and the Ancients crushed his army and crippled him. In other words, wounded him so terribly it took decades to heal. But it's all legend and rumors. What I have seen him do with my own eyes is enough to terrify me.”

The girl's shoulders drooped even more. “I'm pretty much dead, aren't I? Even if you don't kill me, he will.”

Cian turned to look at her. In the light of his apartment, she looked younger than in the club. Her black hair fell long and untethered almost to her waist. Her body was shapely without being heavy. The tattoo on her arm was marred and he could see where it probably held a cross or rosary tucked into the design before her transformation. He had caught a glimpse of the wings on her back earlier. She was very different from Samantha, yet both of them looked very Austin.

“The one thing about being a vampire is that you become immensely terrified of death,” he said finally.

She looked at him with a plaintive expression on her face. “Tell me about it.” She ran the back of her foot down her other leg and sighed. “Can I go eat now? I'm really really hungry.”

“No,” he said with a weary sigh. “It's not safe anymore. You will have to stay here.”

“Look, I have a hotel room. I have a car. I can get the hell out of Austin.”

“And go where?”

She shrugged. “Maybe Mexico. Or New Orleans?”

Cian laughed at that. “There is no Lestat living there. There is a Master there, but she'd rather kill you than deal with you.”

Amaliya sighed softly. “I can't stay here. I got my own life to figure

out.”

“Just stay here tonight and we'll sort it out. You are right. You do need to learn our ways or you won't survive. I can teach you. Then you can go. Decide where you want to go and just go. I won't stop you.”

He didn't mean for his voice to sound harsh, but he was angry at himself for not immediately turning her out. But he just couldn't do it. No one had been there for him when he had become what he was. Just throwing her into the night seemed inordinately cruel and very much like something The Summoner would do. He would not walk in the footsteps of his creator.

“You got blood in storage or something? Because I'm starving.”

Cian could see that she was struggling. Her skin was looking even more pale and her eyes were sparkling dangerously. He reached out and touched her cheek and found it cold to his touch.

“No. But I have fed tonight. You can drink from me.”

She glanced at his neck and drew slightly away. “What will that do?”

“Nourish you,” he snapped, then said in a softer voice, “It will enable you not to feed for another day or two without hunger. I apologize. I have not been around my own kind very often over the last thirty years.”

Giving him a sharp look through slitted eyes, she moved away from the window. Her arms folded over her breasts, she looked around the apartment taking in the furnishings and the artwork. “My car is down in a parking lot. They'll tow it if its still there in the morning.”

“I'll send Roberto to get it,” he answered.

“My clothes are at the hotel,” she added.

“He can get those, too.”

Cian hit an intercom button and Roberto's voice said, “Yes?”

“Could you come down here? We have a guest and I need you to

attend to some duties.”

“Of course.”

“You have a servant?” she asked, looking over her shoulder at him.

“You're so the cliché.” She hesitated. “I think.”

“Never watched vampire movies I take it?”

“Salem's Lot scared the crap out of me as a kid. That floating little boy vampire scared me to death and I never watched another vampire movie after that.”

Cian smiled and had to agree. Children vampires were terrifying. He had met a few in his time.

Roberto appeared and gave their tattooed guest a look of disapproval.

“I need you to take care of Ms. Vezorak's car and retrieve her personal belongings from a hotel.”

Much to his amusement, Amaliya pulled her car keys and the key to her hotel out of her bra and handed them to Roberto. The man could not have looked more horrified.

“The car is in the lot up on 7th and the hotel is down by Riverside.”

Amaliya looked at Roberto thoughtfully. He regarded her like she was a bug.

“I will take care of this, of course. I take it she is staying for a short period of time?”

Cian chuckled at Roberto's emphasis on the word “short.”

“Yes, yes. We have business to attend to.”

Roberto slightly narrowed his eyes, then nodded. He looked down at the key card and saw the hotel name and address.

“My car is a big black Lincoln. I put a Rolling Stone air freshener on the rear view mirror.”

The Hispanic man's gaze grew more pained, but he nodded. “I will

return shortly.” He turned on his heel and walked stiffly down the hall to the front door.

“He's a little bitch,” Amaliya muttered to Cian.

“You have no idea,” he responded.

Giving him a soft smile, she wandered away to explore the library and he watched her go. She was dangerous to him and he could feel it. Already her power was growing. She had survived a whole night without feeding. Obviously, she would be a force to reckon with as she grew older. That was the way it was with some of those who were given the dark gift. Their adaptation to their new life was almost seamless and without the struggles of some. He was glad for her. It would make things easier. But at the same time, he knew if she was not careful, her strength of mind and power would only make The Summoner's torture of her that much more sweet.

Chapter Twelve

Amaliya felt the butterflies in her stomach turn into bloodsucking fiends. They started sucking on her insides as she walked around the library. She was not only nervous, but ravaged with hunger. How she was keeping it together was beyond her. Her feet were beginning to feel pinched in her high heels and she steadied herself by gripping the

shelf of a bookcase.

Slowly turning around, she saw Cian approaching her. He was slightly shorter than her in his bare feet and she figured it was her high heels. Drawing near her, his hazel eyes seemed to warm slightly and he reached out to her slowly.

“Come feed,” he said softly. “It will make things clearer. You’ll sleep deeply and tomorrow night, when you rise, we will speak again.”

“Are you seducing me?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“No,” he laughed. “I’m engaged.”

“To a human?” This surprised her.

He gave her a quick nod of his head and beckoned to her with his hand.

Reaching out, she took it and let him draw her to him. Up close, his eyes were truly mesmerizing. She wasn't sure if it was because he was a vampire or because they were large and heavily fringed with dark lashes. His hand swept her hair to one side to fully reveal her face and he looked at her with a neutral expression.

“Take what you need,” he said softly.

Feeling insanely nervous, she slid her arms around his neck and pulled him close. She could feel his heart beating with fresh blood while her own was cold and silent in her chest. His hands were gentle on her shoulders as he pressed her close.

“Drink.”

This was far different from the other times she had fed. It felt infinitely more intimate and she felt awkward as hell. But her teeth were sharp against her tongue as she ran it over her lips and she knew she needed to feed soon or lose her mind. Placing her lips against his neck, she felt his pulse under her tongue and her eyes fluttered close.

His hand pressed her firmly against him and she pushed her teeth slowly downward.

His blood came cool and salty into her mouth. She fastened her lips tight against his skin as she pushed her teeth harder into him. It was delicious, rich and everything she needed. She pulled him closer, her mouth pulling hard on his skin. She heard him give out an involuntary gasp and his arms slid around her.

Stumbling backward, they landed against the wall and Cian crushed her closer. Sucking harder and harder, she drained his blood, feeling it filling her, and spreading its delicious warming power through her limbs. Grinding her body against his, the feeding was turning into something vastly different and she could feel him harden against her stomach. She didn't want to stop for his blood was everything she had ever wanted or needed.

Pulling her from him, Cian's grip was harsh. His eyes were dilated and he was gasping. The two wounds in his strong neck were still pumping blood. She growled and strained toward him. His expression was torn, but she was determined. Her mouth found his neck again and they struggled with each other, neither unsure of what exactly was going on. All Amaliya was aware of was her great need to feed and the immense pleasure it sent rippling through her body.

Cian slid his hand into her hair and let her straddle his body as they slid slightly down the wall. Giving into the eroticism of the moment, their bodies ground together.

This is almost better than sex, she thought for a moment then felt him cup her breast and rub her hardened nipple. *Okay, its better with sex*, she amended.

And then she was lost to all other sensation as he guided her over his hard erection and ground up against her through her skirt. Cupping

her face, he pulled her back from his neck again and kissed her deeply, his tongue licking the blood from her teeth and tongue, feeding from her. She gave herself up to him as he feverishly consumed her mouth and her fingers gripped his ass. His mouth traveled over her cheek to her neck where his tongue stroked along her renewed pulse and she slid one hand up into his hair as he swung them around and pinned her to the wall.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she gave into him completely as his teeth slid into her throat and she shuddered as the pleasure enveloped her body fully. Her mouth found the wound she had inflicted on his throat again and she began to drink once more as he drank from her.

Still writhing against each other fully clothed, the vampires fed from each other with overwhelming desire. Amaliya gasped as he grabbed her hands and pushed them over her head.

Best sex ever, she thought, and struggled against his hard cock inside his jeans.

Or best almost-sex ever.

Her tongue slid over the wound on his neck as he rubbed against her, still feeding from her. She felt fully alive once again and the great need was satisfied, but now she wanted him inside of her. Before blood, sex had been her greatest drug and now she craved to be satiated.

Cian pulled his mouth from her neck and ran his tongue over the wound he had inflicted on her.

“Please,” she whispered in his ear, and she knew he understood her question.

Instead, he kissed her deeply and kept rubbing hard against her. His hands slid under her thighs as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

The phone rang sharply nearby and they both ignored it. The smell of blood and sex was intoxicating. Amaliya ran her tongue in circles around Cian's, wanting more of him.

The phone rang again.

Cian pulled away from her and she buried her face in his neck to lick the last drops of blood from the wounds.

The phone let out another peal, and then the answering machine clicked on.

“Hey, Cian! Okay, I just got off the longest phone call in the world with my brother stationed in California. He wants to know if we can visit him. Now, I know its rough with the whole sunlight thing, but he's going to miss the wedding so maybe we can talk. Okies, love you, baby!” The voice was perky and sweet and Amaliya drew back from Cian. “Talk to you tomorrow” There was a click and the machine turned off.

A coldness settled between them as the blood lust faded and despite their aroused states, they slid soundlessly from each other's embrace.

“Sorry,” Amaliya whispered, after a long embarrassing moment.

“Not your fault,” he answered, and simply walked away.

Closing her eyes, she shuddered as she felt her body still craving his touch and his blood. Being a vampire was not going to be easy, especially around her own kind. She slowly slid down to the floor and sat there, deep in thought.

Cian walked over to the answering machine and hesitated. He could call Samantha back, but he felt too awkward in this moment. Instead, he deleted the message and moved to his desk with all its computer monitors and sat down in the leather chair. He tried hard to ignore

his aroused state and the delicious smell of Amaliya in the other room. She had tasted wonderful and he wanted to return to her, throw her down, bite her, *fuck* her.

Rubbing his closed eyelids, he tried to remove those thoughts from his mind. It was his fault. He had forgotten how potent it was to feed off another vampire. He had not been among his own kind in so long, his memory was hazy. The last time he had fed off a vampire it had been his long dead lover Rosalinda. It had been wild between them, but she had lived with an insanity that had swept him along and eventually killed her. He had tried hard to forget her and in the process he had forgotten how erotic it was to feel a vampire's teeth in his throat.

Leaning back in his chair, he concentrated on Samantha and her sweet smile. He tried to fill his mind with the memory of their first kiss or the first time he had held her close throughout the night. It almost worked, but then Amaliya entered the room behind him, he felt her darkness pulling at him.

For a moment, he imagined her coming to him and straddling him where he sat in his chair.

He had completely screwed up in keeping her here.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

He didn't dare turn around and see her. She was his kind. Her body, her smell, her blood called to him. He would always want her now. He knew it. Without a doubt, he had doomed himself to wanting her.

"It was my fault," he answered truthfully, and did not turn around.

The door opened and Roberto's soft footfalls echoed down the hall. The two vampires remained just as they were as he entered the room and tossed the bag at Amaliya's feet.

"I will retrieve your car now. I thought you may want this to freshen up," he said in an annoyed tone, then his voice grew soft. "I see."

Cian turned and looked at Roberto sharply.

Roberto looked amused and looked pointedly at Amaliya, then at Cian. “Did I return too quickly?”

“Go get her car,” Cian said firmly.

Roberto bowed briefly, with a smirk on his face, and walked out with a much lighter step.

As the door shut, Amaliya said, “He's a total bitch.”

Cian nodded and looked at her again. She was really pretty with her exotic features and long dark hair. He could see with his keen eyesight that her hair was really blond and that she dyed it, but the black hair contrasted nicely with her skin. She had taken off her shoes and stood barefoot on the hardwood floor. She looked unsure of herself and a little afraid.

“I just don't sleep with anyone,” she said at last, but her tone wasn't exactly truthful.

“Unless they are attractive to you,” he added.

“Well, yeah.” She blushed and sat on the floor. “I got carried away. I'm sorry.” She curled her legs under her and sat Indian style. “Do you hate me now?”

“I don't know you well enough to hate you or like you,” Cian answered honestly. His body was slowly calming down, but he knew it would not take much to arouse him again. He looked away from her and played idly with a framed picture of Samantha.

“You're not going to throw me out, are you?”

“No. No. Of course not. I invited you here.”

“You kidnapped me,” she reminded him.

He smiled lightly. “Same thing. Plus, I am the one who offered you

my throat. I'm responsible for what happened.”

“I'm sure I didn't help,” she mumbled.

Glancing toward her, Cian took in her pensive expression. He said softly, “No, but again, I invited you here.”

Those enormous eyes turned up at him and he once more thought her features were quite intriguing. With blond hair they may have faded to bland, but with black, they were intense and lovely

With a sigh, he realized he had to stop thinking like this and looked over at the picture of Samantha. She had such a cute turned up nose and glorious smile. She was everything good and light in his life. He had to remember that.

“Are you going to tell her?” Amaliya asked after a long beat.

“No. No. She wouldn't understand. She doesn't see this side of me,” Cian admitted.

“But she knows you're a vampire.”

“Yes, she does. She found out unexpectedly one night, but it didn't phase her.” He smiled and laughed a little. “She said, 'Oh, wow. So sunscreen doesn't help, huh?' That's Sam for you.”

Amaliya smiled at that and looked at her hand. “If only sunscreen did work...”

“Sam has a tendency to try to see everything in a positive light. I think that is why I love her. She didn't run screaming from the room. She just stood there, staring at me, and then told me she knew I was a good man.”

“Are you?” Amaliya asked.

He frowned slightly, then shrugged. “When I'm with Sam I believe I am.”

“But tonight I fucked that up,” she said with a sigh.

“I fucked it up,” Cian answered.

“You're trying to live a normal life with Sam. You don't me need screwing it up for you.”

“When I was turned no one helped me,” Cian said in a soft voice. “I floundered. I struggled. I destroyed people I loved. I was mad with the hunger and I barely survived. You're doing much better than I did, but I want to make sure you truly understand what is going on, what you are, before you do something that will get you killed by The Summoner or-” He cut off his sentence and pondered what he was going to say.

“You?”

“Yes.”

“I want to live. I don't want to die. I did it once and it sucked. My whole life I've been trying to find out who I was, what I was about, what I wanted to do. And now, I know who I am. I understand what I am.”

Cian turned his attention back to the young woman sitting on his floor and took in her sincere expression. “And what is that.”

“I want to live. I want to be what I am. What happened between us...that was amazing! Beyond anything in my life. I never felt so alive! That was like...” She shook her head. “I can't even define it. But I felt alive. And honestly, these last few days, though my brain has felt kinda off and weird, I actually feel motivated to do something other than coast through life.”

Sliding from his chair, he walked over to her and squatted down. “Then you're going to live, Amaliya. You're not a self-loathing, hateful fledgling or an insane one. You're already accepting what is going on and that puts you far ahead of most.”

“Why do you hate it?” She tilted her head up to look at him curiously. He reached out and ran his fingers over her soft cheek, then across her jawline. The desire to kiss her and push her down on the floor rose. His teeth grew sharp at the thought of driving them into her throat or more erotic places.

“You should take a bath. Freshen up. I have work to do.”

Her very still body showed that she was feeling the heat growing again. Before she could act on it and doom them both, he stood up and returned to his computer.

“There is a master bedroom upstairs with a large bathroom.”

Awkwardly, she crawled to her bag and pulled it close to her. “Is that where you sleep?”

“No.” He shook his head and pointed to a nearby wall that looked like burnished brass. “I sleep there. I told the contractor it was a panic room, but its actually my sleeping chamber. Roberto takes good care of me, but once you have been nearly turned to ashes by the sun, you do not take any chances.”

Amaliya walked over and pressed her hand against the wall. He watched her slowly walk along its length, feeling the cool metal under her fingers. He fancied the thought of those fingers on him and quickly pushed it away. He had not felt this way in a long time and it disturbed him deeply.

“So its a big box,” she said, and disappeared around the far corner.

“Essentially. To anyone else, it looks like a walled in elevator shaft or something of the sort. That was the idea at least.”

She walked around it and came out the other end. Her hand was still resting on the cool metal. “So how does it open?”

“The walls retract up into the ceiling. I can open them one by one if I want.”

“Will I sleep here, too?”

Cian felt a pulse of arousal, but he knew he could not deny her safety.
“Yes.”

Nodding, she walked toward the second staircase that led to the upstairs. “Thanks, Cian. Again, I’m sorry.” Her expression was wistful, but thoughtful.

“No worries,” he said with a smile.

She ascended the steps and he could not help but watch her skirt sway over her hips.

“I’m so fucked,” he whispered to himself.

The Summoner strode down 6th Street, hands tucked behind his back. The club scene was not as wild tonight as it would be on the weekend, but there were plenty of college students and young professionals out and about.

Now that he was no longer Professor Sumner, he had let his hair grow to its normal length and it hung around his shoulders. It was almost white and glowed slightly in the glare of the neon signs. He could not remember the original color of his hair anymore. It had slowly turned this color the more magic he had performed and the darker the magic was.

He was clad in a simple black shirt and black trousers. It was a boring outfit. He had yet to change over his wardrobe, but his intense good looks were drawing plenty of attention. The goatee was gone now as was the glamor he had thrown up that made him look older and like a version of his long deceased father.

“He looks like Sting,” a girl whispered as she hurried past with her girlfriend.

He smiled at that and swept his hair back from his face and gave her a rakish smile.

“Sting is old and doesn't look like that,” the friend responded with a snort.

The Summoner found that amusing. Humans were ridiculous when it came to their concept of age. Continuing on, he strolled slowly away from the elegance of the Driscoll Hotel.

Once more he was a new man. He wasn't sure what accent to go with. The British one was rather boring to his ears now and he pondered a German one or maybe Russian. The American accent was terrible in his opinion. The Texan one even worse. But he rather liked Texas. It was huge and truly a land unto itself. He marveled at its difference from the rest of the United States and how it changed from one border to the next. He liked its diversity and he loved its people. They were stubborn and rebellious and he thrived on that energy.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out quickly.
“*Rachoń*?”

“Got it done. I left the package outside of Shreveport just like you said,” a deep, husky, but very feminine voice said.

“Excellent. ”

“They should find it within a few days. I hid it just good enough, but not that good.”

“Well done, as always. I may swing by and see you soon.”

There was bemused laughter on the other end. “You should. You owe me.” And she hung up.

Rachoń was the only progeny he had actually established a relationship with. She was from the bayou outside of New Orleans. He had found her as a runaway slave, making her way to freedom. He had, of course, given her the ultimate freedom. Unlike his other fledglings, he had made her to keep with him.

At the time he was bored and in need of a companion. He had adored her dark skin and luminous maroon eyes. They had remained lovers for years until he had grown bored and freed her to her own existence. She had a cruel streak to match his. Perhaps he had twisted her into what she was, but he remembered how she had driven her stolen dagger into his gut to eviscerate him when he had found her in the swamp and knew it had been within her all along.

He walked on, his white-blond hair floating around his shoulders, past the street musicians trying to make a buck, and the myriad of people rushing about to the various clubs before the fateful two o'clock last call.

Now that Rachoń had planted the real Professor Sumner's body in Shreveport, he would be able to put that time behind him. He had only spent four months as the professor, but they had been enjoyable. Twisting the minds of those wonderful adult students as they looked at him anxiously for morsels of knowledge and truth had been delightful.

Of course, Amaliya had been the most wonderful one of all. Hopelessly lost and drifting, unaware of her strength and her unusual beauty. At first he thought her unremarkable, but she was one of those people who slowly emerged from the shadows the more you learned about them. The dimmest of all the lights had grown to blind him and he had to take her.

It was ironic that she had fled to Austin and found Cian so easily. The girl had glorious luck. So far she had been in surprising control of her faculties and had evaded several disastrous scenarios. When she had gone for the security tape in the motel office in Dallas, he had actually been quite impressed. What she had not realized was that she did not even show up on the tape. It was part of their cursed existence. But it

had impressed him nonetheless.

Calmly turning down an alley way, he made his way into the more dimly lit areas of downtown. There were many homeless in Austin and it was always easy for him to find servants. He needed at least a few of the dead to strengthen him and be his guardians during the day. With Cian entering the stage, he would need to adjust his plans.

“That’s a good girl,” he said to the young woman pressed up against the side of the building and hidden in the darkness.

She moved toward him, with little jerky movements. Out of the entire family he had slaughtered earlier tonight in their mansion overlooking the lake, she was the only one he had spared a brutal death. He had slacked his thirst and need to destroy before he got to her and realizing he needed her as intact as possible, he had feasted off her inner thigh and left her neck unmarred.

So far she had been a good girl, helping him move the pieces of her family down into the laundry room where they would remain until he was done and burned the place to the ground. He had been amused to see her struggling to carry the heads of her family in one hand and drag her father’s torso with the other. She had cried the whole time as she slowly bled to death, only kept alive by his power. Now she hovered between life and death, more dead than alive. By morning she would be truly dead and he would lose her valuable voice.

“She hasn’t come out of the loft,” the girl whispered. She was dressed in jeans and a pink top. Her hair was done up in a ponytail and she looked quite pretty. She shouldn’t be moving or talking in her condition, but the steady pulse of his power kept her from collapsing.

He had posted the girl outside of the loft as a precaution. It had been a wild chance that Amaliya would find Cian, but as her luck seemed to be obscenely good, he had to be sure.

“Jenny-”

“Jeanne,” she said softly.

“Yes, Jeanne. You look like a Jeanne,” he said with amusement.

“Anyway, good girl. You did well.”

“Will you let me die now?” she whispered.

“No. Not yet. When dawn comes,” he assured her.

Her pretty pink lips trembled and he drew her close and kissed her forehead. “Come now, darling. It's not so bad. You're serving a higher purpose.”

“My family-”

“Are dead. And soon you will join them and all will be well, correct?”

The young woman nodded, her expression stricken, yet muted. “Yes.” “You did very well calling me and letting me know she has arrived. Very good. I am proud of you.” He smiled at her warmly and enjoyed the little shiver that ran down her body. “Now, I want you to go home and sit down in the laundry room and wait for dawn. Sit with your family and keep them company until you can join them.”

Tears filled her eyes as she looked at him desperately. She would not be able to resist his power and the terror in her eyes said it all. Swallowing hard, she turned and trudged into the night, a pale little thing in pink, doomed and pathetic.

He laughed softly and smiled with delight.

Turning, he gazed up at the windows high above the street. It took only a few moments for Cian and Amaliya to come into view and he shook his head with wry amusement.

She was a lucky little thing.

I have the worst luck in the world, she thought for the hundredth

time.

Amaliya lay next to Cian in his sleeping chamber, trying hard not to feel his presence or go near him. After her long bath, she had come downstairs in black leggings and a tank top to find him working hard at his computers.

He had obviously been engrossed in whatever he was doing, so she had let him be and had gone into the library to look through the tomes. She had found a whole assortment of vampire novels, which she found amusing. But among them was an encyclopedia of vampire myths and legends and since she really didn't know much beyond what was commonly known about vampires, she had snagged it to read. Settling down in a chair, she had stayed there reading the rest of the night.

Rolling onto her back, she tried not to panic at the absolute darkness inside the chamber. His bed filled the entire compartment and the four walls retracted back into the ceiling when he hit a secret switch. She thought it was rather opulent with its fine silk sheets and rich velvet comforter.

It was cold and she rather liked that fact. She pulled more of the covers over her and smelled his cologne on them. He was very still beside her, but she knew he was still awake. Beyond the metal walls, the sun would soon pour through all the windows in the loft. Just knowing that was terrifying.

“It can't reach us,” he said softly out of the blackness, as if he read her mind.

The compartment was drenched in darkness and she was safe, but it was hard to accept that truth.

“Are you afraid of it, too?”

“The sun?”

“Yes,” she whispered, rolling over toward him.

“To the point of absolute paranoia and building this compartment,” he answered. His hand trailed over her cheek to her neck. “You're safe.”

“Is this why the old vampires slept in coffins?”

He laughed softly and said, “Yes. Safer to sleep in utter darkness than risk someone opening a curtain.”

Her eyes were acclimating to the darkness and she could see his features now. He had an intense sort of face with strong cheekbones. Not really her type though. She had a bad crush on Rob Zombie and any long haired metalhead had a good chance with her if he seemed dangerous enough. Cian was almost too clean cut and had a slightly feminine tinge to his lips. But still, he had rocked her world earlier in a way no one ever had.

“It's weird,” she whispered. “You know, being so powerful and yet being so vulnerable.”

“It's the irony of being a vampire. Being immortal and being terrified of death.”

Rolling onto her stomach, she propped herself up on her elbows and her hair fell over her shoulders to pool on the bed. “And the mirror thing is annoying.”

“I know. But when you learn how, you can see yourself through the eyes of others,” he assured her. His hand slowly stroked her hair cascading over one shoulder. “Sleep, Amaliya. Can't you feel the call of sleep as the sun rises higher?”

Laying down on her stomach, she tucked her pillow up under her chin. She could see his face clearly now and wondered why his eyes

glinted almost like metal in the darkness.

She was feeling more and more drowsy. Almost as if drugged. She could feel the sun, her enemy, rising over the hills. Her hand found Cian's neck and she curled her fingers over it to reassure herself. He could kill her so easily, but she no longer believed he would.

“Damn,” he whispered, then was on her.

Their kisses were intense and searing, his tongue thrusting into her mouth as he clutched her tight. Blood filled their throats as their fangs sliced open their lips as they kissed fervently. His arms swept her up close to him as he feasted on her bloodied mouth.

The sun was rising higher and they both were growing more and more drowsy.

“Damn,” she whispered, as she fell away from him, licking her lips. Her body felt leaden and his mouth touched hers one last time before he fell over beside her.

“We can't anymore,” he said softly in a very drowsy voice.

“I know,” she answered, her eyes fluttering closed.

But they both knew they would. It was a matter of time.

Chapter Thirteen

Samantha mumbled to herself as she punched in the code to get into Cian's apartment and twirled the keys in the lock. It was nearly sundown and she was anxious to set up the white candles and flowers she had bought. A nice bottle of Chardonnay was tucked into one of her bags and she figured they could have a romantic night together. No talk of the wedding, just the two of them enjoying the night and relaxing. They both needed it desperately.

Work was a real drag on her mental well being of late. Working on solar energy projects was extremely interesting at times and utterly dull at others. Cian wanted to be on the cutting edge of alternative energy resources and she supported him one hundred percent.

Though it wasn't as if she had a choice. She was in charge of the tiny company that was trying to carve its niche out of the growing market.

Her comfortable cotton skirt, decorated in bright flowers that would have made the Brady Bunch proud, swung around her knees as her flip flops smacked against the floor. Her hair was up in a ponytail and her tank top had an absurdly cute flower on one strap. She felt adorable.

The apartment was growing dark as the sun slowly sank down behind the city and she strained to hear if Roberto was upstairs. She didn't hear his classical guitar music, so she shrugged and moved to the dining area to set up her fresh flowers and candles.

Her parents were giving her a hard time, per the usual, over Cian and asking why he never came out to their barbecues or game watching parties. Her excuse that he had an allergy to the sun had the whole family cracking vampire jokes. Little did they know they were right.

Setting the bags on the table, she began taking out the stainless steel candle holders she had found on sale. They were really beautiful and she admired her reflection in them before setting them down. Cian wouldn't mind them, though he shunned mirrors, since he said he could see himself through her eyes. She wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but it seemed to comfort him, so it made her happy.

The silence of the apartment began to weigh on her so she walked into the kitchen and turned on the radio. Twirling the dial, she found the country station and danced her way back to the table singing along with Patsy Cline. She liked the oldies. They were the goodies.

Funny how it had all come to this. She was engaged to marry a vampire and it seemed okay to her. Never in her life would she have believed it to be true. When she had realized what he truly was, the whole world changed in that moment, and everything became possible.

She set the flowers down on the table and pulled out the clear vase she had bought. It caught the light of the setting sun and she knew she was quickly running out of time. Cian would be up very soon and she wanted the table to look perfect. Going back into the kitchen, she began to run cool water into the vase as she tapped her toe to the music.

Tonight, they would laugh and hang out and it would be perfect. She wouldn't feel this terrible nasty nagging feeling in her stomach anymore. It had bugged her all day. No matter what she had done to

make sure everything in her life was as it should be, she had felt that something was amiss. She had even called Memaw to make sure her grandmother was still alive in her nursing home. That call had trapped her into fifteen minutes of explaining to Memaw who she was, that the war was long over, and that the bad man Hitler was dead. But it had been worth it to hear the old woman's voice.

Behind her, the machinery to Cian's secret compartment whirred to life and she heard the wall began to slide up. Abandoning her vase, she ran out of the kitchen and across the apartment to leap onto the bed and snuggle with him as she always did.

She was almost to the bed when a raven-haired woman sat up and swept her thick hair back from her face. Samantha stumbled to a stop, her mouth dropping open, as she took in the woman's tattoos and peculiar looks. She wasn't sure if the girl was pretty or not, but she was damn sexy with her hair falling around her face and her tight tank top hugging her breasts.

"Hi," the young woman said with an East Texas inflection.

"Hi," Samantha said, not sure what else to say.

Cian rolled over onto his side and slowly dragged himself upright.

"Sam?"

"I'm here, baby," she said, and walked toward the bed, confusion clouding her thoughts.

"Um" was all he said, and rubbed his face.

"I'm Amaliya," the stranger in her fiancé's bed said, and rolled to her knees. "You must be Sam. Cian told me all about you."

"Really?" Samantha hesitated. "Well, good. Maybe he can tell me about you."

"She's a vampire," Cian said groggily.

“Obviously.”

He never looked quite this bad when he woke up and Samantha was worried. He looked a little pale. “I took her in last night. She's new to my world.”

“In other words, completely stupid about what I should be doing,” Amaliya said. Realizing that Samantha was uncomfortable, she crawled out of the bed and stretched. “He's going to teach me to be a good vampire.”

“Something like that,” Cian muttered. He pulled himself out of the bed.

Samantha went to him and he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her softly. She found comfort in his touch, but his skin was colder than usual. “You need to feed, don't you?”

He nodded and she ran her fingers through his hair. It grew out really fast and already it fell over his brow. He looked scruffy and she rather liked it. But at the same time, he seemed distant even though he held her close and snuggled into her.

Amaliya pulled her tank top down over the slight curve of her stomach and looked at Samantha curiously. Samantha knew that look. She was being sized up. Her outfit that had seemed so cute earlier felt girlish and stupid under the gaze of the sultry woman before her. Hugging Cian close to her, she kissed his forehead and enjoyed the feel of his arms around her.

“Why haven't you fed, baby?” she asked softly.

“I fed her,” he answered in a quiet voice, and his body slightly stiffened.

Samantha looked toward the dark-haired girl now rummaging through a bag laying on the floor near the couch that Samantha had

totally missed.

“She can't feed herself?” she questioned, her tone sharper than she would have liked.

Cian drew back and rubbed his stubbly chin. “She is new. She doesn't realize how often she has to feed.”

Samantha watched her fiancé's gaze follow the woman as she slipped out onto the wrap around balcony and she felt her stomach tighten with worry.

“So, you're going to teach her? Or just keep feeding her yourself?” Trying not to show how upset she was, she began to make the bed for him. If she let him, he'd just leave it a mess and lower the walls.

“Teach her,” Cian answered in a peeved tone.

He walked away to the small guest bath where he kept his toothpaste and an electric toothbrush. He was always conscious of his gross breath. Samantha was pretty sure it was from drinking blood.

Wrinkling her nose, she fluffed up a pillow and watched his cute ass as he disappeared into the bathroom and shut the door. He was more uncommunicative than usual and it was not making her happy.

Sorting through the covers and getting them layered correctly, she kept glancing toward Amaliya out on the balcony. She was out there smoking and talking on a cellphone.

“Cian, she's smoking,” Samantha complained loudly.

“What?” He reappeared looking grumpy, but he came over and helped her tuck the covers in.

“She's smoking!” Samantha pointed and frowned at him. “You know how much I hate that. You remember how I worked hard to help get smoking banned in the clubs.”

Cian looked over at Amaliya in a way that made her vastly

uncomfortable. It was almost as if he was embarrassed to look at the other vampire. “Who could she be talking to?” With a frown, he headed over to the door that lead onto the balcony.

Flinging up her hands, Samantha felt more agitated than before.

Cian slipped outside and shut the door firmly behind him.

Roberto came into view dressed in khaki pants and a red button down shirt. With a slight smirk, he stopped to watch the two vampires out on the balcony.

Samantha did not want to deal with him and made herself busy smoothing out the comforter. When her hand came away with one long black hair, her brow furrowed even more. Holding her hand up she saw the raven hair had a golden tip and she looked sharply toward the balcony.

“She's blond,” she hissed.

“So are you,” Roberto reminded her.

“She dyes her hair. She's fake!” Samantha knew she sounded like a shrew.

Roberto smiled even wider. “Feeling threatened?”

“You shut up.”

She shook her hand until the hair fell off her fingers and she wiped her hand on her too cutesy skirt and stomped over to the secret panel and popped it. Typing in the code, she heard the gears shift and the huge walls descended with a soft boom.

Crossing her fingers over her breasts, she stared out onto the balcony where Cian was kneeling before Amaliya. The female vampire was seated on one of the wrought iron chairs with her feet slung up on the railing.

“I picked out those chairs for me and Cian. Not for her to sit out there

and smoke!”

“This,” Roberto said with glee “is going to be fun.”

“Asshole.”

Cian quietly stepped onto the balcony and found Amaliya puffing on a cigarette and talking on the phone.

“Yeah, Grandmama, he's like the king of the city or something like that. He's going to show me the ropes, teach me and stuff,” Amaliya said in response to an older woman's voice that sounded small and muffled through the cellphone.

Realizing she wasn't alone, she looked up at him and exhaled a long plume of smoke. The action seemed incredibly sexy and he shifted on his feet feeling uncomfortable. By the widening of her eyes, he could see that she realized she had revealed that her grandmother knew more than she had let on the night before.

Cian slowly sank down to a crouch in front of her. He folded his arms over his chest and stared at her thoughtfully. She had hidden valuable information from him. She wasn't that stupid and he felt a surge of respect for her. He could hear the old woman's voice clearly on the other end and he tilted his head, obviously listening.

“Is he handsome? Does he look like Dracula?” her grandmother's voice queried.

“He looks nothing like Dracula. Kinda like a normal cute Austin guy. Kinda scruffy.” Amaliya shrugged at him. She obviously did not realize how many vampire codes she was breaking, but knew she was in trouble.

“Can he fix you, nieta?”

“No, Grandmama, there is no cure.” Tilting her head, she mouthed to

Cian “Right,” then puffed on her cigarette.

He slowly nodded. “Right.”

He should rip the phone from her and crush it and kill her for violating his security, but he couldn't bring himself to even move. She was very different from him. She had living family nearby that still cared for her. He had realized last night how unorthodox she was. This shouldn't even be surprising him, but it did. A vampire with a living family was rare. Usually, in the madness, a fledgling vampire killed their family.

“Well, you learn from him what you can and I'll keep praying for your soul. You call me and let me know how you are doing, okay?”

“Yes, Grandmama. I promise. Te amo.”

“Te amo, Amal,” her grandmother said, then hung up.

Amaliya clicked the button on the cellphone. “How many ways am I fucked?”

He laughed slightly and shook his head. “I'm not sure yet. I should kill you.”

“Didn't we already do this last night?” She rolled her eyes and slung her bare feet up onto the railing.

“True.” He rubbed the top of his head with one hand as if he could shake his brain into functioning. He needed to feed. “You're not supposed to let people know what you are.”

“Sam knows what you are,” she immediately pointed out. “So does the creepy Renfield guy.”

“Point,” Cian said with a little bit of a frown. “True.”

“Look, no one gave me a freaking instruction manual, as I keep telling you. Grandmama figured out I was dead and tested me by trying to feed me. When I couldn't even swallow a bean, she figured it out

pretty damn quick. She wanted me to go into the light!” Amaliya stubbed out the rest of the cigarette and folded her arms under her breasts. She looked upset. “So, yeah. My grandmother knows.”

Cian gripped the cold metal of the armrest of the chair she was lounging in and said, “You're going to effectively fuck up my life, aren't you?”

“Look, you kidnapped me. You got me to drink your blood. You're screwing up your own life. If you don't want to teach me, then give me one of your books that tells me what to do and I'm outta here.” Amaliya looked at him angrily. “I have no issue bailing from a bad situation.”

“No,” Cian said in a terse voice. “No. I'll teach you so that you have a shot of surviving.”

Amaliya settled back into her chair, her body relaxing, and he realized she had been fully ready to jump up and walk out. He was not ready for her to do that yet.

“Get dressed. We're going out. You're going to feed.”

“What about you?”

“I live in this building for a reason. I own it. I can enter any apartment in this building and feed.”

Amaliya laughed. “You live in your own barn.”

“Something like that. I'll go feed and you get ready.” He stood up and moved to the door.

“So, we can't go where we are not invited, huh? That explains a lot. My Dad told me to get out and it was like I was shoved out by an invisible force. I couldn't go into my grandmother's house until she asked me in. So it's another stupid vampire myth that is true, huh?”

He could see the pain in her expression as her words poured out of

her and he wanted to reach out and comfort her. But he refrained. He knew Samantha was watching them and he didn't want to upset her more than she already was. "Yes, that is true. But we can pass over water," he said, and pointed toward Town Lake. "It's just that vampire boundaries are often cut up by waterways back in Europe."

"I guess that makes sense,"

"Which is amazing when not much in this world does make sense."

"Like you and the Barbie?"

Cian stared at her and fought back his anger. She was trying to bait him.

"She's cute," Amaliya decided. "Kinda perky cute."

Cian stared through the glass in the door at his obviously-pissed fiancée. Samantha and Roberto were giving each other the cold shoulder as Samantha fussed with a bouquet of flowers on the dining room table.

"Thanks," Cian said finally, and went inside.

"Good evening, sir," Roberto said from the kitchen. He was busy preparing a gourmet meal for himself and looked a little too smug.

"Roberto," Cian said with a slight warning in his voice. "Is all well in our world?"

"Yes, sir." Roberto responded, meaning there were no major troubles with any of the businesses. "How is our little one?"

"Annoying," Cian answered.

This brought a smile to Samantha's face and she turned toward him, showing off her handiwork with the flowers. "What do you think?"

"Lovely. Like you." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. She smelled too good to him and he knew he needed to feed very soon. His teeth were pulsing.

“I thought we could have a night in together.” She threw a dark look Roberto's way.

“I can't. I'm taking Amaliya out to hunt.” He touched one of the flowers lightly. The petal began to wilt and he immediately withdrew his hand.

Annoyed, Samantha plucked the petal off and threw it into a paper bag with the rest of the stems and leaves she had trimmed off. “Well, how long is this going to last?”

“Two nights and then she'll be on her own,” Cian said firmly.

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“I don't like her.”

“I noticed.”

“You seem different with her here. Less like yourself. I can see it. I even felt it all day today. The sooner she is gone the better it will be,” Samantha said with great conviction.

Cian knew she was right. Amaliya was having an effect on him. Samantha's cheerfulness earlier and her desire to please him with the flowers were annoying him more than amusing him. Usually he loved to hear her chatter on and loved spending time with her. But ever since he had seen her tonight, he had been irritated with her presence. Impulsively, he hugged her tight and tried to pull that wonderful human part of him out of the depths of his psyche. The part of him she made strong.

With a beautiful, wide smile, she held him close and kissed his cheek.

“I love you, sweetie,” she whispered.

“I love you.” He kissed her lightly on the lips. “But now I need to

feed.”

“Roberto says he's going to fix me dinner, so I'll be here when you get back,” Samantha said with a big grin.

Cian smiled at her lightly and rubbed her cheek, then slipped away from her. When he turned away, his expression grew grim as he realized how disconnected he was beginning to feel.

The faster he got Amaliya out of his life, the better.

Chapter Fourteen

Amaliya was standing with one hip cocked to one side and staring out the window when Cian literally just appeared beside her. She gave a start and blinked at him. “Wow.”

He shrugged, looking a little satisfied with himself for startling her. He was dressed in black jeans, big black lace up boots, a shirt that looked like a funky up version of a black cowboy shirt, and a battered black straw cowboy hat. His slightly longer hair and scruffy jawline gave him a totally different look. He looked like he fit into her world a little bit better.

Dressed in tight black jeans, her Bettie Page heels, and a tank top with a sexy devil woman on it, she felt at ease. Her tattoos were visible and her black hair hung around her shoulders, silky smooth and shiny.

“Nice,” she said finally. She returned to looking out the window and pondering her lack of reflection.

Roberto and Samantha were talking softly in the kitchen as they ate the meal Roberto had prepared. Amaliya had deliberately avoided them.

He shrugged slightly. “I like switching up my look.”

“Part of living so long?”

“Yep. Tonight, you will learn how to feed off of several different people, but not take too much. You need to learn not to kill-”

She started to open her mouth to protest.

“-or drink so much they end up hospitalized.”

She shut her mouth and gave him an annoyed look.

“The trick of surviving is not to be discovered.” His smile grew condescending. “You know, having your entire family know what you are. That sort of thing.”

“Only my grandmother and-” She stopped herself.

He shook his head and took her arm. “C'mon. Let's get this over with before you put out a press release that you're here.”

“Shut up,” she said, and pulled her arm away.

“We'll be back,” Cian called out as they headed into the hall.

The patter of tiny flip flopped feet let her know that Samantha was coming. Crossing her arms over her breasts, she looked annoyed as Samantha flung herself onto Cian and kissed him. She wasn't jealous of Samantha, but she was the sort of girl who had always looked upon Amaliya as something odd to be avoided. It was obvious that Samantha felt threatened by her. Amaliya was determined to ignore and forget what had happened between her and Cian. It had to be a weird vampire thing. He was not her type. He was short. And he looked too normal.

She had woken up determined to learn what she could from him and then go off and find her own hot Rob Zombie lookalike. Or a young Ozzy Osbourne clone. That would be nice. Or maybe both.

“Let's go,” Cian said, taking her arm again and opening the door for her.

They entered a small foyer that had two sets of elevator doors. A long window showed a great view of South Austin and she looked at the reflection of the empty hallway with remorse. She hated not knowing what she looked like. She wondered if her makeup looked okay.

“I just realized I have no idea where I am. Since you kidnapped me,”

she said a bit tartly.

“I helped you,” Cian corrected her, and stepped into the elevator as the doors opened.

Rolling her eyes, she stepped in with him. They were both silent on the way down. It was obvious that they were both determined to pretend that the events of the night before had not happened.

She supposed that a vampire as old as Cian may have some sort of weird need to try to have a normal life, but she didn't get it. She was looking forward to figuring out this vampire stuff, then carving a life out for herself far away from all this crap with The Summoner. Yeah, he was following her, but she was boring. Maybe he would just grow tired of her and leave her be.

Even she knew that was too stupid to even hope. Therefore, she was going to have to keep running.

The doors opened on a large, boring lobby with treated cement floors and brick walls. They headed to the doors that opened out onto the street and Amaliya glanced toward the security guard. The man barely looked at her before returning his gaze to the Austin American Statesman newspaper he was reading.

Cian shoved the door open for her and she walked outside into the humid spring air. They were close to Town Lake and it made the air muggy. It took her a moment to figure out where they were located, but she quickly recognized a few landmarks and realized they were close to the club scene.

“Where are we going?”

“Headhunters,” Cian answered. “Seems like your kinda place.”

She couldn't help but roll her eyes. “Yeah, okay, fine. I used to hang out there on occasion.”

“I figured that. Live bands. Sweaty guys with long hair and tattoos.”

“Shut up,” she said with exasperation. But she was pleased in a way that he had her pegged. Of course, in some ways she was a stereotype, but she didn't care. She had tried on a lot of looks and personas when she came to Austin as a student. It was when hanging out with the metalheads that she finally felt accepted. Plus she loved metal, so it worked out just fine. She had even played drums for a few bands and slept with the lead singers, of course.

He laughed and said, “Eh, you just look like the girl who'd be hanging out there and dancing all sexy to music that sounds like just noise to me.”

“Yeah? And how would you know?”

“I've got to spread my hunting around,” he answered. “I sometimes have a bit of a wild metal diva to entertain myself.”

They reached 6th Street and headed down the sidewalk that was slowly growing crowded. Thursday night was much busier than Wednesday and lots of college students were out and about. Strolling past the clubs that were just gearing up for the long night, the various tattoo parlors and tourist trap stores, they fell into an easy pace with each other.

“Um, wild metal divas, huh? Is that what you call us?”

He shrugged. “Goth girls are tasty, too.”

“Go to the hip hop club and grind on girls, too?”

Giving her a surprisingly warm smile, he said, “Why, yes I do.”

“You really are an equal opportunity guy.”

“Maybe.”

“Does Samantha go with you?”

“No. No. I hunt alone. Except for tonight. It's a personal thing. It's just you and your prey and the thrill of the hunt.”

“But aren't you kinda domesticated now that you live in your own barn?”

Giving her a sharp look, he studied her expression, then gave her a lazy shrug. “Maybe.”

Amaliya smiled at him and bumped him with her shoulder. “You're all bashful over being the nice vampire!”

Cian frowned at her. “I am not.”

“Oh, you so are. You're all freaking mean to me when I show up, but now I can see you're all Mr. Nice Vampire.”

“I am not. I could kill you where you stand!”

“Oh, yeah?” She laughed at him and skipped away and into the doorway of a tattoo parlor. “Do it in front of all these people?”

Cian passed her and gave her an annoyed look.

She hurried along to catch up with him and tucked her hands into her jean pockets. “Aw, c'mon. It is kinda funny. You're all old and stuff and getting married to Barbie.”

“Don't call her that,” Cian growled.

“Okay, Blondie, and meanwhile you prowl the streets of Austin hopping into clubs to take a little sip here and there, but going home to the missus afterwards. I think its kinda cute. I'm being instructed by freaking Ward Cleaver.”

Cian grabbed her wrist tightly and tugged her around to face him. His eyes blazed at her and it was clear he was pissed off. But surrounded by all the people moving up and down the sidewalks, laughing and talking as they anticipated a night of revelry, she wasn't afraid. He wouldn't hurt her here.

Besides, from the look on his face, he was mad, but he was feeling what she was.

That dangerous vampire lust.

Sticking her tongue out at him, she pulled her arm free and headed down to Red River, the street where a few more clubs were located.

“C'mon, Ward. June is waiting. We must hurry.”

Turning around, she walked swiftly ahead of him, inwardly laughing at his flustered expression. She could feel the tingle of her growing arousal at the thought of feeding and she was having really evil thoughts about Cian. She was a little annoyed with that since he was hooked up with blondie and he was so not her type. But being around him made her want to do lascivious things to him.

Even if he was kinda short.

Walking down Red River, the street was clogged with lots of scantily clad girls standing in line to get into a club. Their male companions tried to discreetly or not so discreetly check out every girl in sight. She wove her way through the line noticing a few of the guys checking her out. Her appearance was far different from the girls in their halter tops and tiny skirts, but when she was in her mode, she knew she could give off hot vibes.

Or good fuck vibes, as her old boyfriend told her.

Passing the Goth club, she looked over her shoulder to see Cian walking along behind her, his hazel eyes boring into her. She blew him a kiss and dashed across the street despite the slowly moving traffic to the club with the metal music pouring out of it. Headhunters always had live music playing everyday of the week and five years ago many of her friends had played here. For a moment, she wondered if she would recognize anyone.

Once in the bar, she looked around the steamy narrow room with its crazy decorations. It was decorated with a wild island theme with

plenty of fake tropical plants, imposing idols, native masks, and bamboo blinds. Most of the bands on the bill seemed to be metal bands. Already the guitars were screeching and the lead singer was growling. The room was packed with the band's fans and family and she wove through them to the bar. Sliding onto a stool, she saw a few long time supporters of the scene gathered in a tight knit group, talking animatedly and drinking heavily.

They wouldn't recognize her. She was never that popular. When she performed with the bands, she was their cool chick drummer, but the guys got all the glory. Besides, she had been in Austin under a year when she got the call about her sister, Rachel. And she had vanished as quickly as she had appeared. It had been terrible not only because her sister was deathly ill, but also because she had just started to find her niche when it had all drawn to a close for her.

Now, here she was again, trying to find her niche again. Except this time she was a blood sucking fiend with a ticket to eternal youth if she didn't get whacked by her psycho ancient creator.

"I need a drink," she decided, and signaled for the bartender.

Cian slid onto the barstool next to her and leaned his elbows on the counter. Ordering a drink for both of them, he took out his money clip, flashing a nice chunk of change. It was a good way to keep the bartender happy and pouring some strong drinks. Amaliya was sure that was the rule in any club.

The music was hard and fast, just the way she liked it. She let out a few primal yells and thrust a fist into the air a few times. Cian just drank his drink slowly and studied the crowd.

Oh, yeah; she was here to learn to hunt.

Leaning against him, she said, "Okay. So where do I start?"

“Well, first off, you have the power to get attention. Use it.”

She looked at him and said, “That's it?”

“You don't feel it?”

Well, actually she did. It was as if she could throw out an invisible net and pull people to her. She felt it, but wasn't sure how to use it. She could feel her body pulsating with the need to feed and it was making her feel wild and sexy.

Cian leaned toward her, his lips close to her ear. “Find someone you want. And then project it at them. Call to them inside of yourself.”

Amaliya sipped her drink and enjoyed the burn as she scanned the crowd of writhing people. Spotting a tall man with long black hair and a heavy beard, she smiled to herself. He kinda had the Rob Zombie thing going. Dangerous and dark. Concentrating, she flung out her power at him. To her surprise, he turned and looked at her. As their eyes met, he nodded at her, and began to move through the crowd toward her .

“See,” Cian said with a smug look.

“That's too easy,” she whispered back.

“You can't see yourself,” Cian said with a wink.

The tall man with the tattoos and dangerous vibe sidled up to the bar next to her and smiled at her flirtatiously. “You look familiar.”

“I'm not,” she said with a wicked smile. ”But we can change that.” She heard Cian chuckling behind her and ignored him.

Small talk with band guys she could do all night. It wasn't hard. She had hung out in the scene long enough to pick up on what they liked to talk about. As the band thrashed on the stage and their small crowd of fans pumped their fists in the air, she leaned into her prey and drew him in with her sly looks and vampire powers.

After around fifteen minutes, Cian tapped her shoulder.

“Excuse me. My brother needs something.” She turned to Cian and whispered in an annoyed voice, “What?”

“You're here to bite him. Not date him. Get him into the bathroom.”

Cian's eyes were intense.

Sticking her tongue out, she turned back to the guy, who's name was Brant, and hooked her hand into his. “Come with me,” she said and pulled him along behind her. He came willingly, just like she knew he would.

Weaving through the throng of people, she aimed for the bathroom. Now that she was so close to feeding, she could feel that dark need rising and flowing out of her. It seemed as if others knew this as they pulled away from her subconsciously, letting her pass.

The door to the woman's bathroom opened just as she neared it. Two girls came out, laughing, their lipstick fresh and glossy and their hair brushed and gleaming. Watching them pass, she shoved Brant into the room and up against the wall. As she expected, Cian slipped in behind her and locked the door.

“Okay, this is a little too weird. Your brother is going to watch?” Brant looked ready to bolt.

Cian folded his arms and leaned on the wall across from them.

“Ignore him. Look at me.” She heard her power in her voice and felt it swirling out of her.

Brant's eyes turned to her and she saw his pupils dilate as she hooked him firmly under her influence. She ran her tongue over her sharpening fangs as she pushed his legs apart and pulled him down toward her. He was tall so she had to strain, but he came willing into her embrace. Licking her fangs, she pulled his thick heavy hair back and ran her tongue over his furry throat. His shudder ignited her hunger even more and she drove her teeth into his neck.

His blood was hot and delicious and she moaned with pleasure as she drank it in with huge swallows. Her arms gripped the large man even more tightly as she pulled his blood into her. She felt it renewing her body and her heart began to pump a little more quickly.

Cian's body pressed up against hers from behind and he slid his hand up under her arm and up to cup her chin. "Stop."

She growled at him and tried to keep feeding, but his fingers slid between her lips and the flesh of her victim. He said again, "Lick his wound and stop."

Cian's strength of will pushed down on her and she realized he was right. Her desire to drain her prey was strong and she ran her tongue over the wound. Licking the blood away, she drew back as the holes closed up into two tiny circles. Brant's eyes were glossy and half-closed with bliss.

"Drink only a little from each one," Cian whispered as he turned her around. "Only enough to sate the first bite of the hunger." Taking her face between his hands, he licked the blood off the corner of her mouth. "Understand."

Nodding, she struggled to keep her hunger abated. She did want to drain the tall man completely dry. It was a terrible need, but she resisted it.

"Now, let him go. Release him, but place in his mind a wonderful thought of a nice time with you. But make your face hazy in his memory..."

Amaliya turned back to Brant and ran her hand gently down the side of his face. As she had with Pete, she felt herself drawing up her power from the dark place inside of her and pressing it into him. Concentrating, she created a memory of a hot little interlude in the bathroom, but obscured her own face.

“Now go to the bar,” she whispered.

Brant slid from her grasp, let himself out, and the door shut behind him. Cian quickly locked it and turned to her.

“I fucked up.”

“It takes practice.”

Ignoring the smelly toilet and the mirror that would refuse to show her reflection, she leaned against the graffiti covered wall, and sighed.

“Now I want more.”

“You need to feed every night.” Cian said softly. “But a little at a time.”

She nodded.

“Okay. Let's try this again.”

Amaliya licked her lips and smoothed her hair a bit. “Okay. Let's go.”

For the next three hours, she maneuvered through the ever changing crowd, chatting, laughing, partying, and finding three more victims. Each time, Cian followed her into the bathroom and watched over her as she fed. By the third victim, she was able to pull away without his assistance.

Her last prey, a hot girl, which she saw surprised Cian, was just a small nibble in comparison to the droughts she had taken from Brant. Even as the girl clung to her, rubbing her body up and down Amaliya's, she had been able to stop drinking and place a wonderfully erotic memory into the woman's thoughts.

The girl seemed less affected by the blood loss and took the time to kiss Amaliya softly before seductively walking past Cian and out the door. He looked at her surprised.

“I had a girlfriend once,” Amaliya said with a shrug.

“Really?”

“She liked me and I thought why not?”

It had been a little more than that. She had figured out that though girls were fun to flirt and mess around with, she wasn't cut out for a relationship with one.

Cian just arched an eyebrow. “We should head out now. The bartender has noticed your last two trips in here.”

“I'll be the talk of the club,” she laughed.

“Something like that,” he agreed. “But we were more conspicuous with me coming in here with you.”

Licking the rest of the blood from her teeth and sucking on her bottom lip, she shrugged, then nodded. “Yeah, true.”

Cian's hand reached out and pulled her toward him. She went willing to him, knowing what he would do. His cool tongue slowly licked the blood off her chin and the edges of her lips. Her own tongue flicked out to touch his and he pulled away quickly.

Despite his grim expression, she could feel his desire to pull her close and bite her throat and taste the rich blood that now flowed through her. Pressing herself past his restraining hands, she rested her forehead against his and laid her hands on his shoulders.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

His mouth brushed over hers, then he easily slipped past her and snagged her hand. Pulling her behind him, they plunged back into the club and the tightly packed crowd parted for them without hesitation. When they got outside, Cian kept walking quickly, pulling her along behind him.

“I told you I would fuck up your life,” Amaliya said to his back.

He let go of her hand, turned around, and his hazel eyes flashed at her. “I'm the one keeping you in my city. It's my mistake to make.”

“Why are you keeping me here? Why don't you call your old boss up and say, 'Hey, guess who's here. Come get her!'. Or don't you have his number?”

“We both know he already knows you're here. He's probably watching us right now. My question is how long will he let us both go without interfering.”

Amaliya blinked a few times, then said, “Oh, shit.”

“You seem to forget that we are made of the same blood and we are both his little toys. He's left me alone for a very long time and now having you here has drawn his attention back to me. I am in danger, too. And probably the faster I teach you our ways, and then set you free, the better it will be for me. Maybe he'll find my interference amusing.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“No one helped me. I told you that before.” He shook his head and walked on. “I'm trying to help you because no one helped me.”

Hurrying to catch up, she fell into step with him as they walked down the darkened street. They avoided 6th Street this time and ended up walking up a barely populated back street.

“Thanks,” she said, and meant it. He was risking a lot and he had that cute little thing back at his apartment that was madly in love with him. Amaliya wanted to feed from him again as he fed from her, but she couldn't say she even liked him that much. She was drawn to him despite him being completely not her type, but she wondered if that had to do with blood and power.

“You're welcome,” he said after a moment.

Her fingers nudged his palm and his hand closed over hers. They walked along in silence for a few minutes.

“Sorry I made Samantha upset.”

“She has a right to be. You have awakened in me long dormant aspects of myself.”

Amaliya pondered this. “Huh?”

“I’ve been playing human for a long time. You make me remember that I am a vampire in every sense of the word. That is why you need to learn to take care of yourself and leave.”

Though his words hurt her, she understood completely. Fighting back the sense of rejection, she nodded. “Yeah. I know.”

“I survived this long. So can you,” he said softly. “You’re smarter than you give yourself credit for and if you could just curb your tendency to take the easiest route-”

“I do not,” she protested.

He looked at her pointedly. “You don’t just go with your whims and take whatever option seems easiest?”

“Okay, when you put it like that,” she admitted. “But my need to run away seems to be coming in handy.”

Laughing at this comment, he reached out and took her by the shoulders. “You just need to not depend on your good luck to pull you through.”

“Good luck! Give me a freaking break. I have the worst luck known to man. Or woman. Or small dogs and cats.” She shook her head and broke away from him to keep walking.

“You have better luck than you think you do,” Cian said firmly.

Turning back toward him, she said, “Yeah? Prove it?”

“You found me.”

“Yeah, and awakening your inner vampire, scaring the shit out of your girlfriend, and screwing up your life.”

“Then that’s my bad luck,” he corrected her. He smiled and walked up to her.

In her heels, she was a little taller than him.

“I train you. You leave. I go back to planning my wedding. You get smart and outwit The Summoner and we both live happily ever after.”

“I think happily ever after is bullshit,” Amaliya responded.

Chapter Fifteen

Cian hadn't known what to say to Amaliya after she declared happily ever afters as bullshit and resorted to walking in silence. All night he had felt on edge with her, as though he was standing on uneven ground and about to crash. Watching her hunt had made him want to take her so badly and taste her new blood, that he had to concentrate with all his will to restrain himself. He had only broken down a few times, but had luckily pulled himself back.

He had to admit to himself that being with another vampire was liberating and intoxicating. It made the night seem that much more vibrant and the world around him so much more alluring. He had been locked away in his tightly controlled world with Roberto and Samantha and had removed himself from the predatory need that he now felt rippling through him.

Amaliya walked slightly ahead of him, drunken with her new blood, and obviously feeling pretty damn good from the alcohol that had laced it. She seemed a bit tipsy to him. Twirling around on her high heels, she gave him an alluring smile. He wasn't even sure if she was aware of her seduction of him. She just seemed to flit along on her whims. Flipping her hair back over her shoulders, she returned to walking along before him.

The enormous man was on her before Cian could even blink. The human form came out of the shadows and punched her hard across

the side of the face. She staggered back, her expression startled, but then it grew horrified.

“Rob!”

The man gripped her by the throat and lifted her off the ground. A terrible gurgling noise came from the man that almost sounded like speech. Cian realized the attacker was actually dead and that could only mean The Summoner was nearby.

Amaliya twisted in the creatures grip as its dead fingers began to sink into her flesh.

Cian rushed forward and struck the creature with a brutal blow to the temple. It barely faltered as its fingers crushed Amaliya's throat and blood began to spout from her neck. Unable to scream, Amaliya's hands and feet scabbled at the creatures body as she tried to wrench herself free.

Gripping the creatures fingers, Cian began to try to pry them free of her throat. Blood streamed over the dead man's hands and made Cian's grip slippery. Growling in frustration, he began to break the digits one by one. If he didn't hurry, the dead thing would decapitate Amaliya and end her.

Struggling in the shadows, the three supernatural creatures fought with desperation. Amaliya gasped as one hand came free from her throat, but the creature immediately began clawing at her ribcage, trying to push its broken hand into her flesh to rip out her heart.

With a furious cry of frustration, Amaliya hissed, “Let me go!”

Cian was breaking the creatures wrist, when it staggered backward and shook its head. Her hands covering her gashed neck, Amaliya's eyes were glowing not red, but white.

“Rob, fuck off,” she growled.

The creature was actually a very large man that was obviously very dead. His vivisection scar and the damage Amaliya had inflicted on him just a few nights before were clear on his white, enormous belly. He was naked and grotesque. The thing tossed its head back and forth in frustration, its broken hands clawing at its head. It staggered forward again, but Amaliya hissed, “Back off” and it fell back.

A low cry issued forth from its mouth, then it charged toward her.

“Leave me alone! Get the hell out of here!” Amaliya screamed.

The dead thing appeared to trip and it fell onto the hard packed earth beside the sidewalk. Cian backed away from the irate creature as it hit the ground and convulsed as if in pain. As it struggled, it sank slowly into the earth, and then was gone.

Falling to her knees, blood pouring over her hands, Amaliya whimpered in agony.

Cian leaned down and wrapped his arms around her. Her eyes were blue-gray again, but they were looking hazy. He had never seen any creature's eyes glow as white as hers had, save The Summoner.

Confused and afraid, he pulled her firmly against him, stepped into the shadows, and vanished.

* * *

Cian stepped out of the shadows of his own apartment and heaved Amaliya's weakening body over one shoulder. The power he had used to transport them left him feeling weak, but he could not think of himself in this moment. He rushed to the sleeping chamber.

Voices from the living room informed him that Roberto and Samantha were still about, but he had no time to deal with them.

Sliding to a stop before the metallic wall, he leaned down, popped the panel, and hit the code to open only one side.

“Cian?” Samantha appeared behind him looking confused. She saw

Amaliya's pale and bleeding form and gasped. "Oh, God!"

The wall slid up and Cian laid Amaliya down on the bed. She was bleeding out and he could see she was swiftly weakening. She was too new to lose so much blood. Madness was a danger.

Without a word, he hit the interior controls for the wall and it descended with a soft whoosh. The last thing he saw before he was engulfed in darkness was Samantha's confused and stricken expression as she whispered, "Cian?"

In the blackness, he found the light switch and a soft glow filled the compartment. Heaving Amaliya into his arms, he found that his fingers were trembling. Terror gripped him tightly as he feared that she would succumb to the extreme blood loss and go mad. And if she went mad, they were all in danger and he would have to destroy her.

Leaning down, he licked her wounds. His saliva would stop the bleeding and began the healing until her own body could take over. Despite popular modern vampire mythology, vampire saliva was not an anti-coagulant. It actually healed. That was why the vampire bite was always such a powerful, brutal event. They had to pull hard to draw out what they needed.

The fresh blood filled his mouth and he gasped with the pleasure of it. But she needed to feed. She lay limply in his arms, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"Amaliya, feed," he whispered.

"Rob," she answered in a muted voice. "He's dead. I killed him."

"Drink," Cian said, and tore his own wrist. He held it over her, watching the rich blood drizzle into her mouth.

"Rob is dead." Her bloodied lips and tongue seeming oblivious to the vitae that would heal her and give her life.

“It was The Summoner who did it. Do you hear me? He sent the dead to attack you because he knew it would do this to you. Either kill you or terrify you. Amaliya, do you hear me?”

Her gaze finally flicked toward him. “I sent him away.”

“Yes, you did.” And he had no idea how she had done it. “He's gone. You won.”

Slowly, her tongue ran over her lips and teeth. She slowly rolled toward him to take his wrist in her mouth. Weakly, she began to drink from him and he leaned over her with relief. He licked the blood from his bloodied hand, then leaned down to her to run his tongue over her bloodied shoulder. To his relief, the blood was sinking back into her flesh and he could feel her power growing again.

She released his wrist and looked up at him. “I can't do this. I can't win against The Summoner. He sent Rob.”

Cian brushed her hair back from her face and whispered, “Yes, you can. I promise. You can do this.”

Exhausted, she lay down on his bed and stared up at him. “Maybe he should just kill me. Or maybe you should. I can't do that....deal with dead victims ripping my head off my shoulders.” She covered her face with trembling hands. “I can't.”

Cian leaned over her and kissed her hands, then drew them away.

“Yes, you can deal. I want you to.”

“Why?”

Cian stared down at her. “Because you make me feel less alone.” And the answer changed everything and nothing in that moment. Samantha still stood on the other side of the wall with her hands on it, scared out of her mind and he knew it. And Amaliya lay in his bed, a reminder of everything he was and that brought a terrifying sense of

completion to him.

“I need to go then,” she said after a long moment.

“I know,” he answered. He lay down beside her and drew her close.

Her arms slid around him and they held each other as her body healed. His fingers slid through her hair and he sighed heavily. They lay there until she fell asleep.

Kissing her cheek, he felt a heavy pang of regret. But he had fought too long and too hard to have a normal life. A human life. His future lay on the other side of the wall.

* * *

“Let me open it,” Samantha hissed, and tried to get away from Roberto.

The lean Hispanic man had grabbed her just before she was able to enter the code to open up Cian's sleeping chamber.

“That would be an immensely bad idea,” Roberto said firmly.

“He needs me. There was so much blood!”

“It's not his. It's hers.”

Samantha hesitated in her struggles, contemplating this, then tried to wiggle away anyway. “I don't care. He needs me. Did you see his face? Something bad happened!”

“And because something bad happened, we need to let him take care of it,” Roberto said firmly.

“No, we need to help him!” Samantha squirmed even more and almost succeeded in twisting out of his grasp.

“She's lost blood and if she goes crazy she'll kill us if Cian can't stop her,” Roberto hissed in her ear.

Samantha frowned deeply, but stopped struggling. “What do you mean?”

“She's a new vampire. If she doesn't drink enough blood or gets badly wounded and loses too much blood, she'll go insane and kill everything in sight. That includes you.”

Roberto released her abruptly. She stumbled forward than whirled around. She felt helpless and frustrated. Clenching her hands at her side, she stomped her foot then said, “I don't like her! She's mucking things up.”

For once, Roberto didn't make a snarky comment and just sighed. Looking a bit nervous himself, he sat down in a chair and crossed his legs. “Just wait for Cian to handle it. He is an old and wise vampire.”

Tugging on her hair a little, Samantha stomped over to a chair near Roberto and sat down. “I know, but he looked so scared.”

“He's going through a difficult time.”

“I don't like her,” Samantha said again firmly.

“I noticed.”

“We were perfectly fine before she showed up. Yeah, I have to deal with you being a snarky bastard but she...she...” Samantha couldn't even put into words how Amaliya made her feel. And it wasn't just her tattoos, unique looks, or strange piercings. She lived in Austin. She was used to that. It was how Cian was acting since the new vampire had arrived.

The chamber opened and Cian slipped out before shutting it again. Samantha caught a glimpse of Amaliya curled up on her side, apparently asleep. Samantha slid to her feet and rushed over to Cian and threw her arms around him. He pushed her away before she could crush him close.

“I need to feed,” he rasped.

She drew back and realized he looked very pale and a bit gaunt.

“Cian, ohmygawd!”

“I had to give her a lot of blood.”

Roberto grabbed her arm and drew her away from Cian. “Let him be.”

Cian nodded to his servant, then turned and disappeared into the shadows.

“I’ve never seen him look like that!”

“That is because he never allows himself to go that far into the hunger.” Roberto let go of her. “Perhaps you should go home now. It is very late.”

“You’re trying to get rid of me,” Samantha said in an accusing tone.

Roberto whirled on her, and said in a fierce voice, “This is not about you!”

Samantha drew back, startled. “Yes. Yes, it is! I’m his fiancée, asshole!”

Roberto drew slowly near her, his manner more menacing than she had ever seen. “Do you not understand that he is truly a vampire? Not your romance novel vampire, but a real vampire who feeds on blood and is truly, terribly dangerous.”

Tears, hot and angry, sprang to her eyes and she leaned toward Roberto, and said, “He’s a good man no matter what he is. And I’m not leaving.”

Flinging up his hands, Roberto stormed away, leaving her alone outside the chamber.

Feeling extremely grumpy, she walked over and sat down again. Unable to help herself, she glared at the closed off chamber. That girl had to leave and soon. That was all there was to it.

It was nearly an hour later when Cian came down the stairs from the second floor of his apartment. He looked yummy in a clean white t-

shirt and black jeans. His hair was longer than usual and his face had the beginnings of a beard, but he looked much more like himself than he had.

“You're still here,” Cian said with surprise when he saw her.

“I couldn't just leave,” she answered and stood up. For once she wasn't sure if she should run and fling her arms around him.

Cian looked touched by this comment, but his hazel eyes seemed darker than normal. He walked past her to collapse into his leather chair at his computer desk. “It'll be all right. You should go home.”

“Is she going to go apeshit and kill everyone in the building?”

“No. No. She's fine now,” Cian said softly.

He wasn't looking at her and Samantha shifted awkwardly on her feet.

“I want her gone.”

Looking up, he was clearly startled by her vehemence.

“I don't like what she's doing to you. To us.”

“She'll leave soon,” Cian assured her, but his gaze seemed distracted.

“What happened?” Roberto asked as he reappeared from the library.

“Why was she in that condition?”

“The Summoner attacked us on our way back.”

“The guy who made you?” Samantha heard the shrill sound in her voice and made a face.

“Yeah. Him. He sent one of his minions. It was evidently the man she killed in Dallas,” Cian answered.

“She killed someone?”

“In self defense,” Cian assured her.

“Yeah, right. She's a vampire,” Samantha said sullenly and she crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

Cian slightly smiled at her, then continued, "Anyway, it was an animated corpse. It nearly wrenched Amaliya's head off and she somehow..." Cian rubbed his bottom lip looking confused and a little disturbed.

"And then," Roberto prompted.

"She banished it." Cian stood up and folded his arms over his chest.

"She actually banished it back into the earth. And her eyes...they turned white like The Summoner's when he controls the dead."

"Can you do that? Cause that's kinda icky," Samantha said.

"No, I can't. Which is why I'm confused." Cian shrugged.

"If she can do what this bad guy can do, then maybe she's on his side. Did you think of that?" Samantha could not believe how stupid men could be around a good pair of tits.

"I'm sure she's not. She's a fledgling. I believe her when she says she's a pawn in his game," Cian said firmly.

"You have to consider that maybe he can control her from afar. She is very new. Closer to real death than you," Roberto pointed out. "And he can control the true dead."

Cian bristled at this suggestion and Samantha felt her fear elevate to a new level. She had never seen him this agitated before. If anything, she would have described Cian as sensible, easy going and calm by nature. But now he looked dark, a bit angry, and defensive.

"She's afraid of him. She nearly died tonight," Cian retorted.

"It could have been a ruse to gain your sympathy," Roberto suggested, calmly.

"Yeah, what he said," Samantha cut in.

"I was there. I saw what happened. I know that what she is saying is the truth. I will help her again tomorrow night and maybe the night

after. I don't know. I just need to make sure that when she leaves here she doesn't walk straight into his trap.”

“What if you are in his trap already?” Samantha asked in a low voice.

Cian shoved his chair out of his way and stalked past them, toward the sleeping chamber.

“Cian, she has a point,” Roberto called after him.

“I've made my decision,” Cian answered sharply, and opened the chamber and disappeared inside.

“Do you see what I mean?” Samantha stomped her foot at Roberto.

“What are you going to do about it?” Roberto asked, and arched an eyebrow. “You and I are his human servants and we do as he says.”

“I'm his fiancée! Not his servant.”

Roberto just shook his head wearily at her and walked away.

Realizing Cian hadn't even kissed her goodnight, she felt tears brimming in her eyes. Frustration eating at her, she grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

What was she going to do about it? Well, she wasn't sure. But she was going to do something.

Curled up on Cian's bed, Amaliya fell into a deep, yet restless sleep. Traumatized by the night's events, her dreams slowly turned to blood and violence.

Cian was just settling in beside her when she sat up gasping with fear. Her hands clutched the bedclothes as she looked around the chamber in terror. His hand gently touched her arm and she looked at him with fright in her eyes.

Her sluggish heart was beating harder than it had in days. She pressed

her hands between her breasts, feeling its harsh thumping. Leaning over, she rested her forehead on her drawn up knees.

“What did you dream?” Cian asked softly.

“I was dying.”

She could vividly remember the way her hot blood had sprayed the professor's clothing as he savagely tore into her. Her own heart had betrayed her and continued to pump her blood out in rhythmic spurts. She felt Cian put an arm about her shoulders and leaned toward her.

“Your mortal death?”

“Yes.” She turned her head, rested her cheek on her knee, and stared at him. “I was bleeding out so fast. I could feel my life draining out of me.”

Cian's fingers gently moved her hair back from her face, and he asked in a very tender tone, “Can you tell me what happened next?”

Blinking, she exhaled slowly, emptying her dead lungs, then nodded.

“I think I blacked out. I remember coming to on the ground. I felt very cold. He was leaning over me and whispering words in another language. I could see...” She struggled for words. The image had come to her so vividly in her dreams, but it was fading away. “His eyes were white. Completely white and I could see that his shadow was somehow...um...like it was reaching into me and making my heart beat and my lungs breathe.”

“Like he was keeping you alive?”

“Yeah. With some sort of voodoo magic or something. Then he held his wrist over my lips and his blood began to drop into my mouth. I started to choke, but he kept trying to get me to swallow.”

“And the whole time his eyes were glowing white?”

She nodded the affirmative, then let herself drop backward onto the

bed. Her hair splayed out around her as she stared up into the dim light filling the small chamber. “I think he even told me not to die too soon. That it wasn't part of the plan.”

Cian sat next to her looking quite thoughtful. She could almost see him breaking apart her words and examining them, looking for some sort of clue to some mystery he alone seemed to know about or want to solve.

“Tonight, when that creature-”

“Rob.”

“Rob attacked you, you banished him. How did you do that?”

Amaliya blinked, and then shook her head. “Did I banish him for real?”

Cian gave her a short nod. “Yes, you did.”

“I don't know. I just knew that he needed to get off me and go back to where he came from. I kinda imagined him falling into his own grave and then he just sank away into the earth. So I did that? For sure?”

“I'm pretty sure you did. The same way the Summoner's eyes glow white when he controls the dead, so did yours.”

“Can you do that?”

“No. I can't.” Cian lay down next to her. “I think that when he kept you alive using his necromancy, he may have inadvertently ended up giving you some of that power.”

“To control dead things?”

“Yes.”

“Ugh. Do not want!” She did not want to deal with ugly zombie things like Rob ever again.

“Well, it could work to your advantage if The Summoner truly gave

you a bit of his power by accident. If you can figure out how to use it, you may be able to use it against him.”

“I just don't want to deal with him,” Amaliya grouched, and rolled onto her side to face Cian.

“I know, but you will have to,” Cian responded somberly.

“Your girlfriend must hate me,” she said after a beat.

“I think she hates me a little right now.” Cian rubbed his eyelids slowly. He sounded weary. “She was riling against you being here and it infuriated me because she and Roberto cannot understand my position.”

“And you're the big bad Master of the Austin, eh?”

“Well,” Cian pondered this. “Yes, I am. I shouldn't be questioned.”

“Vampire stuff kicking in, huh?” Amaliya smiled at him. “Getting all reconnected into the dark side of the force.”

“Something like that,” Cian admitted.

“Glad to be of service,” she joked, and adjusted the pillow under her head. “But honestly, Cian, I will be gone soon and they won't have to worry about me corrupting you.”

“You can't corrupt me.” Cian laughed. “I am already corrupted. You're just reminding me of that.”

”Sorry.”

“The sun will rise soon. Go back to sleep.”

Amaliya sighed and closed her eyes. She did feel weary, but she also felt anxious. If what Cian said was true, then maybe she had a few more tricks in her bag then she realized. Her eyes flashed open and she said, “Hey, can I turn into a bat?”

“We'll talk about that tomorrow.” His tone sounded amused.

Pouting slightly, she snuggled down in the covers. “Fine.”

He deliberately rolled over and put his back to her and she stared at the curve of his shoulders, then closed her eyes.

I'm not attracted to him, she whispered in her own mind. He's just not my type. Plus he's short. I like tall men.

“I'm marrying Samantha,” Cian's voice said from near her. But it did not sound so sure anymore. “I worked hard to create this life.”

“You're not my type anyway,” Amaliya said with a little laugh. “Don't worry about it.”

There was silence from his side of the bed, then he reached over and turned out the light. The darkness was strangely comforting, despite the night's events, and she pulled the heavy comforter over her as the cold air whispered over her skin.

“When I died, I lost my entire life. My wife, my children, everything. For years I mourned them and struggled to escape The Summoner and his twisted reality. Austin is where I found my freedom from him at last. I finally won his twisted game and he released me. It took a lot of time and planning to be where I am now. Samantha was just unexpected. She was so full of life and energy. She made me laugh. She made me feel human again. And when she discovered what I was, she didn't run away screaming. Samantha sees everything that is good in me.” Cian's voice was very soft, yet full of deep emotion and torment.

Amaliya reached out and touched his shoulder lightly. “That is why you should marry her.”

“I will,” he said with a slight tinge of defiance in his tone. “I will.”

Something heavy and unspoken hovered in the air between them and Amaliya felt herself struggling not to do something obscenely stupid.

“It doesn't make me stop wanting you. Doesn't make it any easier not to sink my teeth into you and feed. Or want to be in you as you drink from me,” his voice said with raw need and desire. “You remind me of everything I truly am. The parts of me I have been denying.”

She drew her hand away slowly, but he caught it.

“I'll teach you the basics of our abilities tomorrow and then you must leave.”

“Okay,” she said softly.

“Because if you don't go,” he hesitated. “If you don't go tomorrow, I may never let you go.”

Chapter Sixteen

Taking the day off was easy for Samantha. Being the boss definitely had its perks at times. It was easy for things to go terribly wrong when it came to dealing with State agencies, but luckily her small staff was pretty competent. When she called her office manager to leave a voice mail that she was taking the day off, she felt secure that the office could survive one day without her.

Crawling out of bed around ten o'clock, she had stumbled through her small 1940's house to the kitchen and poured herself some coffee. She loved automatic timers. Her cat curled around her feet, muttering about the lack of food, and she managed to pour most of the cat food into the bowl and not onto the floor. The tabby she had picked up at the Town Lake Animal Shelter did not act like it had ever been a stray. Beatrice was decidedly aristocratic in bearing and threw a disdainful look at the few bits of kibble on the floor.

"Fine." Samantha picked up the bits of food and almost tossed them in the bowl, but didn't want to upset her Feline Majesty, so she threw them away.

She had never needed much sleep before meeting Cian, so usually their late nights did not really affect her, but last night had drained her. The bright sunshine pouring through the trees that towered over her small house filled it with dappled light and shadow. Opening the refrigerator, she pulled out cold Pesto A Go Go pizza from Austin Pizza and began to eat. Breakfast was so overrated.

She had snagged as many of Austin's free publications as she could last night at the Magnolia Cafe after she had left Cian's. She had felt upset and wanted queso. Sitting in a corner table, feeling like a jilted girlfriend, she had gone through all the announcements and ads she could find, looking desperately for someone who could help her. She had considered the Catholic church, but as someone raised Southern Baptist, she was slightly suspicious of their methods.

Picking up the few publications she had yet to read, she sat down at her tiny breakfast table and began flipping through them as she munched on the delicious pizza loaded down with pesto and goat cheese. Every once in a while, she had seen announcements for lectures on the supernatural in town. She had never attended, though her curiosity had been peaked. Before Cian, she had not believed in anything supernatural, but God, Jesus and the angels. Now she was engaged to a vampire, a hot one at that, and she was a lot more open about the supernatural. It made life more exciting and a little more scary all at once.

Tapping the end of her purple highlighter against her cheek, she arched an eyebrow as she came across a small announcement in one of the smaller weekly magazines.

“Is the Supernatural Real? Evidence Presented and Discussed by Jeffery Summerfield, owner of Central Texas Supernatural and Occult Bookstore.” Tucking the highlighter cap between her teeth, she tugged it off then highlighted the ad in bright, cheery purple. Then she noticed the date. The cap hit the table and rolled onto the ground as she exclaimed “Holy shit! It's today!”

Beatrice pounced on the purple top to the highlighter and smacked it across the kitchen like it was a hockey puck.

Tearing the page out of the magazine, Samantha rushed through her house into the bedroom and began digging through her fresh laundry for something to wear. What did you wear to an occult lecture? She had no idea, but she didn't want to look like an idiot.

Digging out a black skirt with big white, abstract splotches and a black tank top with a white flower on the shoulder, she made a slight face. All her clothes were so cutesy. After seeing Amaliya lounging around in just plain jeans and a t-shirt, she felt decidedly unsexy. Though,

she thought with evil glee, her legs were longer than the female vampire's and her hips were trimmer. At least she had that over the sexy vamp.

As per the usual, trying to hurry only resulted in her dropping the soap in the shower numerous times, burning her eyes with shampoo, falling halfway out of the tub when she tried to get out, and managing to drop her makeup all over the floor.

By the time she made it out the front door, jostling her big white bag stuffed with a notebook, pens, and a Bible-a spur of the moment choice- she felt like she had fought a major battle already. Unlocking her little convertible Volkswagen, she glanced up the quiet street to see a few of her neighbors out walking their dogs. It seemed so normal here, but she knew things were far different below the surface of it all.

Even though she was worried she wouldn't make it by 11 AM to the Spiderhouse, the coffee shop where the lecture was being held, she drove carefully, and listened to her Patsy Cline CD to soothe her nerves. Despite her calm appearance, she was nervous as hell and the last thing she needed to do was have a wreck. It wasn't a long ride from her house on the edge of Hyde Park to the infamous Drag that lined one side of the UT Campus. She parked in the Spiderhouse parking lot and made her way to the old house converted into a coffee shop. It was funky and cool and very Austin. A large board covered in flyers and announcements had one big poster on it announcing the lecture, and she sighed with relief.

Two huge worn stone statues, a lion and winged leopard, stood guard on the steps leading up to the purple house. She patted them as she passed and wove her way past college students animatedly talking as they exited the building. Following the wrap around porch, she

carefully maneuvered past small tables filled with students typing away on their laptop computers or reading their textbooks. The patio was large and full of old statues that were missing pieces here and there, old rusted patio chairs and tables, Christmas lights, and people from all sections of Austin life catching a quiet moment before returning to work or school.

Samantha found the lecture in the patio in the back of the house and there was a nice gathering of people already seated at the picnic tables. On the large screen, that was usually used to show movies or classic TV shows, there was a projected slide of of Bela Lugosi as Dracula with the words “Are they real?”.

Taking a seat at the last table, she set her bag down and took out her notebook. She noted she didn't look that out of place as she looked at the students, housewives, a few elderly people, and a large man in a wheelchair, gathered around the tables waiting for the lecture to start. Looking around curiously, she tried to figure out who was the lecturer. She finally settled on an older man having an animated conversation with a woman with too much lipstick smeared on her lips.

“Okay. I guess we should start. It's ten after eleven and I think this is it,” a young man said as he slid off a bench. He was wearing very battered jeans, a t-shirt that read “Got Blood?” and flip flops. His plain brown hair was kind of scruffy, with long bangs hanging in his eyes.

What was she expecting? Giles from Buffy?

“This lecture series is all about the different popular supernatural creatures that exist in our modern subconsciousness and where their legends originated. We'll address the possible theories as to their attributes. Such as does lycanthropy really make a werewolf? We'll discuss the possible supernatural aspects of these creatures and

whether or not there is viable evidence to back up these claims.” The young man spoke quickly, but not as confidently as he was trying to project. He looked a little nervous and he wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans once or twice.

“Will we be discussing your father's works?” This came from the older man in the audience.

“Yes, we will be discussing my father's life works and his conclusions.” The young man bounced slightly on the balls of his feet, then said, “Okay, let's start.”

Samantha settled into her seat, ordered an Italian soda from a green haired girl wearing a white slip of a dress, and began to take notes. Apparently she was at the first lecture and it was a basic overview of the monsters that Summerfield would be addressing through a six part series. She noticed that vampires were going to be in two weeks. Damn.

It was very obvious that most of the audience was well versed in monster legends and soon the interaction was on a level that was way over her head. She wrote down anything that was on the slides the young man was going through, but she felt very confused by some of the terms.

At noon she ordered a sandwich and another soda and rubbed her cramped wrist. To her surprise, no one else seemed tired or bored and she felt a little guilty. Despite his very youthful appearance, it was clear that Jeff Summerfield was smart, witty and knew his stuff. A few times, she noticed him looking her way, before his gaze darted away.

Finally, it was over and her plate of half-eaten food was being invaded by flies. Closing her notebook, she pondered how long she should wait before approaching Summerfield. He was immediately swamped by

several people who were anxious to talk to him. He stared at them intently as they talked and nodded once or twice, but she could tell he was curious as to why she was there. She could see his eyes moving toward her in quick little glances. Maybe she stood out more than she thought.

Finally, the older man clapped Summerfield on the back a few times, then shook his hand before wandering away. The back patio was finally empty of everyone, but them.

She wasn't surprised when he walked over and sat across from her. He looked a little tired now that the lecture was over and he wasn't "on" anymore.

"I've never seen you at one of these before," he said pointedly. "I don't come to them," she admitted. "But you did a really good job today. I liked it."

"Thanks," he answered with a slight smile. "I don't have my father's finesse, but it went okay."

Samantha had managed to glean from the lecture that his father was a well-known paranormal expert, and she said, "I'm sure he thinks you're awesome."

"I hope so. He passed away a few months ago and taking up his mantle is not easy."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

He shrugged his skinny shoulders slightly. "It's okay. I'm Jeffery. Call me Jeff."

"Samantha. People call me Sam."

"Like Bewitched, huh?"

"But I can't wiggle my nose," she said with a smile.

"You're obviously sticking around for a reason. How can I help you?"

“Uh.” She pursed her lips, and then made a face. “Okay, this is going to sound really, really crazy.”

“Okay,” Jeff said slowly. “How could it be crazier than what we talked about today?”

Samantha laughed brightly, and said, “Okay, true.” She leaned toward him, her gaze intense and whispered, “My boyfriend is a vampire.”

Jeff's eyes slightly slitted. “Really?”

“Yeah. A real vampire. Like....um..Dracula or Angel from Buffy. Except I don't think he gets all gnarly when he vamps out. Not sure on that.” She pondered this for a moment, her brow furrowed. “I've never seen his teeth either, but I've seen him do some really vampy things.”

Jeff leaned toward her, and said in a low voice. “And you are telling me this why?”

“Because there is a new vampire in town. And I think she's totally evil. And I think she's doing a spell on him or something to get him to be evil. I need to know what to do.”

Jeff blinked slowly, then looked away from her as if mulling something over.

“What is your boyfriend's name?”

“I can't tell you that.”

“Is it Cian ó Loinsigh?”

Samantha blinked. “Uh, no. His last name is different. It's Lynch.”

“Lynch is the English variation of ó Loinsigh,” Jeff answered.

“Oh, shit! You know my boyfriend!”

“My father knew him. They made a pact back in the day that still stands to this day.” Jeff sighed softly. “But if another vampire is in

town and Cian isn't taking care of it, there is a problem.”

“Did I just get my boyfriend in trouble?”

“If there is another vampire in town, we may all be in trouble.”

With the casual elegance he was known for, and actually quite proud of, Roberto laid out all the tools he would need for his impromptu excursion. Industrial strength trash bags, twist ties, a bag full of garbage, an extra large garbage container, duct tape, several rolls of black plastic tarp, and the keys to the Lexus RX. Taking a hold of the ladder he had purchased that morning at WalMart, he set it before the nearest window and decided to start there.

It took almost an hour to cover the windows with the black plastic, sealing it into place with the duct tape. By the time he had finished, the area around the chamber was dark and no sunlight crept in anywhere near it. Satisfied that Cian would be safe, Roberto popped the panel and entered the code.

The wall slipped open with a soft whisper and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the absolute darkness that enshrouded the vampires. Slowly they took form in the murk and he could see that Cian was holding Amaliya close to him. He was not surprised. He had seen his master steadily falling under the influence of her presence.

That was why he had to do this.

Removing her from Cian's arms would be a little difficult, but he knew the vampires would sleep through it all. And thankfully, Cian's blood infusions made Roberto strong despite still being basically human. Being a human servant to a vampire did have its advantages.

He leaned over and began to steadily apply pressure to Cian's arms. He projected what little power he had toward the vampire. He knew

that his master would sense his presence and not be threatened. Slowly, Cian's arms came apart from around the woman and Roberto maneuvered his Master's sleeping body into a more comfortable sleeping repose on his back.

Taking a deep breath and steeling himself inwardly, Roberto reached for Amaliya. As he had known they would, her eyes flashed open and her lips parted. It was a survival instinct and he knew she was still fully asleep. To protect her as she slept, her body took on an even more sexual and voluptuous look in order to bespell whoever was disturbing her sleep. He had to admit that she was alluring in her own way. If she wasn't such a damn disruption, he would have possibly entertained the thought of seducing her.

He so did enjoy seducing beautiful, exotic women.

Using what little vampire power he had inherited from Cian's blood, he ignored her seductive aura and pulled her toward him. Her clothes were stiff with dried blood, but her skin was pale and beautiful. Over the last few nights, he had seen her fully coming into her new vampire nature.

Which was all the more reason for her to go.

Picking her up, he found her surprisingly heavy. He carried her over to the tarp on the floor and lay her down, then returned to close the chamber. The wall descended, sealing off Cian, and Roberto felt a sense of relief that his master was too weak to awaken during the daylight hours.

Disturbed by her open eyes and the way they trailed after him, he leaned down and closed them with his fingertips. They immediately reopened. Frowning, he grabbed a heavy bag and slid it over her head and down to her hips. Then, he yanked another bag over her legs and

began to wrap the duct tape around her securely.

Cian would be upset. He knew that. But his Master was blinded by the lust he felt for the new vampire and the feelings she drew out of him. It was not as if Roberto was particularly fond of Samantha. He found her too cute and too chirpy to suit him. Just as Amaliya drew out the darker aspects of Cian's personality, Samantha drew out Cian's human side. Roberto found both women annoying. Cian had been best when Roberto had been his only companion. He had been strong, sure, and merciful when need be.

Roberto wasn't sure if he could get rid of Samantha without Cian's wrath, but he could get rid of Amaliya.

Setting the over-sized trash can down, he studied the wrapped up form of the vampire and then made his choice. He picked her up and just dumped her in and began to shove and twist until she fit snugly at the bottom.

As the second son of a rich Spanish landowner in Mexico nearly a hundred years before, he had been ignored in favor of his brother. It had been made clear to him very early in life that he was expected to find his own way while his brother would inherit everything. Roberto had responded to this by becoming a bit of a con artist and a womanizer. By sixteen he was cast out and on his own.

That had suited him just fine. He had rich taste and found ways to ensure a good life for himself. In his late thirties, he was rich, well-established, and living on his own hacienda in Mexico. Then he had seen torches in the distance on his land one night. He had rode out to inspect what was going on and found men torturing a man they had tied to a tree with silver chains. Angered that they were lynching anyone on his land, Roberto had shot and killed the four men without

pause. It was when he had gone to untie the man they were torturing, that he realized the man had blazing red eyes and sharp fangs.

“Release me and I will not hurt you,” Cian had hissed.

Roberto had hesitated, then said, “What are my assurances of this?”

“None. It's a gamble. I'll take their blood, not yours. And if you give me shelter, I will make sure you are richly rewarded.”

Roberto was never one to shy away from a gamble.

Now, here he was: rich, the companion of a power man, practically immortal, and protecting Cian as he had that night.

Picking up Amaliya's bag, he shoved it down next to her. He pushed a full garbage bag down on top of her and opened up the top. He pulled the sides of the bag down firmly over the lip of the trash can and secured it with a little bit of duct tape. Once done, he put the lid on, then took it off again and peered in. It looked just like any other trash can. No one would ever guess that a bound vampire was at the bottom of it.

Replacing the top and snapping it closed, with the handles that locked into place to hold the top shut, he smiled with satisfaction. Not certain of how long it would take for him to get back, he took the plastic and duct tape off the windows and rolled it up into another trash bag. Within an hour, the apartment looked just as it had and Amaliya was tucked away in the trashcan.

Cian needed him to protect him and that was exactly what he would do. That was his role in Cian's life and he would not let his master be the fool.

As for Samantha, perhaps Cian's true nature had awoken enough for him to send her away. Though, Roberto would miss sparring with her.

Oh, well.

Picking up the car keys, he grabbed hold of the handle and pulled the trashcan so it would pivot on the wheels at its base. With a small, smug smile, he pulled the trash can out after him and locked the apartment door.

Chapter Seventeen

Jeff stood up and motioned to Samantha to follow him. He needed to pack up and grab something to eat before heading back to the store. The lecture had gone well enough, but the turn of events had him uneasy. His father had long held the line when it came to the supernaturals in Austin, keeping things relatively calm and under control. The last big threat had been the vampire cabal that his father and the other hunters had wiped out in the late Seventies. And they would never have been able to do that without Cian.

“I don't understand how you know about Cian,” Samantha said in a low voice. Her eyes were huge with disbelief.

“My Dad knew him really well before he died.” Jeff began packing up his slide projector. It was old and worn out, but it had been his father's. He could easily use a laptop for this sort of thing, but he had a problem letting go of the past. Well, letting go of his father.

“How?”

“My father was a vampire hunter.”

“For real?”

“Yeah. And so am I.”

“You're not staking Cian,” Samantha said firmly. “Okay?”

Jeff hesitated, then rolled up a cord slowly. “Did Cian make the new vampire?”

“No. But his creator did. I heard that much. Theo Sumner made her.”

“The Summoner?”

“Yeah, him.”

“Shit.” Jeff shook his head. “And she found her way to Cian?”

“I think he picked her up in a bar,” Samantha answered with a sigh.

“And this is your boyfriend?”

“Actually, we’re engaged’.”

“Cian is getting married to a mortal?” Jeff raised both his eyebrows in disbelief.

“Yeah. So? He loves me!” She gave him a petulant look and crossed her arms defiantly over her breasts.

“Okay, just tell me what you know.”

“You aren't going to stake him?”

“No. No. But we may have to kill the new vampire,” Jeff answered.

Samantha thought this over carefully and Jeff could see her coming to terms with the thought.

“Okay. I can live with that.”

“All right. Tell me everything.”

She did. In her perky, offbeat way, she rattled off the entire story. At times her eyes would flare open with great drama and other times slit with disgust. It was obvious she was upset. It was also very obvious she was certain Amaliya was a threat.

“And then he said her eyes glowed white, just like that Summoner guy! Which to me, says she is totally on the bad guy's side and that she is snowing Cian,” Samantha said at one point.

As he placed all his things in a big plastic bin, Jeff listened to every

word she said with a growing sense of dread. The Summoner was well known in the secret societies that deployed vampire hunters across the world. He was legendary and reported dead every few decades only to reappear later on. He was notorious for playing games with people, stalking them for years, before finally destroying them. The Summoner had wiped out all the hunters in France within a matter of days a few years ago. The only reason this was a known fact was because The Summoner sent the dead vampire hunters after their English counterparts.

“When did she show up?”

“Wednesday.”

“And it's Friday morning. Things changed that fast?”

“The first night, Cian was already being weird. Last night...” She got tears in her eyes. “He went to bed without kissing me goodnight. Plus, he was mad at me. That never happens. Ever.”

Jeff shoved the plastic lid into place and heard it pop. Standing up, he scratched his side, then sighed. “Okay. So. Cian is changing. Are you sure he's just not, you know...um....doing it...with this new vamp and you're jealous?”

“He would not do that! It's worse than that. Seriously, she's making him-” She looked startled, her eyes widening even more. “Oh, God, she's making him dangerous.”

Jeff leaned down and picked up the bin. “Okay. I just needed to make sure. My Dad really adored Cian despite him being a vampire. I don't want to undo what my father established with him.”

As he knew she would, she fell into step behind him, clutching her bag tightly to her, as he walked out the back gate entrance into the alley parking area. His old Range Rover was parked in the handicap spot and she frowned at him.

“You shouldn't park there just because you are the speaker,” she chided him.

“Fake leg,” Cian answered and leaned down to rap on one of his calves. “A vampire tried to pull me apart to punish my father.”

“No shit?”

To his surprise, she leaned over and examined his fake foot. “Wow, it looks real. You can even wear flip flops.”

“You'd be surprised what they do now days,” he answered. He heaved the box into the back seat and turned to her. “Look, what you are telling me is extremely serious just on the basis of the possibility The Summoner is here. That is not a creature to be reckoned with.”

“Does it hurt?” she blurted out, still staring at his artificial foot.

“Sometimes it itches,” he said with a grin.

“Wow.”

He touched her shoulder to get her attention. “Listen. I think we need to talk more, but I need to get back to my store. I have a clerk out sick and the other one is off at one. Come by the store at eight. That is when I close the shop and do private consultations. I don't have anything scheduled for tonight.”

“What do you privately consult about?”

“Haunted houses, exorcisms, that sort of thing,” he answered.

“Wow. You're like-”

“Don't say it.”

“-Giles from Buffy.”

He rolled his eyes. “If I had a quarter for every time someone said that.”

She smiled impishly at him. “Okay. I'll be there. I don't want to be in

the apartment when her skanky ass wakes up anyway.”

Jeff couldn't help but laugh. “Well, considering everything you have told me, I actually think it will be safer for you not to be there.”

Samantha pouted, nodded her head, and then suddenly said, “Oh! Oh! You are going to tell me about your Dad and Cian, right?”

“Yeah. I'll tell you all about that and some other stuff. But you have to promise me that you will help me deal with this.”

“Like Buffy?”

He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “Yes. Like Buffy.”

“Yay!” She grinned at him as he handed her his card. “I'll be there! Eight o'clock.”

Jeff watched her as she bounced away, obviously feeling much better than she had earlier. He understood what it was like to be consoled by the thought of actually being able to do something about a dire situation.

Sliding into the Range Rover, he turned it on and listened to the engine try to turnover, then catch after a slight cough. He definitely needed to get the SUV into the shop soon.

He pulled out of the parking spot and turned down the alley toward 29th St. He did feel satisfied with how the lecture went, but the conversation afterwards had him deeply concerned. The pact between Cian and his father had remained intact since the Seventies and he would hate to think that things were changing. The terms had been explicit. No other vampire but Cian would be allowed to live in the city. Cian would kill or turn over any new vampires to the hunters. In exchange, the hunters would leave Cian alone.

Sighing, Jeff donned his sunglasses and turned up the air conditioner. It was time to grow up and fill his father's shoes. He just hoped he

was up to it.

Amaliya awoke to utter darkness. Feeling drugged with sleep and needing blood, it took her a moment to process that she was tightly bound. Abruptly claustrophobic and terrified, she began to struggle. Something slick was pressed up against her face and she was compressed into a small space. She tried to move and realized her hands were taped together and against her chest. Panic began to grip her, but she fought it back and tried to think straight. Managing to squeeze the plastic between her fingers, she began to try to push her nails through the slick material.

“Damn,” she whispered, and tried not to completely lose her mind. She was terrified, but she had to remember she didn't have to breathe, therefore, she couldn't smother to death.

Her nail poked through the plastic and she wedged her fingers through it. Desperately, she began to tear at the black plastic. Filthy garbage began to leak around her fingers and she cursed loudly. Losing all patience and losing her battle against panic, she began to throw her body back and forth as hard as she could.

There was a loud cracking noise and then she fell sideways onto her side. She was still bound and her legs were trapped in something that was pinching them hard, but now she was laying on the ground. Instead of more black plastic and garbage being outside the hole she had torn, now she could see the cement roof of a building. With renewed vigor, she tore at the plastic until she could push her head through and looked around frantically.

She appeared to be in a multi-level parking garage. No cars were around and looking down the sloped floor she saw the area she was in was roped off. Heavy blue tarps were hanging from the ceiling to keep

anyone from entering. A sign nearby read “Danger” and she realized the area must be under some sort of renovations.

Sitting with her head poking out of the plastic, she could see her body was tightly restrained in two trash bags with duct tape wound around it. Pissed, she began to tug at the tape around her legs.

“If he wanted me gone, he could have just said so,” she mumbled.

It took awhile, but she finally got the tape off her legs and kicked the bottom bag off her. Taking advantage of her hunger, she used her sharp teeth to gnaw through the tape on her wrists. At last, she stood up, threw the bags away from her and looked around. She had busted her way out of a large plastic trash bin and her duffel bag was still inside under a bag of garbage.

Disgusted beyond belief, she grabbed her stuff and noticed a note pinned to it.

“Fucker,” she hissed. He could have just told her to leave.

She tore the note off, crumbled it up and tossed it in with the other garbage. Feeling like shit, she moved toward the plastic curtains cutting her off from the rest of the parking garage. She pulled back an edge and realized she was in the parking lot for the Riverwalk Mall in San Antonio.

“Man, when you ditch a girl, you ditch a girl,” she bitched.

Holding her bag in front of her to cover her bloody shirt, she walked along until she found an entrance and slipped inside. Luckily, no one was looking her way as she rushed down a side hall to the women's bathroom. She was sure she looked like shit and she was still caked with blood.

Ignoring the empty mirror, she used the soap dispenser and a wad of paper towels to clean herself off. She worked as fast as she could before anyone could enter. Once clean, she ducked into a stall and

switched out her clothes. To her dismay, she realized she was down to just a few clean things now.

Dammit, she had to do laundry. Were vampires supposed to even do laundry?

The door to the bathroom opened and she heard a woman's voice speaking in Spanish. Peeking out, she saw a beautiful young woman standing in front of the mirror checking her makeup as she talked away into a bright pink phone.

The need inside of her drew black and wanting. She needed to feed. Slipping out of the stall as quietly as possible, she moved toward the woman. As she knew it would, the mirror remained devoid of her reflection and she crept up behind the girl on silent bare feet.

With one last laugh and a kiss into the phone, the girl clicked it shut and leaned forward to touch up her lipstick.

Amaliya moved in to strike, her lips hovering just over the girl's shoulder. By the widening of the girl's eyes, she knew her victim could see her out of her peripheral vision. The fact that her prey could not spot Amaliya in the mirror froze the mortal in fear. It was ridiculously easy for the vampire to spin her around and sink her teeth into her neck. She took four great gulps and then licked the wounds closed. It took all her willpower, but she did not drain the girl dry. She stepped back as the deeply tanned woman raised her hand to her neck, the terror in her eyes keeping her still.

“Forget,” Amaliya whispered once, and pushed her power hard and deep into the young woman.

Her victim staggered backward, then caught herself on the edge of the sink. Slowly, she opened her eyes and put a hand to her forehead.

Amaliya retreated back into the bathroom stall as the pink phone

began to ring. She smiled with satisfaction when the girl said, “Babe, I need to eat. I almost fainted. Meet you at Tony Roma's.”

Cian awoke knowing that something was wrong. At first, he could not fathom what it was, but as he sat up, he realized he was alone.

“Amaliya,” he said softly, though he knew she would not answer. She was gone from the chamber.

A flash of hot anger filled him and he hit the controls to open one wall. It rose and he leaped out into his loft to find it strangely empty. Outside, the sky was nearly completely indigo with just one brush stroke of lavender and pink on the horizon over the hills to the west. With preternatural speed, he moved through the apartment, searching it in vain.

She was gone.

He was alone.

Even Roberto was missing.

Rubbing his bottom lip, he stood in the center of his living room and felt his anger growing even more violent. Either The Summoner had found a way to violate his haven in the daylight hours or he was betrayed. Only Samantha and Roberto could have taken Amaliya without activating his survival instinct to awaken.

Where was Samantha? He looked over at his answer machine to see there were no messages waiting to be heard. Of course, he had treated her rather badly the night before, so she could be somewhere sulking. It felt odd not to have her waiting for him, ready to fling her arms around his neck, and shower him with kisses.

Sadly, he realized he was not as concerned about Samantha as he was about Amaliya's whereabouts.

Behind him the door opened and he moved to see down the hall. Roberto entered carrying a Foley's bag and gave him a small smile.

“Good evening, Master.”

“What did you do with her?”

Roberto didn't even hesitate in his steps as he made his way to the kitchen. “Nothing terrible. I just removed her from your presence to bring her influence to an end.”

“You had no right!” Cian's voice was harsh.

Roberto's eyes barely flicked toward him in recognition of his anger. He turned with a stiffed back to place a new set of wine glasses on the counter.

“Roberto, you had no right to defy me.”

“My role in your life is to protect you,” Roberto said after a beat. “To keep you from harm. To be your guardian by day and your servant by night. I would hope that somewhere in the midst of those duties, I am also your friend.”

“You are my friend,” Cian admitted, but his emotions were choking him. “You had no right to go against my wishes! What did you do with her? Did you kill her?”

“Of course not. But I would have if I felt that had been necessary. After careful consideration I decided that her influence merely needed to be removed. She would have left anyway. I just moved her along more quickly.”

Cian hissed through his teeth and flung out one hand. “And why would you do that? Why?”

“Because she is making you weak! She has already brought The Summoner to your city! Do you understand that you are endangering everything we fought for? Everything we created? I can endure

Samantha because she is annoying and not a threat, but Amaliya is much more than that. It is not who she is, but what she is. The Summoner's pawn. And despite yourself, my Master, you are already deeply in love with her and what she brings out in you.”

Cian took in his words, understanding them as truth, but not ready to admit it. “Where is she?”

Roberto's hands gripped the edge of the cement counter top and said in a low voice, “Let her be. Let her go. Return to the way your life was.”

“I can't,” Cian said in a low voice. “I can't because it wasn't real. I can see that now. I created this illusion to make myself comfortable. I lied to myself that I could recapture what was lost when The Summoner created me and I slaughtered everyone who ever meant anything to me. I've been lying to myself and worst of all, Samantha.”

“Then let them both go and be who you truly are,” Roberto said in a soft voice.

Cian drew closer to Roberto and his eyes flashed red. “Roberto, you have been at my side nearly one hundred years. If there is anything you should know about me is that I do what I please and what I believe is right.”

“And sometimes you are wrong.”

“Where is she?” Cian smashed his fist down on the counter near Roberto's hands and the counter cracked and the edge crumbled.

Slowly, Roberto drew his hands back and pulled himself up even straighter. “You cannot set right what is already wrong. Let her go. Remember that you have won your own battle with The Summoner and let her do the same.”

“Roberto, I will not ask you again. Where is she?” Cian looked at his old friend with despair and frustration. He could not believe that his own servant would defy him, but yet again, for years, it had only been

him and Roberto, struggling to carve out a life for themselves. They had been complimentary partners in crime for almost a century, but it was now obvious that they were at a crossroads.

“San Antonio,” Roberto said finally.

“You dumped her in Santos' territory?” Cian was shocked. “Do you realize what he will do to her?”

“If she's smart, she'll move on before he finds her.”

“This is Amaliya we are talking about,” Cian snapped, and headed toward his phone.

“Let her go,” Roberto said once more. “Let her go. Or she will ruin you.”

Cian snatched up the phone and dialed. Pushing his shoulder length hair out of his face, he frowned deeply. His beard and hair were now the same length as when he had died. It never took more than a few days for his appearance to revert.

Santos, the Master Vampire of San Antonio, did not answer his private cellphone. Instead a feisty Mariachi piece played and ended with a loud whoop, then the beep sounded.

“Santos, this is Cian. One of my cabal may be in your city. She's a fledgling and not very clever. I will retrieve her if this is approved by you. Please call me back so we can discuss terms.”

He hung up and stared at the phone. Resisting the urge to throw it or crush it, he set it down on his desk.

“She'll be the end of you,” Roberto predicted.

“Then so be it,” Cian said.

He turned and walked toward the stairs. He would get ready and wait for Santos to respond. If she was lucky, Amaliya would not be found by Santos' people. But if she was unlucky, he had to be fully fed and

ready to heal her.

“Cian,” Roberto's voice said from behind him.

Cian turned as he reached the first step and saw Roberto lingering near the dining room table.

“I did it because I love you.”

“I know,” Cian said softly, and he walked upstairs feeling the heavy, sad weight of Roberto's bitter gaze.

Amaliya slowly strode along the crowded walk that wound around the entire Riverwalk area below street level in downtown San Antonio. Since it was Friday night, people were everywhere: heading into clubs, strolling, shopping, and sitting down to dinner along the edge of the river. The atmosphere was exciting and festive.

Children darted around her as they dashed about excitedly. Swerving around couples walking hand in hand, she almost felt human and it felt great. All she needed to do was get her bearings, figure out where she was going, and get back on the road.

At least the bastard had added another two thousand dollars to her stash of cash. Going away money, she assumed. It should last her a bit longer.

She was feeling better now and enjoyed the energy of the people around her. She had fed off of three different females that had come alone into the restroom. Luckily, she had been lurking in a restroom tucked away from the main walkway and did not have to worry about being interrupted.

She was passing one of the many stairways that led up to the street level when she was snagged from behind. Two massive Mexicans grabbed her arms as another snatched away her bag.

“Do not fuck with me boys,” she warned, and tried to wrench free. They didn't budge and their grip remained secure. Slowly, she realized they were not human.

Dammit.

“Um. Hi?”

“Let's go,” one of them said with a grim smile.

“Santos is going to love this one,” the smaller guy with the super short hair decided. “Yeah. This one will be fun.”

“Look, I'm just passing through and-”

“No vampire just passes through nowhere. You're in our territory now, puta. Better hope Santos is in a good mood.”

The big guy took a firm hold of her as if she was his girlfriend, his huge arm slung over her shoulders.

Amaliya tried to break free one more time, but she was held securely in place against the beefy man.

“Oh, shit,” she whispered and was escorted away into the night.

Chapter Eighteen

Amaliya kicked the back of the car seat as hard as she could every few seconds and screamed at the top of her lungs. Trapped in the trunk of a small sports car, she felt claustrophobic and pissed off. The brutes had fastened her hands and feet together with plastic handcuffs. They had actually left her duffel bag, still smelling of garbage, in the trunk with her. The reek was getting to her.

“Just let me go,” she screamed again, and kicked as hard as she could. The car veered to one side and her head slammed into the side of the trunk. This had happened several times and she was sure the driver was doing it on purpose.

She could not believe her luck. Just when things looked like they were going to get better, Cian ditched her in San Antonio, and she got picked up by gangster vampires.

Her body smacked into the side of the trunk again, then the car came to a hard stop, and she slammed into the rear of the backseat.

“That fucking hurts!”

“Not like it's gonna hurt, bitch,” a muffled voice answered her.

The back seat of the car was pulled down to reveal a small opening and the large vampire pulled her through into the interior of the car. It was obvious they did it to knock her around as much as they could. She was yanked out of the vehicle and the big guy accidentally dropped her on her face.

Wiggling around, she managed to flip onto her back as the biggest guy, bald and massive in a goldenrod yellow shirt, stood guard while the smaller guy got her bag.

She reared her legs back and tried to kick him. Without even glancing her way, the large man caught her booted feet in one massive hand. Flipping her back onto her stomach, he leaned down and grabbed the waistband of her jeans and hoisted her up off the ground. Carrying her like she was a bag, he walked up a narrow driveway to an enormous house nestled into the side of a hill.

We must be on the Northwest side of San Antonio, she thought.

Latin music filled the air and an assortment of Mexican-American women of all sizes, skin and hair color, all clad in sexy outfits, stood on a patio off to the side of the house sipping drinks and laughing. They barely glanced her way as she was dragged up the front steps and into the Spanish-style house. Carried over tiled floors, Amaliya tried wrenching free, but to no avail.

The big man carried her through the house and finally up a stairway that ended in a massive room. A fireplace dominated the room on one end, which made no sense since San Antonio never had weather that needed one. Hoisted over the back of a leather couch, she was dropped onto it.

Several of the girls from outside wandered in to look at her. Speaking in Spanish, they leaned over and studied her. A few looked disappointed and one said, “Vampiro.” She realized they had been hoping for a nice meal. Two of the girls were quite fair and she figured they had a lot of European blood. The third looked like a pure indigenous Mexican. She was very tiny, with coal black hair, and strong features. From the way she carried herself, it was obvious she was the one in charge.

“Look, I am just passing through,” Amaliya said firmly. “I didn't mean to break any rules.”

The woman leaned over her, her long black hair brushing over Amaliya's skin. It smelled of cinnamon and vanilla. “Mistakes happen. Unfortunately, Santos doesn't like excuses,” the woman said in a husky voice.

Just then a man in black slacks and a white shirt entered the room. He was not very tall, but he carried himself as though he were a man of great power and influence. His hair was dark brown and curly, while his eyes were brown flecked with amber. His skin was dark, yet had a pale undertone. She wondered how old he was. It was obvious he had not been in the sun in a very long time. Waving a hand, he dismissed the women before taking a seat across from her. She assumed this was Santos.

“Habla Espanol?”

Struggling to sit up, she shook her head. “No. Sorry.”

“What kind of name is Amaliya?” He tossed her driver's license onto the coffee table.

“Russian. But my Mother messed with the spelling a little.”

“You Mexican?”

“Part. My grandmother.”

“And you don't speak Spanish?”

She felt a little defensive and finally managed to get upright. “I was raised in East Texas with my Polish family. My Mom was half German, so we weren't, you know, straight up anything.”

“I see.” His expression was cold and odd.

She was hunched over lopsided, but he didn't seem to care.

“And why are you in my city?”

“I got ditched here,” she answered. “I was on the way out of town when your guys nabbed me.”

“Who ditched you?” He was eerily calm and cold.

Amaliya felt hesitant to say Cian's name even though he had her removed from his city. “I'm not sure.”

Santos moved so fast, she didn't even see him coming at her.

Suddenly, she was on the floor and her jaw felt broken. Slowly, calmly, Santos leaned down next to her as she spit blood on his tiled floor.

“Who sent you?” The Master of San Antonio pulled a kerchief from his pocket and began wiping up her blood in a nonchalant manner.

“No one,” she gasped. “No one sent me.”

This time she saw the blow coming and tried to duck away. He was far faster than she was. He hit her so hard her head smacked into the tiles and the world spun around. Blood began to slide into her eyes as she gripped the floor with her tied hands, and tried to steady herself. The pain was excruciating and she could not concentrate on anything other than it ripping through her.

Numbly, she realized that Santos was still speaking to her. He struck her again before she could determine what he was saying. This time she felt her cheekbone crack and blood bubbled out of her mouth as she gagged.

“Who sent you?”

There was no way she wanted him to hit her again, so she whispered, “The Summoner.” It was a gamble, but Cian was afraid of the bastard who had made them. Maybe Santos would be also.

Santos calm demeanor disappeared and he drew back from her.

Numbly, she noticed he was splashed with her blood. Wiping his

hands on his black trousers, he said something sharply in Spanish to the big guy in the yellow shirt waiting nearby. Amaliya was busy spitting up blood when she was heaved up into the air again. This time the big vampire gripped her under her armpit and held her off the ground.

Santos appeared in front of her again. “Who sent you?”

“The Summoner,” she managed to get out.

“Break her arm,” Santos ordered.

Amaliya screamed before the big man could get a good grip on her. “Call Cian! Call him! He’ll tell you!”

“You know Cian?” Santos raised an eyebrow. He considered her words, then said, “Break it.”

Amaliya twisted hard and fell to the floor. Despite being tied up, she kicked frantically at the big man as he tried to reach down and grab her again.

“Mi único y verdadero amor,” the dark haired woman said from the arched doorway.

Santos looked up at her and Amaliya managed to get purchase on the floor and push herself under a huge wrought iron table.

“What is it?” Santos demanded.

Amaliya tried to worm her way away from the big man as he got down on the ground and tried to grab her feet and drag her out. Her face felt swollen and it pulsed with pain. There was no way she was going to let anyone break her arm without a fight.

“You got a voice mail from Cian.”

“Really?” Santos reached out for the phone.

Screaming, Amaliya felt the massive guy catch her leg and began to draw her out from under the table. She was so desperate, she tried to grab a chair leg with her teeth. Roughly, she was pulled out from

under the safety of the table and was rewarded with a hard punch to her chest. Blood spurted from between her lips and she knew she had heard her ribs break as her body was enveloped in overwhelming agony.

“Manny, leave her alone. Cian called to claim her as part of his cabal. We don't want to mess her up too badly if she is worth something to him,” Santos said in his deadly, calm voice. He then dialed a number and raised the cellphone to his face, the glowing keyboard illuminating his face red.

As Amaliya vomited up more blood, she heard Cian's voice faintly from across the room. And then she felt her head fall to the floor and drag her body down into darkness.

* * *

Samantha arrived at the small bookshop in South Austin just before eight o'clock. It was a tiny converted house with a wide porch with chairs arranged on it for reading. The front yard was actually well tended and had a birdbath in it. The parking along the side was limited, but hers was the only car in it other than Jeff's SUV. Climbing out of her car, her feet settled into the freshly laid gravel.

She had felt silly in her earlier outfit, so tonight she was wearing jeans and a white fitted t-shirt. Instead of flip flops, she had dug out her cowboy boots and she had thrown on a black shrug at the last minute. Heaving her heavy bag over one shoulder, she walked up to the door and peered in the glass.

The first room was tiny and had a checkout counter. A huge magazine rack full of free publications and political pamphlets of all kinds stood near the door. It was also decorated with old paintings and photos of famous writers of the paranormal. She recognized Stephen King, Anne Rice and Edgar Allen Poe. Pulling the door open, she heard a

tiny bell jingle over head.

Rooms opened up to her left and straight ahead. Both were filled to the brim with bookcases loaded up with books. A few overstuffed chairs were shoved into corners under what looked like antique hanging lamps from exotic countries. A string of plastic beads hung over each doorway. The design the colored beads created were of a pentagram on one and an ankh on the other.

The beads tinkled as Jeff appeared. He was limping slightly and he smiled at her awkwardly. He looked really young, but she bet he was her age.

“Hey, Serena,” he said.

“Samantha,” she answered automatically.

“It was a joke. You're wearing a totally different look from this morning and Serena was Samantha's evil cousin and-” He looked flustered.

“Oh, yeah! Oh, sorry!” She laughed and waved a hand. “I'm just a little stressed.”

“Want to come to the back? I just need to lock the door. It's been dead since about an hour ago.”

“Yeah, sure.” She felt a little nervous at the thought of hanging out with a complete stranger. She had her mace in her purse and she consoled herself with that thought.

Jeff limped to the door and locked it. Laying the keys on the counter in plain sight, it was clear he did not want her to feel ill at ease. He had changed his t-shirt since this morning and it read “Vote for Pedro.”

“I love that movie!” Samantha said, pointing. “Napoleon was like this kid that used to always stare at me and drool in high school.”

“It seems a lot of guys would do that without being a super nerd,” Jeff responded and winked.

“You're sweet,” Samantha decided as she followed him into the hallway leading to the back.

“Nah, just a nerd,” he teased. “I own an occult bookstore and wear t-shirts from movies.”

“True. True,” she conceded.

The room they entered was also loaded with books and opened up to yet another room. This last one was much larger and had a long beat up wooden table in the middle with mismatched chairs around it. It looked quaint and sort of like an old library. To her left, she saw a door marked “Restroom” with a little drawing of a female ghost on it with a pink bow. A few feet from it was one with a male ghost.

Between them was a small table with a coffee pot and Styrofoam cups set out. A cookie jar with a donation cup next to it looked alluring and she went over to pry it open.

“I made those,” he said as he settled into a chair at the table. “They're vegan.”

Pulling out a cookie, she felt its freshness and the smell was wonderful. “Vegan? Really? They smell good! Oh, yummy.” Rummaging in her bag, she looked for some change.

“You don't have to donate,” he said quickly.

“No, no. I want to!” She found a dollar bill lurking under her sunglass case and tucked it into the jar. Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she already felt a little less nervous. The smell was heavenly.

“I just do that so people will feel at home. It can be nerve wracking to come in here looking for actual answers and just not fun reading material.” Jeff rubbed his leg and tapped the leather bound books

stacked next to him.

Setting her drink down, she sat next to him and munched on her cookie. It had a different texture than what she was used to, but it tasted great. “Do a lot of people do that?”

“Oh, yeah. South Austin has a lot of haunted houses. Then on top of that, add in college students messing with the occult and not having a clue what they are doing. They end up with trouble and have to find a way out of it.”

“And you take care of that? Fix the situation?”

“To the best of my ability,” Jeff answered. “I can't always resolve it, but I do my best.”

“You're kinda like-”

“Please, don't.”

“Van Helsing,” Samantha piped and ate another bit of her cookie.

“I thought you were going to say Buffy. Again,” Jeff said with a laugh.

“I look more like Buffy than you do,” Samantha grinned.

“And you date vampires,” Jeff agreed with bemusement.

“But seriously, you do this all the time, right? Deal with the supernatural?”

“Not all the time, but enough to give me some really good nightmares.”

“Well, I guess getting your leg torn off by a vampire would do that,” she said with a frown, and immediately regretted saying it.

With a somber expression, he nodded and said, “Well, you know, it's not something you easily forget.”

“Was it Cian?” she asked fearfully, the terrible thought suddenly enveloping her.

“No. No. It was actually in another state that it happened. I was a baby, so I don't remember it. We were on vacation and Dad took a job getting rid of a local vamp. It found out and did a preemptive strike.” He sighed. “That's when I lost my Mom and my leg.”

Samantha was utterly horrified and her mouth opened, but she couldn't find words to speak.

“It's okay. I grew up and helped my Dad with his hunts until he died. Of natural causes, thankfully.” He looked quite somber, but in an effort to shake himself free of his dark thoughts, he grabbed a book and opened it. “My Dad kept copious notes on all his cases and he had a lot written about Cian going back quite a ways. Dad was supposed to destroy this book per an agreement he had with Cian, but it was his life's work and he couldn't bear to do it. Cian was actually one of the first vampires my father hunted.”

“That is so totally weird. So your Dad found out a bunch of stuff about him and stuffed it in a book, huh? What does it say?”

“Originally, Cian came up out of Mexico where he was located with his human servant Roberto for a very long time.”

Samantha finished her cookie and leaned forward to look at the newspaper clippings, notes, and other bits of information stuffed in the book. “I know Roberto. He's a jerk.”

“Well, yeah. His history is not all that spectacular. Before Cian took him in, he was connected with multiple murders. He was even suspected of his brother's murder. There is speculation that is how he became so wealthy. Married women he seduced tended to become widows and he would stick around long enough to receive some very generous gifts. Cian and Roberto were in Mexico City for an extended amount of time after they joined up. Cian found favor with the Master of Mexico City who sympathized with his past. Both of them had been

slaves at some point in their history and she was enamored with him. Word is, she banished Santos, her brother who is now the Master Vampire of San Antonio, from her territory in favor of Cian.”

“Wait, wait, Cian was a slave?”

“You didn't know that?”

Samantha shook her head, her eyes growing larger.

“When Cromwell came into Ireland in the late 1600's, he decimated the Irish population. He sent a large portion as slaves to the West Indies. Cian and his family were sent to Barbados. He lived as a slave most of his life until he was around twenty-four. He actually gained favor with his master and was set up as a foreman of the sugar cane fields. He had a wife and two children when The Summoner arrived in Barbados. We think we found the actual ship he arrived on. It suffered a plague in transit and most of the crew and passengers died. Soon after, The Summoner killed Cian. Though we cannot prove it, we believe the Bridgetown fire was caused when some of the slaves tried to burn Cian or The Summoner out. It killed thousands of people, which, of course, would have been very satisfying to The Summoner. My father asked Cian about it and he doesn't remember why the fire happened. At the time, Cian was mad with the hunger that struck him after his rebirth as a vampire. But he said he remembered the flames. Cian fled and hid in caves for weeks in the aftermath. When he regained his senses, he knew was undead and was terrified because of it. He tried to go home, but the plantation had burned and his family was dead. People were speaking about red-eyed devils and he knew he had to get away from Barbados.”

“How did he escape?” Samantha felt oddly overwhelmed. It was suddenly quite clear she knew nothing about Cian at all.

“A pirate ship, believe it or not. He hid away on board the ship and

slowly drank most of the crew to death. They didn't know he was there and never found him. When they finally reached land, he disembarked and began his journey across South and Central America. He has never returned to Europe.” Jeff hesitated, obviously seeing she was trying hard to absorb all the information he was giving her.

“So, he...he...well, he's over three hundred years old for one thing. I knew he was old, but okay-” Samantha clutched her hands together and processed all of this. “So, he was in Mexico for a long time?”

“Yes, until he sent a request to the former Master of Austin. He asked to relocate here. He stayed in Mexico City far longer than he ever planned because it was safe. But he grew increasingly bored and had to move on. That is his story. My father actually believed that The Summoner was after him once more. Anyway, the Master of Austin agreed to have Cian join the cabal. As soon as Cian got here, there was trouble. The Master's companion took a liking to Cian and it caused inner turmoil. Beyond that, the cabal was extremely dangerous in their size and daring. A lot of vampires are hard to track nowadays because they do not kill. Like Cian, they take just enough from each victim to satisfy. But the cabal in the Seventies began to kill. Of course, there was the whole craze over the Zodiac killer and Charles Manson at the time, so the Austin police were looking for a group of Satanists. My father knew the truth and was looking for the vampires, but they were very elusive. Then, Cian came to him one night. And they made a deal. Cian gave him the cabal's location. My father swore he would not interfere with Cian's life as long as he did not kill or make any other vampires. It was also agreed that no other vampires would be allowed into the city.”

Samantha pressed a cold, sweaty palm to her forehead. “Oh, my.”

“Later, my father found out that The Summoner and Cian had made a pact. The Summoner would release him if Cian became the Master of his own city.”

“And with the cabal dead...”

“Exactly.” Jeff was flipping through pages, showing her time lines, drawings, and newspaper clippings. There were even several small sketches of Cian from different time periods. They all had Roberto's signature.

“Did Cian...set up the cabal?”

Jeff shrugged. “I don't know. My father didn't think he did. But then again, my father was fascinated by Cian. His history enthralled him and they had many meetings. They would sip tea and speak of the history of the vampires in America. But there have not been any other vampire related deaths in the area since the Seventies, so who is to say one way or the other.”

“You think Cian set up the Austin cabal, don't you?”

Jeff looked very solemn. “I do wonder. But if The Summoner was after me, I don't know what I would do.”

“He's after the new vampire. Amaliya. The Summoner made her and he's after her.”

“Then he's probably in the city by now. I've spent today studying up on her. She's not even a week old,” Jeff said, pulling a new leather book off the pile. He had already started collecting newspaper clippings, online articles and had several photos from different sources cut out and pasted to the pages. “I tracked her from where she was killed in East Texas across to Dallas. She disappears for a day, then arrives in Austin. I did check on her family history and found that her grandmother and some cousins live in Eastland County near the Abilene area. My guess is she went there.” Jeff showed her a map.

“So, did she kill a lot of people?”

“Yeah. The first night she woke up, it was close to a dozen. Vampires usually awaken mad with the hunger. This woman in East Texas is my guess for a second victim. A third was in Dallas. A truck driver. One of her childhood friends was hospitalized, so that could have been her, too.”

“So she's evil,” Samantha decided.

“Not necessarily,” Jeff sighed a weary sigh. “Vampires are scary creatures. They don't think like we do after awhile. They are above us on the food chain and when they are hungry, that is all that matters.” He paused, then looked at her worriedly. “Has Cian drank from you? Or you from him?”

“Ew. No.” She shook her head. “No. No. Hell, we don't even do...um...sex...much.” She shrugged a little. “I thought maybe vampires aren't super into it or something.”

“It's probably because vampires mix blood with sex and he was trying to spare you.” His tone was very gentle and his expression embarrassed.

“Oh.” She absorbed this, then said in a soft voice, “So that points to him being good, right?”

Jeff gave her a reassuring smile. “Yeah. I'm sure it does.”

She ran her fingers over the picture of Amaliya with blond hair from her high school yearbook. Amaliya looked a little sad and bored in the picture.

“What do you want to do?”

Jeff's voice startled her and she looked up. “What?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Save Cian. Get rid of her,” Samantha said finally.

And after that, she wasn't sure.

Now she wasn't sure about anything. Marrying a vampire had seemed so ultra romantic and wonderful. Now she was scared out of her mind. But she knew he was a good man or creature or whatever and he didn't deserve to die.

Or at least she didn't think so.

Jeff reached over and took her trembling hand in his. It was nice and warm, not cool like Cian's. "I'll help you do that then. Besides, I always told my father I would honor his promise to Cian."

She gripped his hand tightly between hers and fought back tears. "Amaliya being here is bad, isn't it?"

Jeff nodded. "I think so."

Samantha cleared her clogged throat then said, "Okay. Then we kill her so The Summoner leaves and everything goes back to normal."

It was almost eleven o'clock when Cian finally arrived at Santos' home in San Antonio. It had taken an hour of phone negotiations before he could leave Austin. It was a little over another hour to drive down. Roberto had been furious to be left behind, but Cian did not want to deal with his right hand man as well as the Master of San Antonio. It was maybe foolhardy to go alone, but he did know Santos was a man of reason, even if he was a brutal bastard most of the time.

Santos was the son of an Aztec princess who had been raped by a Spanish invader, or so he claimed, and the anger he carried inside of himself had not diminished with time. Santos did consider himself a man of his word, and when he swore that Cian would not be harmed, attacked or killed, Cian believed him.

Besides, Santos wanted information about The Summoner.

Cian parked his Mercedes where one of Santos' guards directed him. A party seemed to be getting underway with plenty of beautiful Latina women and Santos' faithful compadres or his "boys" as he liked to put it. Dressed in black trousers and a black silk shirt, Cian had dressed up for the Master of San Antonio. He knew that Santos basically held court and expected a certain amount of respect. Cian's shiny black shoes felt a little too snug, but he had barely worn them since buying them.

Etzli, Santos half sister, stepped out onto the steps. Her diminutive figure, raven locks, and dark eyes spoke of her pure Aztec blood. Her keen eyes, lightly tilted up at the corners, looked him over and she smiled slightly.

"Still pasty white and boring," she teased him, a slight edge in her tone.

They had met hundreds of years ago in Mexico City, long before Santos had been forced to immigrate up into Texas. Cian had been fascinated by her and her bloody ways. Her name literally meant blood and he had a feeling if she had not been transformed into a vampire, she still would have had a blood fetish. She was sultry and wicked and he had adored her until Santos had discovered her secret affair with the Irishman. Etzli, as the Master of Mexico City, had banished her brother from her city after he had tried to kill Cian in a fit of jealousy and anger. Years later she had not been pleased when he had left her cabal to move to Austin, Texas.

"And you are beautiful, as always," Cian said with a charming grin. "Visiting your brother? On speaking terms again?"

Cian wasn't surprised. Santos and Etzli were firmly intertwined in each other. He had realized toward the end of his time with her that she had mostly adored him because her brother had not. "You are far

away from home.”

She gave him a little shrug. “Once you were gone, we reconciled. Blood is powerful.”

Cian nodded slightly and tried not to be drawn into her magnetic gaze. The half-siblings were most likely lovers again and he did not want to dwell on that thought. There was too much pain in their past.

She slitted her eyes at him and gave him a coy smile. “Your fledgling is here. She has upset Santos greatly. No respect for him at all.”

“None for anyone. That's kinda how she is,” Cian admitted, letting his Irish brogue come fully into his voice. “I'm still teaching her.”

“She mentioned The Summoner.” Etzli drew away from him and beckoned him to follow her into the house.

“Yes, Santos said something about that.”

“It is not wise to mention such a creature. Names have power,” Etzli reminded him.

Cian knew she was pumping him for information and he only shrugged in response. Santos had allowed him to come and get Amaliya for one thing: information. Santos was not one to take kindly to anyone, including The Summoner, being in his territory.

Some lovely young women slipped past them, whispering softly, and giving them furtive looks of curiosity. Cian smiled at them, but kept walking. He knew that Santos kept an abnormally large cabal at his side. It was for power and for protection, but dangerous if detected.

Walking up a staircase, he entered a large room that was obviously where Santos held court. It was decorated with antiques and artwork from Mexico along with Amaliya's body suspended from the iron chandelier. Cian started at the sight of her. Obviously, Santos had questioned her for a bit before calling him. Her face was swollen and

almost unrecognizable. Blood drizzled from the tips of her hair and he tried hard not to stare at her.

She appeared dead. Anger and despair began to swirl up to fill him with violence.

“She's alive.”

Slowly, Cian's gaze was drawn to the man seated near the fireplace. Santos was dressed in black slacks and a white shirt splattered with red. He was drinking from a goblet and Cian could smell the blood. It was Amaliya's. It was a pure power play and he knew it. Etzli glided to her brother's side and leaned against the chair.

“Good evening, Santos,” Cian said, and bowed his head slightly. He gained control of his emotions and embraced the feeling of relief, knowing that Amaliya still lived.

“My friend, Cian, how wonderful it is to see you again,” Santos responded and rose slowly.

Cian reached out to grasp the man's hand that was proffered to him. Santos squeezed it hard enough to crush bone. Cian matched his pressure. Santos smiled and dropped his hand.

“I found your runaway.” He motioned to Amaliya.

“I noticed,” Cian said, and put on his most neutral expression.

“She said she was dumped here.” Santos dark eyes searched Cian's expression.

“She tends to lie.” Cian shrugged.

“Really?” Santos arched an eyebrow. “She mentioned The Summoner. That he sent her here.”

Cian tucked his hands into his trouser pockets. “She was probably...” he looked up at her body. “...in pain and trying to save herself.”

“But she knows of him.”

“Of course. He made her,” Cian said and again shrugged. If he played it cool and calm about The Summoner, it would push Santos off kilter. Santos was used to him being in terror of his creator.

Santos' expression grew grim and he looked toward the young woman hanging over his floor. “So, you sent her here to deflect him from your city?”

“Of course not. But she is running from him. I've taken her in as part of my cabal, but she's used to being on her own. She ran away.” A bit of the truth, a bit of a lie. Santos would know it, but he expected Cian to lie. But he would not know which part was the truth.

“So she is not your fledgling?”

“Of course not. I do not make vampire children. I hold my city on my own,” Cian answered coolly. It was a bit of a bitch slap at Santos, but again, the Master of San Antonio expected it.

“I see, my friend. So this girl, who you take in out of the kindness of your heart, runs away to my city with The Summoner in pursuit of her? And you expect me to believe this?”

Etzli slid her hand lightly over her brother's shoulder to soothe him, or perhaps encourage him. Cian wasn't sure which.

“You know what he does. He plays games. I am his child, too, you know, and he cut a swath of destruction behind me for years,” Cian reminded him. “You remember what he did to us in Mexico.”

“So why did you take her in? She only brings him to you,” Santos said, his gaze intense and curious.

Cian looked up at Amaliya and her battered countenance. What answer would satisfy Santos? He could declare his love for her, but that wouldn't work. Or he could claim it was out of the kindness of his heart, but Santos would never believe that.

“She is what he is,” he said finally.

“What do you mean?” Santos looked confused and Etzli drew closer to him.

Cian could see Etzli's gaze grow cold and calculating as she looked toward Amaliya.

“I've only seen it once, but she can control the dead. She's not exactly sure how to control her power yet, but she can do it. I hope to hone her powers and make her my second,” Cian said.

From Santos' expression, this he believed and readily. “Then perhaps, I should keep her here. If she is what you say she is.”

“If you do, The Summoner will sweep into San Antonio and do as he pleases,” Cian answered truthfully.

From Etzli came a small cough.

Santos looked toward her curiously.

“The last thing we need is The Summoner coming into your city to kill your people. He plays with his offspring, but he destroys all other vampires with impunity. You know this,” she said. Her voice was thick with emotion.

“He'll fuck you up,” Amaliya's voice said from above them as she roused and opened her eyes.

Santos frowned up at her.

Cian nodded in agreement. “You know what he is like. You remember what he did to Etzli.”

Looking down at the pool of Amaliya's blood that was slowly snaking its way across the room along the grooves in the tile, Santos looked very thoughtful. “But if she can do what you say, I may be able to use her against him.”

“To do what?” Her voice was full of pain.

“Control the dead, Amaliya,” Cian said to her.

She laughed and twisted a little. Her body was doing a steady little loop as the chandelier swung about and her blood streamed over the leather sofa.

“I have no idea how to do that. What am I supposed to do? Go, arise ye dead fucks to torment the ones who killed you?” As soon as the words left her mouth, her eyes flashed with light and turned utterly white.

At first, Cian wasn't sure what was happening, but then the floor under him buckled. Startled, he stepped back. The tiles under his feet sunk downward and he moved again.

Santos looked stunned as the floor of the room kept heaving and buckling.

“Shit!” Etzli exclaimed. “It's all the bodies you buried under the house!”

“Whoa,” Amaliya said in awe as the first dead bodies appeared, struggling to escape their graves.

Cian stared in amazement as the mummified corpse of a woman struggled out of the ground at his feet. He sidestepped her as she stumbled forward and another corpse rose up behind her.

Etzli screamed as several lurched toward her. But most of the dead struggling out of the ground under the house were moving toward Santos. A few beat against the door to the patio trying to escape and get to the vampires partying outside. They were in various degrees of decay and some were nothing more than bone.

Santos recovered his shock and dove for a decorative sword on the wall. As the dead moved toward him with their hands raised to grab hold of him and pull him down into their grave with them, he began to slash at them.

Cian quickly leaped upward and landed on the ceiling. Crawling quickly over to the shocked Amaliya, he began to work on the rope binding her to the chandelier. She slowly looked up at him, her eyes glowing white.

“Wow,” she whispered, staring at him as he moved about on the ceiling.

He held onto her as the knot came free and swung her up next to him. He held her close as he pulled out a switchblade and began to cut through her bindings.

Santos was now sliding up the wall, slashing downward as the dead drew blood from his flesh, trying to tear him limb from limb. They were eerily silent as they reached for him.

Somewhere outside, several men and women began to scream as the dead attacked them, seeking vengeance.

Cian finally got the plastic cuffs off Amaliya and pulled her along behind him. None of the dead seemed interested in them. The corpses filled the room below them with their rotting flesh. Etzli continued to scream and leaped up onto the chandelier where Amaliya had hung.

The two vampires from Austin slithered along the tops of the walls and made their way out of the house as it filled with the dead. As they crawled upside down, they saw a few of Santos' women curled up in the corners of the ceiling, trying to evade their resurrected victims below them.

Though Cian knew the vampires could probably tear the corpses apart with their bare hands, there was something inherently terrifying about the raised dead. Even he felt it. A vampire felt pain and could be stopped. These things seemed immune to pain and even as some of them were ripped apart by the struggling vampires trying to escape

them, the dead continued their assault with silent determination.

The front door was open and Cian pulled his body through, then reached back to help Amaliya out. Together, they leaped to the ground and ran to Cian's car. The dead did not even acknowledge their presence.

“Why aren't they attacking us?”

“It was your curse. You told them to attack the ones who killed them,” Cian answered, unlocking the car.

“Oh,” Amaliya seemed unaware of her glowing white eyes. “Oh, yeah. I said that.”

“Get in the car. We should be more worried about Santos than the dead.”

She wrenched the door open and crawled in. “But my bag,” she cried out. “They took it.”

“I'll buy you new things,” Cian assured her and slammed his door shut. He quickly turned on the car and began to back up.

Santos erupted from the house, slashing at the dead creatures that relentlessly pursued him.

“Think you could call them off? We've scared him shitless. He will respect us and our territory even more now.” Cian was grinning with satisfaction as the Master of San Antonio looked after the car with desperate fear.

“I can try.” Amaliya rolled down the window. “Hey! Hey! Dead guys!”

The dead stopped their assault and turned as one.

Cian felt his skin crawl at the sight.

“Go back to the earth and rest,” she ordered waving her hand at them. Instantly, the dead began to sink back into the ground.

“It worked,” Amaliya whispered. “I can do it.”

Santos fell to his knees in shock and stared at Amaliya in terror.

Cian gave the man a curt nod, then he turned the car around. It sped down through the gates and away from the great house.

Chapter Nineteen

Amaliya waited until they were on the highway before slugging Cian as hard as she could. The Mercedes veered sharply to the left. Luckily, a car wasn't traveling in that lane.

“What the hell was that for?” Cian demanded.

“Dumping my ass here in San Antonio! What the hell was that all about?” She was furious. The pain in her face and chest were a throbbing reminder of Santos' lack of hospitality.

“I did not do that,” Cian said to her sharply. “You should know that!”

“You wanted me gone so you could marry Samantha! You told me that yourself! You could have just told me to get the hell out of Austin and I would have!” she screamed at him.

“Did you just miss the fact I rescued you?”

“It was more like I rescued myself and you just happened to be there,” she huffed, and restrained herself from slugging him again.

“Well, I came to rescue you,” he said with a growl in his voice.

“God, my face hurts.” She moaned and laid her forehead against the dashboard. “You could have shown up before they pummeled my face into the ground.”

“I called Santos as soon as I heard where you were,” he said in a gentler tone, and his hand stroked her back gently.

“So, Roberto dumped me, huh? Or was it Sam?”

“Roberto was trying to protect me,” Cian admitted.

Amaliya lifted her head up to see they were heading back to Austin not via I-35, but US 281. She knew from her time living in Austin that it would loop them around through the outskirts of Hill Country up to US-290 so they would enter Austin from the West, not the South.

“Why this way?” she asked.

“You need to feed. We can pull over out here easier. Plus it’s darker. No continuous city lights,” he explained to her.

Falling back in the chair, she ran her hands over her arms. She was feeling hungry, but she was angry. “Look, just let me off somewhere. Give me whatever cash you have and I’m going to just head out.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No. You’re going back to Austin with me after you feed,” he said firmly.

“You’re not the boss of me,” she said through gritted teeth.

She was sick of all of this crap and she just wanted to get away. Just runaway and be done with it. She’d call her Grandmama and tell her where to get the Lincoln.

“I am now. You’re not going anywhere. We need to prepare for The Summoner. Now that you’ve shown you have his powers twice, he’s going to be coming for you.”

Cian’s voice sounded very sure of this and it sent a chill down her spine.

“I don’t even know how I did it!” She wasn’t even really sure that she had summoned up the dead. But if she hadn’t done, then why would have they gone back into the earth when she ordered it? Lightly, she touched her broken cheekbone and shivered at the sharp stab of pain.

She was definitely healing slowly and she was famished. Crossing her arms over her stomach, she curled up in the car seat.

“It doesn't matter if you know how you did it or not, he'll come for you for now. I don't think he ever anticipated that you inherited some of his ability. I know I never heard of this happening before. I certainly cannot control the dead.”

She stared out the window at the dark landscape rushing past them. Tears were threatening to fall, as her face pulsed with pain. Her hunger grew. When she had said the words that Cian now called a curse, she had felt something drain out of her body and into the ground below her. It was as if a thread had been pulled and a piece of her had quickly unraveled. When she had taken back her words, she had felt it snap back. Now she was keenly aware of the shadow wound inside of her that could call to the dead.

“My Grandmama sees the dead,” she said. “That is why she was suspicious of me. She sees the dead so clearly, they are like living beings to her. My grandfather was terrified, so she stopped talking about it. When she was a little girl, she used to help ghosts cross over. That's why she is addicted to those stupid TV shows with mediums and ghosts.”

“Then, maybe that's why its been different for you,” Cian suggested.

She looked toward him and saw that he was deep in thought. He looked different tonight with his much longer hair and a goatee. “My life is seriously fucked up, isn't it?”

“Yeah. Both of our lives are.” His hands were gripping the steering wheel tightly.

“I'll leave when we get to Austin.” She felt a little calmer now. He had come to San Antonio for her and dumping her seemed like something Roberto would do. Tie her up, shove her in a trashcan and

leave her out for the San Antonio vamps to play with. "I'll get Grandmama's car and head to Mexico. Unless they're as crazy as you guys are about territory."

"Worse," Cian informed her with a sigh. "It's a constant struggle for control down there."

"Then maybe Canada," she decided. She could feel her sharp teeth brushing against her bruised lips and she ran a finger over them thoughtfully.

"Stay in Austin," Cian said to her.

"You're getting married," she pointed out.

He lapsed into silence and she curled up even tighter. Her body hurt like crazy. There were still a lot of cars on the road, but they would soon thin out as they got further out of San Antonio.

She must have dozed for awhile for she was startled when he pulled over onto the shoulder.

"You need to drink," he said, and slashed his wrist.

The smell of his blood overwhelmed her. Without hesitating, she leaned over and gripped his arm between her hands and covered the gash with her mouth. Sucking hard, she drew his blood into her in a wonderful cool rush. It wasn't as warm as a mortal's would be, but it was rich and full of the life she needed. She gasped as the blood began to flow through her and her body began to tingle as she healed. She felt Cian's hand slide into her hair and she giggled, blood almost coming out her nose.

"What?" he whispered in a raspy voice.

"If anyone saw us they'd think I was giving you a blow job," she said, and bit into his wrist again.

Despite his earlier seriousness, Cian's laughter filled the car. It even

broke the tension between them a little as the deliciousness of the moment filled them. The more she drank, the more she felt entangled in him and soon wanted to climb on top of him and devour him in other ways. His fingers in her hair tightened and slowly drew her head back.

She didn't hesitate to kiss him back when he covered her mouth with his and her hands clung to his shoulders. It felt so good to heal and it felt so good to feel fully alive again. His tongue licked the blood from her lips and he drew back reluctantly. Slowly, she sank back into her seat and ran her hands over her now healed face.

Cian looked a little pale as he sucked on his wrist so it would heal more quickly. There was a disquieting atmosphere in the car as they both retreated into their own thoughts. Amaliya had no idea what was on his mind, but she was still thinking about blood and sex.

Unfortunately, she was also thinking about him being engaged and as annoying as Samantha was, she appeared to love him very much.

With The Summoner somewhere out there, she had no desire to stick around anyway. She knew that if she stayed around, it would only put Cian in more danger and she was done with doing that. She'd grab the car and the phone her grandmother had given her that was still at the apartment and she'd bail. Simple as that.

Without a word, Cian shifted gears and the car sped back into the night.

The silence on the trip back to Austin had been stifling. They had both retreated into their corners and avoided even looking at each other. Amaliya had the distinct feeling they were both gearing up for the big argument they both knew was coming.

When they reached downtown Austin, she finally looked toward him

to see that his jaw was set in a harsh line. It made her feel agitated and she looked away sharply. He parked in the parking garage and she was out of the car before the engine died.

“Amaliya,” Cian said from behind her.

She walked to the elevator and punched the button. Turning, she rested her hands on her hips. “What?”

“We need to talk.”

“No, we don't.”

To her relief, the elevator doors opened and she stepped backward into it.

And managed to bump into a couple that were exiting.

“Oh, sorry,” she said as they looked at her curiously and she remembered she was covered in her own blood. She just gave them a half-hearted smile and shrugged.

Cian stepped in beside her and began to open his mouth when a pretty blond girl reeking of liquor lunged in. She swept her hair out of her face and giggled at them.

“Hope I'm not crashing,” she said with exaggerated concern. Her keys jingled in her fingers as she swayed back and forth.

“Not at all,” Amaliya assured her.

“Did you spill your drink?” The girl pointed to Amaliya's crusted t-shirt.

“Bloody Mary,” Amaliya answered.

“That sucks,” the girl said with a deeper frown.

“How are you doing, Heather?” Cian steadied the girl with one hand.

“Oh, I'm drunk. But I got a cab back,” she assured him.

It struck Amaliya that this was one of the people Cian drank from on a

regular basis. She felt a pang of jealousy, then fought it away.

“Good for you,” he said, and helped her step out onto her floor when the doors opened. “Be careful.”

Heather teetered on her high heels and giggled. “I like the look, Cian. It's hot.” She gestured to his long hair.

Cian smiled at her slightly. The doors shut. With a determined expression on his face, he turned back toward Amaliya.

Amaliya pointed a finger in his face. “Don't start.”

He moved to grab hold of her and she managed to skirt around him as the elevator opened. Rushing to the door, she banged on it as hard as she could.

“Let me unlock it,” Cian said shoving her aside.

Roberto opened the door and peered out at them. “You brought her back.”

“I told you I would,” Cian snapped. He was growing more and more irritable.

“I need my car keys and my cellphone. And you owe me seven thousand dollars,” she said to Roberto, jabbing him in the chest as she pushed her way past Cian and into the apartment.

“Are you leaving?” Roberto asked hopefully.

“No,” Cian said firmly.

“Yes,” Amaliya spoke over him. “And I should rip your freaking head off after the shit you pulled,” Amaliya hissed at Roberto as he moved smoothly toward the kitchen.

“I only did what I felt was right.”

“Well, what if I do what feels right and it's throwing you off the balcony?”

“I’m stronger than you think,” Roberto answered as he picked up the cellphone and looked around for the keys to the Lincoln. “A hundred years of drinking a vampire’s blood makes me stronger than a mere mortal.”

“I’ll show you how mortal you still are!” Amaliya headed toward him. She had a very strong desire to punch his lights out.

She was stopped when Cian grabbed her arm and jerked her back off her feet and onto the floor. “Leave him be.”

Roberto moved toward them, the keys and cellphone in his well-manicured hand. His expression was impassive as he laid the objects on a table. He plucked his jacket off the back of a chair.

“If you are wise, you will let her leave,” Roberto said to Cian.

Amaliya pushed herself to her feet.

“Roberto,” Cian said in a low voice. It was a tone Cian had never used before and it terrified Amaliya.

“Yes, my Master,” Roberto said, eyebrow arched, as he shrugged on his jacket.

“Get out.” Cian’s tone was absolute.

“As you wish.” The servant quickly moved across the loft and soon the front door clicked shut.

“Are you going to kill me?” Amaliya asked warily as she backed away from him.

“No,” Cian answered, and closed the gap between them in the wink of an eye.

She was startled when he pulled her close and his hands cradled her face.

“Cian, we talked about this,” she said as he kissed her. As always, she felt the great need rising and her desire to crush him close was

growing unbearable.

“I was wrong,” he answered against her lips, and kissed her again with deepening passion.

“Samantha,” she whispered in a husky voice. “You’re marrying her.”

Cian drew back from Amaliya and moved toward the walls that hid his secret lair. She felt strangely abandoned and her lips felt naked without his. She felt hypnotized by his movements as he moved away from her.

“You know as well as I do that I was living a delusion.”

“You said she made you good,” Amaliya responded in a weak voice.

She felt terrible that she had come into his life and royally messed it up just as The Summoner had done to her.

“She makes me weak. She makes me feel human. She makes me forget what I am,” he said sharply. He turned toward her, eyes blazing. His longer hair and goatee made him look almost satanic. “I am a vampire. I am the master of this city and I will protect it and guard it against intruders. And that includes protecting my cabal. Which may be only you, but that is what I must do.”

“You’ve changed. Just since I met you a few days ago,” Amaliya said in a low voice.

It just wasn’t his appearance: it was his presence. He seemed less of the Austin pretty boy and more of the master vampire. His power was evident to her gaze now, even if it had not been when she had first met him. She felt torn. Cian was the only real advocate she had in this life. The only real protection she had against The Summoner and the unknown. Hell, even against herself. She was still learning. But she hated to fuck up his life and destroy all he had created for himself.

Cian ran his hand over his hair and shook his head slightly. “Maybe. But maybe it is an awakening you are seeing more than anything else.”

Moving slowly toward him, Amaliya ran her hands over her arms lightly, trying to focus her thoughts. Being around him was hard at times. This was one of those times. She wanted him. They both knew it. Despite her misgivings and her own stubbornness, she slowly closed the gap between them.

The moment she was close enough, his hands were in her hair and his lips were on hers. Within seconds, their kiss was frenzied and full of need.

Pulling her around and pinning her to the metal wall behind them, Cian licked her lips and sucked hard on their fullness. She felt his sharp fangs draw blood and her hands yanked hard at his shirt, pulling it free from his black trousers.

“It can't be gentle,” he whispered. “Not the first time.”

“I know,” she answered and drew her tongue over his lips. Then as quick as a viper, she drove her fangs into his neck.

Gasping, he pushed her hard against the wall, grinding his body against hers. Amaliya drew her nails down his bare back, then around his sides to his navel. Once there, she began to unfasten his pants as she drank deep from his throat.

His hands pushed her thick hair back from her neck and licked her with one long delicious swipe. She managed to pull his cock free and began to stroke it with her cool hand. She sucked harder, tearing at the tiny holes her fangs had made in his skin. They both knew they would not stop this time. He was hot and heavy in her hand, like flesh over steel, and it only aroused her more. When his fangs slid into her neck, she felt his pulse in her hand and a deep moan pulled itself out of her.

Somehow, he managed to get her jeans open and pushed them down.

Her overwhelmed senses barely took in his maneuvering to get one of her legs free. She was consumed with the taste of his blood and the heat of him in her hand. She stroked him with swift, demanding movements.

Once her jeans were off, he pulled his lips from her neck and forcibly drew her mouth from his own throat. His blood spilled down her chin and he licked the long rivulet from the base of her throat to her full, bruised lips.

“Look at me,” he ordered.

Her fingers traced up his neck to caress his face as he pulled her body upwards. She could not tear her eyes from him as he pressed himself deep into her sex. She opened for him, hot and ready, and she bit her lip as he fully filled her. Her eyes closed, but he shook her.

“Look at me,” he said again.

She obeyed, pressing her forehead against his as he began to slowly stroke in and out of her. Her legs tightened around him as he pulled her against him and licked the blood off her neck.

They were so terrible for each other and they both knew it. This never should have happened. Every time he slid his cock into her, she would cry out and he looked drugged with her blood and sex. The fingers of one of his hands gripped the back of her neck as he thrust into her. She kept her gaze locked to his as he slid his other hand under her blouse and tugged on one of her pierced nipples.

“Don't stop,” she muttered as his tongue played over the wound on her neck. It was beyond any experience she had ever had.

It wasn't until he buried his face in her throat and bit her again, that Amaliya felt the terrible sensation of being watched. She knew, for certain, The Summoner was nearby. Anger sliced through her and she gripped Cian's hair with one hand and pushed her hips hard against

him, driving his cock even harder into her.

Let him watch, she thought bitterly. *Let him watch.*

Gripping Cian tight inside of her, she bit hard into his throat again and pushed them both over the edge. His nails bit into her ass as he came deep in her and her own nails sliced down his back drawing more blood. Letting his vitae fill her mouth, but not swallowing, she released his flesh.

Slowly, they slid down to the floor together, a tangle of legs and arms. Cian's tongue lapped up the blood he had spilled as her wounded neck healed and she drew her finger through the blood running down his chest. The sensation of being watched was no longer there and she felt spiteful, yet satisfied.

Cian stared up at the ceiling and let out a shuddering sigh.

“What now?” Amaliya asked softly, almost afraid that he was full of regrets.

He rolled over and opened up the concealed compartment that hid the controls to his sanctuary. Tapping in the code, he looked toward her and gave her a slight smile. The wall behind her slid up and she gave him a suspicious look.

“I want to taste the rest of you,” he said in a low voice that made her legs tremble. He kissed her again and his hands began to undress her. “Do everything we skipped over the first time.”

Her voice shuddered as she whispered, “Yes, please.”

Easily picking her up, he tossed her onto the bed. As the wall slid down to shroud them in blackness, he crawled between her legs and she moaned with delight.

It was close to dawn when The Summoner saw his opportunity. A young woman in jogging clothes slipped out of Cian's building and

started down the street holding her car keys. He followed her at a distance, noting her bloodshot eyes and the slight reek of liquor on her breath. She was sobering up and obviously on her way to collect her car. After a short while, she began to jog through the streets and he moved through the shadows silently.

When she reached the empty parking lot, he took note of her rising fear. She had been afraid her car would be gone, either towed or stolen, or damaged in some way. Obviously relieved, she unlocked her car to get in.

“Excuse me,” he said from beside her.

She whirled around, terrified. Her eyes were enormous and she swallowed hard.

“Heather, it's me. Patrick. We met last night at the bar. I was worried about you when you disappeared.”

“I don't remember,” she stuttered.

“We live in the same building? Remember?” He held up his hand and forced her mind to see a key card to match her own.

She leaned forward slightly to see a card with his picture on it and apartment number. Her shoulders began to relax. “Oh, yeah.”

“I just moved here from France, remember? I'm so sorry I startled you. I've had a very late night myself and I was just walking back when I saw you. I was over at IHOP sobering up. You know how cabs are at this time of the night.” He smiled at her gently.

“Oh,” she rubbed her brow, and studied him, obviously trying to remember him. “Yeah. I know about cabs. I know it's stupid to drive when I live so close by, but with high heels on and all.” She floundered and looked nervous.

He could easily force her to have a false memory, but he enjoyed toying with people and seeing them trying to rationalize his actions

into their world view.

“Well, anyway, I’m glad you are okay. I’ll see you around.” He turned to walk on, his hands tucked into his trouser pockets.

“Oh, well, Patrick, why don’t you ride back with me?”

She motioned to her car and glanced toward the horizon. It was slowly growing light and he knew from his many years of life that humans found the sun a comforting signet.

“That would be very kind of you,” he answered and slowly walked around the car. He settled in as she pulled the seatbelt over her lap and chest.

“I had a good time last night, but I definitely drank too much,” she said as she turned on the car.

He knew she was working up to apologizing for not remembering him.

“I’m afraid I did too. I went to IHOP for three hours trying to sober up. I barely remembered your name.” He gave her a charming smile.

She laughed with relief. “I really don’t remember you either. I guess because we don’t live on the same floor I haven’t seen you before.”

“I’m sure we’ll see more of each other now,” he assured her.

The tiny sports car zipped up the streets as she made her way back to the apartment building in a roundabout way forced by all the one way street signs.

“That would be cool. I was thinking of doing a barbecue for some people in the building,” she said, and turned onto the ramp leading into the parking garage.

“That sounds quite lovely,” The Summoner decided. “I do enjoy socializing.”

She quickly swiped her card and the gate slowly lifted. The little car zipped up the ramp and she maneuvered to the correct level. “Me, too. I mean, hell, you’re only young once. Might as well enjoy it.” She

turned the wheel and the car slid easily into her parking slot.

Climbing out of the car, The Summoner could feel the exquisite pleasure of the hunt ratcheting up. The pretty girl with her swinging blond hair and firm body came around the car and headed toward the elevator.

“I'm kinda glad you were walking back. Kinda needed a second set of eyes. God, the cops are so cracking down on people driving drunk.” She rolled her eyes. “I know it's dangerous, but sheesh. It's like the gestapo.”

She punched the button for the elevator and he stepped up next to her.

“One of the annoyances of life and going out. Trying to outwit the authorities.”

“I remember when I had a fake ID. That seemed so dangerous.” She laughed.

The doors opened and she hopped inside.

He deliberately waited.

“Coming?” she asked.

“I didn't want to make you uncomfortable,” he said smoothly. He waited calmly for his invitation into the elevator, and thus into Cian's little world.

“Come on. We can share an elevator. We're practically old friends. Get in. Come on,” she laughed coyly. It was now obvious she was flirting with him.

The Summoner stepped into the elevator. As the doors shut, he reached out and banged the back of her head hard into the elevator wall. She crumpled without a sound. Leaning down, he picked up her key card and keys and pocketed them. Tucking his hand under her

hair to grasp her neck, he lifted her up so she was leaning against him. He could feel her heart beating against his chest. It was a delicious sound.

The walls were up for now, allowing them a spectacular view of the slowly rousing city of Austin. The sky on the horizon was turning lighter shades of purple and blue. Amaliya could feel the night washing away as the sun rose. She was curled up under the covers of the bed with Cian's arms around her.

Cian kissed her shoulder and rose up to sit beside her. "We'll have to close it soon," he said.

"It makes me sad, you know," she said softly. "Never being able to see the sun again."

His hand slowly slid down her arm and he rubbed his fingers over hers. "I know."

"I don't remember the last time I saw it. My last moment of seeing daylight happened and I didn't even realize it was important," she said with her voice full of regret.

"I remember the green of the sugarcane fields and the sun glittering off the white shores as the sun set beyond the edge of the ocean." His memory tinged his voice with sadness. "I didn't know it was my last day as a mortal, but I stood there wondering what Ireland looked like. At that point, I could hardly remember anymore."

He had told her his own story in the aftermath of their lovemaking. It had broken her heart.

Amaliya rolled onto her back and stared up at him. "Do you want to go back to Ireland?"

"Some days," he admitted. "But then I remember that my family is long dead and my village long gone and that there is nothing there for

me anymore.”

“I always feel there is nothing for me,” Amaliya confessed. “Like I belong nowhere. That I am always the visitor, the outsider, never part of the inner circle.”

“Is that why you always run?”

Amaliya frowned at him, but nodded. “Yeah. I think so. Always running to something, I guess. Just not sure what it is.”

He leaned over her, his leanly muscled chest smooth and cold to her touch. “Stay this time. Don't run.”

Amaliya was afraid of his request and she couldn't answer. She always ran away. It was her nature. When things became overwhelming, she always ran. But she had to admit, for the first time in her short life, after having sex with someone, she had not rushed away as soon as it was over.

“Amaliya,” he said again softly.

She pushed herself up onto her elbows and kissed him. Her lips caressed his and she playfully licked the tip of his tongue. It was her way to shut him up and avoid the conversation going in the direction she did not want it to go.

Distracted, Cian kissed her passionately and pushed her back down into the bed. Just as the sun was about to break the horizon, he fumbled for the controls and lowered the walls.

Chapter Twenty

Roberto cast a disdainful look at Cian's sleeping chamber. Amaliya's phone and car keys were right where he had left them the night before. His Master was a complete idiot and Roberto was disgusted. Sliding off his jacket, he slung it over a chair and went into the kitchen to make himself some coffee. The sun was low over the horizon and the loft was awash in morning light. It was refreshing to his senses after sulking around the Magnolia Cafe all night. He had tried to amuse himself with a book, but had ended up sipping endless cups of coffee and contemplating leaving Cian.

Of course, if he did that, he would begin to age again and eventually die. He was not ready to do that. His relationship with Cian was always a bit odd. They had come together out of necessity. Cian needed shelter; Roberto wanted to live forever. For years they had enjoyed the wild life in Mexico, living rich and fine among the vampires there. They had what Roberto considered adventures until the modern age gripped hold of the world and drove it into the boring reality it was now.

Cian was happy to stay secure in Austin and build up his mini-empire. Roberto had hoped that one day they would strike out again to new territory, but he could not be certain now. Cian's obsession with being normal and human had dissipated now that Amaliya was on the scene. That was quite a relief, but it was clear that he was changing into someone Roberto did not know.

Cian was not reverting to the man he had been before. Roberto had found Cian beaten down, nearly destroyed by the vampire hunters. A man who was broken and without a home. Roberto felt he had helped cultivate the former slave into an educated and sophisticated man. But now Cian was changing and this time Roberto was not certain that he could influence his Master, nor keep his elevated position in his

life.

Amaliya had changed everything.

Rubbing his brow, he felt the need for more coffee. He rarely slept, but he was tired now. But he refused to sleep until he sorted out his thoughts and devised a plan of action. Obviously his plan from the day before had failed miserably. He had not been able to be rid of the interloper and now Cian was being an absolute fool.

He poured the coffee slowly into a cup and frowned as he stared into the dark liquid reflecting the morning light. He should have convinced Cian to kill Amaliya the very first night he brought her to the apartment. Now he was uncertain of what to do. He was tied to Cian unless he found another alternative to secure his immortality.

He would miss his time with Cian. For years he had loved Cian as a brother, but then again, he had killed his real brother long ago. Love and hate were not so different when passion was involved.

The doorbell rang and he arched an eyebrow. It rang again a few seconds later and he gently laid the cup on the counter. He slowly walked down the hallway, curious as to who could possibly be at the door. Neither he nor Cian was particularly social and Samantha had her own key.

Peering through the peephole, he saw one of the pretty blonds that lived in the building waiting in the hallway. Roberto had spoken to her on occasion. He had figured out swiftly that she was more interested in his elusive master than in him. It had disappointed him for he thought her breasts were wonderful and in need of caressing. He was very surprised to see her lingering outside their door.

Removing the chain and unlocking it, he slowly opened it. “Heather? Can I help you?”

She looked a little unsure of herself for a second, then raised the gun and shot him in the chest. “No, I have it covered.”

The two dead homeless men The Summoner had sent to help her, stepped out from around the corner, and moved to gather up Roberto's body.

Somewhere in Heather's muddled mind, she was screaming, but the rest of her thoughts were consumed with The Summoner and his commands. He was powerful and she must obey his power. She could feel him, in her apartment, waiting for her. He didn't have to sleep anymore. He had said he was beyond that now and his legions walked both the day and the night.

She wasn't dead yet. She had wondered at first if maybe she was dead. But her heart was still beating unlike the two huge men busy wrapping Roberto up into the hallway rug. Those two men were truly dead. She rubbed the gun against her leg nervously.

What she was doing was wrong, right?

She wasn't sure anymore.

The Summoner called out to her through the darkness of her mind and she moved toward the elevator. Looking down at the gun, the thought of shooting him flickered through her mind. But he needed her. He had told her so.

She needed to obey him. Serve him. Love him. Until he killed her.

Sergio was intent on sleeping in. It was Saturday morning and his wife had taken the kids to visit her relatives. Because he had to work a double shift the night before, he had been given a reprieve from his glowering mother-in-law. She absolutely hated him because of his

Mexican blood and he absolutely hated her because she was a bitch. He had woken up long enough to kiss his kids and wife goodbye, then had collapsed onto the sofa to sleep the morning away.

As he dozed, he was dimly aware of the cat lying on his back, kneading his shoulder as her tiny claws lightly scratched him. The sound of the neighborhood kids playing outside tried to pull him from his light slumber and he grumbled. He'd give anything for there to be Saturday morning cartoons again so the kids would be inside being little TV zombies. Then at least he could sleep deeply.

A loud banging on his front door made him jump. The cat yowled and drew blood as she scampered off.

"Thanks a lot, Tinkerbell," he muttered, and wondered why he had let the kids name the cat.

Grumbling, he sat up and stared at the door. There was no one visible through the glass panes set in the door in the shape of a fan. Deciding he must have dreamed the banging, he lay back down.

The door shook as the banging started again. This time his grandmother's voice joined the harsh knocks.

"Sergio! Sergio! Open the door!"

Blinking, he sat up again and rubbed his eyes. "Grandmama?"

"Open the door!"

Pulling his undershirt down over his stomach, he staggered to the door, unlocked it, and swung it open.

His tiny grandmother stood on the stoop clutching her big tote bag with the flag of Texas on it. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt with a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe on it and her tiny feet were tucked into bright pink sneakers. "Get dressed. We're going to Austin."

"Huh?" He rubbed his eyes again and tried to figure out why his

grandmother was bugging him on a Saturday morning at the ungodly hour of nine AM.

“Amaliya hasn't answered her phone in two nights and something is wrong. Get your gun.”

“Grandmama, I want to sleep in,” he muttered, and was shoved aside as she barged in.

“No time to sleep.”

“Hey, why do I need a gun?” He shut the door and stared at her in confusion. Sergio's muddled brain couldn't take all this in quite yet and he sat down in his recliner, blinking tiredly.

His grandmother sat down on the sofa and the cat instantly appeared on her lap. “I gave Amaliya that phone.”

“Right.”

“And she called me and told me about this Cian.”

“The Key Inn?”

“No. It's a name. Cian. Anyway, she said he was going to help her. But she hasn't answered her phone in two days and now I am worried.”

“You know, Grandmama, technically, she is already dead,” Sergio said timidly. The events of the other night still haunted him and he tried hard not to think of it too much.

“I don't care. She's alive in a new way,” his grandmother answered. Her lips set into a firm little line as she lifted her chin. “And we're going to go find her and save her.”

“Grandmama, I don't mean to upset you, but Amaliya is not the most reliable person in the world.”

“Maybe not. But she's our blood. And she is my granddaughter and your cousin and we protect family.”

Sergio looked at her through bleary eyes trying to figure this whole thing out when something occurred to him. “Hey, how did you get here? She took your car!”

“My boyfriend brought me,” his grandmother answered primly.

“You have a boyfriend!” Sergio suddenly felt very awake. “You have a boyfriend?”

“Yes, I do.” His grandmother rubbed the cat under her chin vigorously and made soft noises to the furry creature as she obviously ignored Sergio's reddening face.

Sergio waited a beat, then said explosively, “Who?”

“Juan Carlos.”

“The old guy who rides around on the moped. He brought you over on the moped?”

His grandmother rolled her eyes and pointed at him with a gnarled finger. “Get dressed. Get your guns. We're going to Austin.”

Sergio leaped to his feet. Not to run for his gun, but to look out the window. “Where is he?” He had a strong desire to go outside and shake the old guy and threaten him something good.

“He left. I told him you would take me to Austin. But we need to go to my house. I have my stuff packed.”

Sergio blinked and turned to look at his sweet, tiny grandmother. He knew she was feisty, but he was realizing she had this whole other life he was not aware of. “You have a boyfriend and didn't tell me.”

“I didn't think you'd be okay with me having sex,” she answered.

“Oh, God! I don't want to hear it, Grandmama!” He covered his ears with his hands and stood staring at her in disbelief.

“I told you. You're such a wussy,” she said with a sad shake of her head.

“I am not. You're just...” he stammered to a halt. Calling his grandmother an old woman would get his ass kicked. So he clamped his mouth shut.

She smiled at him victoriously, seeing she had the upper hand. “Now, go get dressed. We need to go save Amaliya.”

Sergio rubbed the top of his head with one hand and frowned.

“Nothing I say or do is going to keep you from going to Austin, right?”

He could feel himself giving in despite his tiredness and his desperate desire to crawl back onto the sofa and sleep.

“I'll steal your truck while you sleep if you don't go with me,” she answered truthfully.

“Fine! I'll get ready!” Stomping out of the living room, he couldn't help but smile and by the time he was in the shower, he was laughing.

Amaliya woke up first and stretched with a soft yawn. She felt a little hungry and she rolled over onto Cian and lightly bit his neck. He woke up with a start, then wrapped his arms around her. Teasingly, she held his flesh between her teeth, but didn't draw blood. He ran a slow, seductive hand up over her back. She let go of his skin to kiss him. It felt wonderful considering everything that had happened the last few days and she let herself enjoy the tenderness of it.

“I'm hungry,” he said in a low voice, and pushed her gently off him.

“We both better feed.”

With a little growl, Amaliya sat up and ran her hands over her hair to smooth it down. Cian rolled over and opened the wall. It slid upward and revealed the young blond woman from the elevator the night before sitting in a chair. She had been waiting for them to awaken and she sat with her legs crossed. Her hand was resting on the gun on her lap.

“Heather?” Cian's expression was just as confused as Amaliya felt. “I didn't want to do it, you know,” she said in a strangely monotone voice. Her eyes were oddly jittery as she sat there looking pretty in her jogging outfit.

“Do what?” Cian asked in a low voice.

Her eyes continued to waver strangely as she forced them to look at him. “I shot Roberto.”

Cian nearly launched himself off the bed, but Amaliya caught hold of him and drew him back.

“It's The Summoner,” Amaliya whispered to him.

“He made me after he...he...” she touched the back of her head with her hand. “I should be dead. I hit the wall so hard. I can feel the cracks in my skull, but I'm not dead. He won't let me die.”

Amaliya slowly slid to the end of the bed and set her feet on the floor. She tried to pull on that dark power within her and sling it around Heather to bring her under her control, but it sat dormant inside of her, unmoving.

Heather swallowed hard. “He made me shoot Roberto. Then I had to go back to my apartment. He was there. He told me things. Horrible things.” Her fingers twitched over the gun again.

“This is impossible. He can't control the dead or the near dead when he's sleeping,” Cian declared. He looked angry and stunned by the turn of events. His gaze swept over the apartment looking for Roberto. “He doesn't sleep anymore. He's so old he doesn't have to. He can now stay awake all day. Sit in a dark room, play with dead girls, and make the dead walk the streets.” She stood up slowly. “The bullets won't kill you, but they'll hurt. A lot. He told me to shoot you if I had to. You're supposed to come with me if you want Roberto back alive.”

Amaliya didn't like anyone pointing a gun at her, even if she was a vampire. She flinched when Heather aimed the gun directly at her chest.

“Get up. Get dressed. He is calling me to him. He's waiting.”

“Roberto doesn't mean jack shit to me. Let The Summoner kill him,” Amaliya said with a shrug. “Besides, how do we know you really have him?”

Cian climbed off the bed, sleek, muscular and naked. She saw a flash of lust in Heather's eyes, then it was replaced with dullness again. “Yes, how do we truly know you have him, Heather? Did The Summoner give you proof?”

Heather coolly tossed Roberto's keys and money clip at Cian's feet. There was blood on them.

Cian stared down at the personal possessions of his servant with a dark expression on his face. “Get dressed,” he ordered Amaliya.

“I am not going to go out there and risk my life to save your freaking, backstabbing servant,” she said, and crossed her arms over her bare breasts.

“Fine. Then I'll go alone,” Cian said.

Heather trained the gun slowly toward him. “The Summoner whispers to me that if you don't come I am to shoot Cian in the head.”

“He'll heal,” Amaliya sneered.

Cian's brow furrowed. “What sort of bullets are those?”

“The exploding kind,” Heather answered.

Cian looked at Amaliya pointedly. “Chances are, I could not heal from that.”

For a moment, she pondered just running away. Just fleeing into the night and away from all this insanity, but looking at Cian, she knew

she couldn't bolt. Slowly, she stood up. "Fine."

Naked, she walked over to where her jeans were and began to pull them on. They had blood on them, but it wouldn't matter where they were going.

"I'm getting dressed," Cian said to Heather.

"I'm coming with you," Heather answered.

"Why don't we just kill her and be done with it?" Amaliya asked zipping up her jeans.

"Because if we don't go tonight, he'll up the ante. He'll do something even worse than taking Roberto," Cian answered.

"He says he knows where your Grandmama lives," Heather said in a voice that held no emotion, yet her voice quavered.

"I hope he can see this," Amaliya said, and gave Heather the finger. There was no way she was going to let The Summoner get her grandmother. She had to go.

With Heather standing guard over them, they quickly dressed. Cian handed Amaliya a David Bowie t-shirt. She shrugged it on and tied it at her waist. Her bloodied boots would have to do. Cian changed quickly into a black shirt and jeans and pulled on sturdy combat boots. His hair was now past his shoulders and his goatee looked a little scraggly. He was looking more and more her type all the time, she thought.

"Let's go," Heather ordered.

"Where are we going?" Amaliya demanded.

"A ghost town," Heather answered and waved them to the door.

"Great, just great," Amaliya muttered. Her luck, as usual, was in the pits.

“Where?” Cian slid his mouse over the mouse pad to awaken the computer.

Heather blinked, looking confused. “I can get us there.”

“Where?” His voice was firm.

“Fenton,” she answered. “He says to come now.”

“I want to see how far away that is,” Cian answered her in a authoritative voice.

Amaliya was confused at first, then realized Cian wanted to know how far away they were going to be out of the city. They were restricted by the night and if they escaped, they would need to know if they had time to make it back to Austin or make another plan altogether.

Cian typed into the Google search and watched the map pop up.

“Okay. Let's go.”

Heather waved the gun at them. “You're wasting time on purpose. He says you're stalling thinking Roberto isn't with him. But he is. I shot him and gave him to The Summoner.”

“Fine. Then take us to Roberto,” Cian said in a cold voice.

Cian took her hand as they slipped out his door. His touch was surprisingly calming. Her fingers tightened on his they walked into the elevator.

Jeff felt uncomfortable barging into a vampire's lair. Hunters only tracked their prey by day. Entering a vampire's lair at night was suicide. But after a day of arguing and planning, Samantha was determined to give Cian one last chance to see the truth. She had been unshakable in her belief that he was a good guy and needed to just see the light. Jeff wasn't sure coming to the apartment was the wise thing. He would have preferred neutral ground.

In his short time knowing Samantha, he realized she had a will of steel. So here they were, outside of Cian's apartment with Samantha banging on the door.

“Maybe they're out,” Jeff said after a minute.

“I have a key, but if they are doing something, I don't want to walk in on them,” she snapped at him with her face screwed up with disgust.

“Do you really think they're-” He stopped at the look on her face.

“Sorry.”

Samantha hesitated, then began rummaging in her big purse. “I cannot believe that I'm scared of going into my own fiancé's apartment because of some stupid bloodsucking whore!”

Jeff turned away to suppress his laugh. She was really cute when she was upset, but he did feel bad for her. He knew it had become increasingly clear to her the last few days that she really didn't know her fiancé as well as she thought.

“Are you laughing at me?” Samantha pouted and smacked him, her keys jingling in her hand.

“No,” he said somberly. “Let's go in and talk to Cian. But there is a good chance Amaliya won't leave.”

“Then we stake her tomorrow,” Samantha said firmly. “Besides, aren't you supposed to yell at him for having another vampire in the city?”

“Something like that,” Jeff agreed.

Samantha entered the alarm code and unlocked the door. Thrusting it open, she stomped inside. “Cian, it's me. Where are you? We need to talk.”

Jeff entered slowly behind her, looking around with curiosity. Movie posters, some funky Mexican artwork, and very modern furniture

filled the apartment. A massive desk with computer gear on it drew his attention. The last vampire lair he had been in was a converted basement at the bottom of a high rise in Chicago. That had been an exceptionally nasty vampire who chose only children as his victims. This apartment just looked like the place of any successful computer geek.

Samantha's boot heels clicked sharply on the wood floor as she searched without fear or trepidation for her fiancé. Even Jeff didn't feel particularly anxious. Cian and his father had a long friendship during his father's life and if Amaliya was dangerous, he was sure Cian would keep her under control.

But his primary concern was that Amaliya's presence meant The Summoner was nearby. That death and destruction. Jeff worried about the large homeless population in Austin. The Summoner could already be up to his old tricks and it would take awhile for it to be noticeable if his victims had no one to miss them. By now, The Summoner could have a nice little army of undead minions.

Curious, Jeff walked over and peered down at the state of the art computers. They made his aging Dell computer look archaic. His brow furrowed a tad when he realized one of the monitors was on. It had a map drawn up of a tiny town around three hours west of Austin. "Samantha, I don't think they're here," Jeff said as he slid the cursor over and clicked on the print button.

She was halfway up the stairs and stopped. "Why?"

"There is a map on his computer of a town out West. I know that town. It's abandoned. Nothing there but falling down buildings." The printer hummed and coughed, then spat out a copy of the map.

She stomped her foot. "Dammit. Why would they go there?"

Jeff sighed softly. "It sounds like a perfect place for them to go meet

The Summoner, doesn't it?"

Her expression instantly became distraught and she scampered across the floor to the computer to look at the map. "Oh, no! He's going to kill Cian because of that stupid bitch! Where the hell is Roberto?"

"I guess Roberto went with them," Jeff said as he ran his fingers through his hair. He was unsure of what to do next. The whole situation was complicated and increasingly dangerous.

Samantha looked at him with wide eyes and said in a trembling voice, "We have to save Cian."

Jeff looked up at her in disbelief. "Do you have any idea how dangerous The Summoner is? No hunter that has set out against him has come back alive. We just can't go rushing after them and expect to rescue them from the most dangerous vampire in history."

"I thought that was Dracula," she said with utter sincerity.

Jeff laughed despite the seriousness of the situation and sat down in the chair before Cian's computer. "Well, he's not the one we have to worry about right now."

"So? We should go there right now! Let's go!"

"Look, Samantha, I didn't have a problem coming here to talk to Cian because he was my father's friend. But there is no way I am traveling, in the middle of the night, toward what may be the lair of The Summoner. If we go, we go in the daylight."

"But he could be dead by then," Samantha protested.

"At night, that is when the vampires are at their pinnacle of power. The Summoner is a vampire and a necromancer. That makes him doubly dangerous." Jeff looked at the flustered young woman with his most calm expression, but his stomach was in knots.

Samantha stomped her foot and turned away from him, but he could

tell she understood.

“We'll go first thing in the morning. It's our best chance to locate them and rescue them and perhaps kill The Summoner. But to go at night is suicide.”

It was then that the phone resting on a table near them began to ring. Samantha snatched it up and said, “Cian!”

Jeff stood up and moved toward her, straining to hear the voice on the other end.

“No, Amaliya isn't here. Who is this?” Samantha was frowning even more. “Her grandmother?” Samantha looked startled.

Jeff gently took the phone from her. “Hello? How can I help you?”

“I want to speak to my granddaughter. Is this Cian?” The woman had a slight Mexican accent.

“No, this is Jeff. Cian and Amaliya are not here.”

“I'm worried about her. Did you see her today or yesterday? She didn't answer her phone and now I call and you answer!” The old woman's voice was full of fear.

“Actually, I haven't met her yet. I'm a friend of Cian's fiancée and we were coming to visit them tonight.” Jeff shrugged slightly as Samantha frowned.

“Did that bad man get her?” The old woman sounded close to crying.

“What do you know about this bad man?”

The woman didn't answer, but spoke to someone in Spanish. There was a long pause.

“Hello?” It was a male voice this time, with a West Texas accent.

“Yes, who is this?” Jeff felt his confusion mounting. Amaliya was not an ordinary vampire if she had actually visited her own family and not killed them in the madness of the first days.

“Who is this?” The voice was strong and a little belligerent.

Jeff felt his patience waning, but he said calmly. “I am a friend of Cian's fiancée. We came to the apartment looking for him and Amaliya, but they're not here.”

“Did Sumner get her?” The man's voice was now alarmed.

“You know about The Summoner?” Jeff was flabbergasted.

“Professor Sumner? Yeah. He made her into a vampire. If you know this Key-inn guy then you gotta know they're vampires, right?”

Jeff moved to sit down again, feeling a little overwhelmed. Never in his life had he met such a group of people. Usually, people did not believe in vampires. He could hear the two voices on the other end talking swiftly in Spanish.

“Who is this again?” Jeff finally asked, breaking through the conversation on the other end.

“Sergio, her cousin. Look, my grandmother is frantically worried and we just hit Austin. Can we meet you guys somewhere? We're worried and it sounds like there is a good reason to be.”

Jeff liked the lower timber of the man's voice. He sounded competent and strong, like Jeff's father. “Yeah. Let's do that. Why don't we meet at Kerby Lane on South Lamar? Do you know where that is?”

When Sergio told him no, Jeff quickly gave him directions while Samantha paced back and forth in front of him, wringing her hands.

“All right, we'll see you within the hour,” Jeff said, and hung up.

“What is going on?”

“It's Amaliya's grandmother and cousin. They came to Austin to rescue her,” he answered.

This whole situation was growing more and more bizarre and he had

no idea how he was going to keep the three of them from running off and doing something crazy. He had no emotional investment in the situation other than making sure Cian continued to honor his father's agreement, but he had to admit to himself, he was growing fond of Samantha. Since last night, he could see that her inner core had been laid bare. Her chirpy self was diminished and he could really see her steel.

“So we're meeting with them?” She fussed with the collar of her pink shirt and looked at him with a very strained expression.

“I don't think it will hurt. They're here to save her like we're here to save Cian.” Jeff reached out to her. “Come on. It won't hurt to at least meet with them.”

With a soft explosion of breath, she shook her head. “This isn't supposed to be happening. It was all okay a few days ago. We were going to be married!”

“I know. Come on, Sam. Really. We can't do anything more here.” She looked close to crying, but nodded her head. Reluctantly, she took his offered hand.

Jeff gently led her out of the apartment that was empty and devoid of life and quietly shut the door behind them.

Kerby Lane was quite busy when they arrived. The late dinner crowd was out and they had to wait to get a table. The waitress was just about to lead them to their seats when a tall man and a small Mexican woman came in the door.

“Sergio?” Jeff asked.

“Yes. Yes.” The man came forward and thrust out his huge hand. “You're Cian's friends?”

“His fiancée,” Samantha muttered.

Jeff could hear the fading hope in her voice and he squeezed her arm reassuringly. Shaking hands with Sergio, he glanced toward the tiny woman obviously sizing him up.

“This is my grandmother,” Sergio said.

“Nice to meet you,” Jeff said politely, and reached out to shake her hand.

The old woman peered at it thoughtfully, but didn't take it. Instead, she turned to Samantha. “You're Cian's fiancée?”

“I think so,” Samantha said slowly with a definite edge in her voice.

“At least I was before your slutty granddaughter showed up.”

“Whoa,” Sergio said in a fearful voice.

“You don't speak badly of the dead,” the grandmother said sharply.

“Don't you mean undead?” Samantha snapped back.

“Whoa, whoa, let's calm it down!” Sergio quickly stepped in front of his grandmother.

“Why don't we all sit down and talk,” Jeff said in a soothing tone as he took hold of Samantha's arm.

“Yeah, Grandmama, let's not get into a fight already,” Sergio pleaded.

The old lady narrowed her eyes and looked ready to unleash.

“C'mon, Grandmama. Let's go eat and calm down.”

“Fine,” the old woman said resentfully and walked with her nephew after the waitress.

Jeff was relieved to have the other man helping him corral the two women. They were both obviously ready to throw down. Jeff took Samantha's arm. He pulled her toward the table the concerned waitress was laying menus on.

Samantha slid into the booth first and Jeff sat at her side as the grandmother sat on the other side with Sergio taking up most of the seat next to her. There was strained atmosphere as everyone was nice and polite to the waitress as they ordered their drinks. The moment the purple-haired girl stepped away, Samantha leaned across the table.

“You need to get your granddaughter out of Austin and away from my fiancé. She is messing everything up!”

“I'm here because your fiancé isn't doing what he promised. He said he would help her! And now they are missing,” Grandmama hissed right back.

“Okay, okay, let's not get mad at each other. Let's figure this out,” Sergio said firmly.

“I know what is going on. Your slutty cousin has my fiancé out in the middle of nowhere with a really bad vampire who could be killing Cian as we speak!”

“Hey, it's not her fault that her professor did what he did,” Sergio said in a low, but angry, voice. “He just dumped her to take care of herself!”

“So she has to come to Austin and mess up my life?” Samantha's hands were gripping her napkin tightly and twisting it hard.

“She didn't do it on purpose,” Amaliya's grandmother grumbled.

Jeff laid a hand on Samantha's arm. “Calm down. Calm down.”

“You can't tell me to calm down when that Summoner guy is going to kill Cian and it's all because he was stupid enough to get involved with that girl!” Tears sprung to her eyes and began to pour down her face.

Jeff wiped her face gently. She sniffled and scrunched up her face as he did it, but she gained some control over herself. He folded the

napkin calmly and handed it to her. She needed to blow her very red nose.

“Okay. Well, as the person that is not involved in this situation, mind if I guide this conversation.” Jeff looked around the table.

The three angry-looking people reluctantly nodded and avoided looking at each other.

“Okay, so. I assume that what we all know is that The Summoner made both Cian and Amaliya and he's playing a twisted game with them. Right?”

“Professor Sumner made that Key Inn guy, too?” Sergio looked vastly interested at this news.

“Professor Sumner from the college? He made Amaliya? He's The Summoner?” Samantha widened her eyes. “He's on the news. They are looking for him.”

“But he's really this Summoner guy, right?” Sergio looked at Jeff. “Right?”

“Possibly. Did she say that is who killed her?” Jeff quickly wrote down a few notes in his small notebook.

“Yeah, that is what she told us. That Professor Sumner killed her and buried her in the forest.” Amaliya's grandmother looked close to crying.

“Then it was The Summoner posing as this Professor guy,” Samantha said gripping Jeff's arm.

“And he made this Key Inn guy, too?” Sergio asked.

“Yes. Several hundred years ago,” Jeff answered.

“Dios mio,” the old woman muttered.

“He made both of them and he tends to play games with those he

creates.” Jeff wrote down a few notes quickly.

“He's a real sicko that gets off on fucking around with people's lives,” Samantha muttered angrily.

The waitress reappeared with their drinks and there was an uneasy silence as she set the cold glasses down. They all ignored her and pretended to be reading the menu. She gave them a curious look, then wandered off slowly, obviously wondering what was up with the strange foursome.

“And that is what he is doing with your cousin and Cian,” Jeff said in a low voice.

“So, The Summoner is an old vampire who killed my cousin just to have her play a game?” Sergio frowned even more deeply. “That's not right.”

“He's an evil man and we should destroy him,” the grandmother said, and pulled a stake from her purse. It was made from the end of a broom handle and she had whittled the end to a fine point.

“Grandmama!” Sergio quickly grabbed the thing and shoved it back into her tote bag.

“Well, that would be the way to do it, right?” Samantha sipped her soda and rubbed the end of her red nose.

“Technically, yes. If we could find him,” Jeff answered.

“We know where he is!” She pulled out the map and waved it at him. “They went here. So he is right there with them! We have to go and kill him and save Cian.”

“And Amaliya,” the grandmother said firmly.

Sergio snagged the Google map and stared at it. “Is this where they are? For real?”

“I’m certain of it. I think The Summoner called them to him.” Jeff sighed and wished the tension headache starting in his neck would go away.

“Why?”

“Because if they didn't go, he'd do something even worse than what they fear right now,” Jeff answered the big man and tried to imply what he did not want to say in front of the old woman.

“Like kill us,” the grandmother said, seeing right through Jeff. “He's a real puto.”

“Grandmama,” Sergio said in surprise.

“I don't like him. He should die. He killed my poor Amaliya. He deserves to die,” she answered him firmly.

“I totally agree with that,” Samantha said. “We should go right now.”

“Um, no way,” Sergio pointed to the window. “It's nighttime and I do not want to be vampire chow.”

“We wait until morning,” Jeff said sternly. He tried to look at his menu for real this time and not just as a ruse to keep the waitress away.

“I say we go right now,” the old woman insisted.

“Grandmama, the vampire would eat us,” Sergio said in a harsh whisper.

“Amaliya could be dead by morning,” his grandmother hissed right back.

“Yeah, what she said. They could be dead by morning,” Samantha said with a pout. “We should go now.”

Jeff laid down the menu and turned to Samantha. “Do you trust me?” It was a gamble, but he hoped she'd answer yes.

Her bottom lip quivered a little and she looked at him with wide eyes.
“Kinda. Maybe.”

“Okay.” He tried another tactic. “Who's the experienced vampire hunter?”

“You are.”

“Okay. We go in the morning.” His voice was very firm and everyone at the table looked a little startled by his tone. To his surprise, they nodded slowly in agreement and seemed a little more respectful in their gaze as he signaled for the waitress. “We eat. Then we plan.”

“Can't we plan now?” the old woman said, and he made a mental note to find out her name.

“Nope. We eat first. Plan later.” Again his tone was strong and no one argued. He caught Samantha staring at him with consternation and smiled at her slightly. “Hey, the blood and gore can wait. They got good gingerbread pancakes. Possible last meal and all that.”

She pouted at him but turned her gaze back to the menu.

The stealthy looks in his direction were somewhat comforting and for the first time, he felt like a true leader.

Now, if he could only figure out how to keep them alive.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Lexus RX, Cian's luxury SUV, wove its way down the road through the Texas Hill Country. Inside, Cian drove as Heather sat behind him and held him at gunpoint. The barrel of the gun pressed against his skull just behind his ear made Amaliya wince. She was sure she could snatch the gun away from the zombie girl. But she wasn't so sure that the gun wouldn't go off and kill Cian before she had a firm grip on the weapon. Amaliya wasn't willing to take that chance. Turning her gaze back to the black road sliding by under the harsh glare of the headlights, she set her boot heels against the dashboard. Crossing her arms, she set her jaw and thought of all the wonderful things she would do to The Summoner. She had a wonderful idea of ripping his balls off and stuffing them up his ass.

"That's a truly evil smile," Cian said suddenly.

She looked at him and smirked.

Despite the muzzle pressed against his head, Cian grinned back at her as if he could read her thoughts.

His smile made her heart pulse in her chest and a nice little throb started between her thighs.

Shit, she thought, I really like him.

Heather sat behind Cian, one arm wrapped firmly around the headrest of his chair as she held the gun against his flesh. At one point he had taken a turn rather quickly, but Heather had managed to keep her balance. This had resulted in her slamming the grip of the

gun against his skull hard enough to crack it. Blood was pooled around his neckline, but he had healed. It had been a good try, but Heather was more The Summoner now than she was herself. He was possessing her from afar and her actions clearly projected this.

“Hey,” Amaliya said to Heather and the girl's eyes didn't even glance toward her.

“She's not really in there,” Cian said in a low voice.

“I'm so going to kick his ass,” Amaliya answered.

Cian's hazel eyes flicked toward her and again she felt her heart stutter as his dark lashes framed those beautiful orbs. “I would more than enjoy seeing you do that.”

“I'm going to kill him,” Amaliya said firmly.

She was pissed and beyond fear. At least beyond fear for herself. She was sick and tired of being beaten up, bled out and killed. First The Summoner, then Rob, then Roberto and finally Santos. She was seriously sick and tired of being the one thrown around. Yeah, she got the best of Rob the first time, but the second time, the zombified asshole had nearly killed her.

Cian nodded his head. “Yes. We will kill him.”

Amaliya reached out and touched his hand on the steering wheel. His fingers slid over hers and caressed them.

“Let go of her,” Heather said in a dark tone.

Amaliya withdrew her hand and flipped off The Summoner/Heather. Cian chuckled and Heather leaned toward her from the back seat.

“You have no idea of the horrors I have designed for you.” Heather's voice was female and soft, yet it held a power that was not human in any way.

“Fuck off,” Amaliya answered, and slid down into her seat.

She could tell by the signs that there were almost to the little ghost town in the Texas Hill Country. It seemed so damn dark out here, but the sky was amazing with its unhindered glory of stars. There was no glow on the horizon to reveal a hidden town. It was stark, black, and wild. Without a doubt, they were in the middle of nowhere.

Cian slowly settled his hands onto the bottom of the steering wheel. Watching him from the corner of her eye, she could tell he was considering a rash move. But she didn't want him to risk himself. Not now. Not after last night. Hell, not after the last few nights. Despite everything, he had shown more compassion toward her than anyone else in her life.

“I want to see him,” she said firmly.

Cian barely nodded as Heather shoved the gun so hard against his head he had to tilt his head to one side.

“Don't try anything!” Her voice was ragged and full of pain. It sounded more like a terrified woman now than a supernatural creature.

Amaliya wondered if The Summoner had turned his attention elsewhere as they drew closer.

“Slow down,” Heather said in a trembling, but firm voice. “We're almost there. He's waiting.”

The Lexus slowed down as they drew near the outskirts of the dead town. A faded, peeling sign flashed by that read “Fenton, TX. Best Homemade Peach Cobbler in Texas!” The rural road they were traveling on seemed too narrow as the shoulders disappeared and the first decaying structure slid out of the darkness in front of them. It looked like a building from the late 1800's. Its windows were boarded up and it was surrounded by wild grass and foliage. Slowing down even more, the SUV glided toward a “Y” in the road. The rural road continued on and the split off lead up into the hills. Tucked into the

“V” of the “Y” was an old motel that was completely falling apart. A young tree had pushed up through the front office and its branches spread out in a leafy roof over the crumbling building. Across from it was an old gas station that looked like something out of the mid-1930's. The old pumps were rusted over and listing to one side. Nearby was a row of buildings that once may have been restaurants or shops, but were now blackened husks.

“This town is seriously dead,” Amaliya decided.

The SUV slowly drove toward the old motel. Cian's gaze roamed over the town as he drove. “A perfect place for him.”

“Stop when you reach the gas station and pull over,” Heather instructed.

Cian nodded and obeyed. Amaliya looked out at the old gas station with its broken out windows and faded advertising for Coca Cola.

“Nice.”

Cian quirked a smile. “Just his style. Dead.”

“Get out,” Heather ordered.

Amaliya and Cian both reached for the doors.

“No. Just her,” Heather said firmly.

Amaliya felt the first cold rush of fear slide over her skin and she looked toward Cian sharply.

Cian slowly turned in his chair. “No. We go together.”

“If you try to get out, I'll shoot you in the head,” Heather answered and tears glimmered in her eyes.

“It's okay,” Amaliya said at last. She looked out the windshield over the dead town. “It's been coming to this point all along. I can do this.”

Cian sighed and looked at her with his amazing eyes and said in a low

voice, "I won't be far."

Not caring what Heather would do, Amaliya leaned over and pressed her lips against his in a soft kiss.

"Thanks for everything," she said to him and before he could speak, thrust the door open and leaped out.

A cool and moist wind whipped through her hair and almost shoved the cowboy hat off her head. She caught her hat and shoved it down firmly. The Lexus RX cruised on down the road and she knew Cian was driving on reluctantly. She watched the vehicle with remorse and wished she could have said more to Cian. Only now, was she fully understanding how much he had come to mean to her. Her stolen moments with Pete had been just that. A stolen moment. Not real. A fantasy. Something from her dreams. What she shared with Cian was real. It might be completely fucked up and twisted, but it was real.

Walking slowly over the cracked cement and avoiding the rocky patches overgrown with grass, she headed toward the motel. She knew The Summoner was in there. It was darker around the perimeter of the decaying building and she knew he was standing inside watching her.

"Hey!" She called out and was angry that her throat was clenched tightly. Her voice cracked.

Right before the road, Amaliya stopped. She stood at the edge of the parking lot to the gas station and stared across at the motel. She could see the Lexus' red brake lights in the distance as it pulled over. It was a reassuring sight. Cian was still nearby.

Slowly, she squatted down and ran her fingers over the sharp little edges of the overgrown grass poking through the asphalt. Tilting her head, so she could gaze at the motel under the brim of her cowboy hat, she wondered what he was waiting for. The darkness was visibly

shifting around the motel.

“Just going to stare at me?”

She rested her elbows on her knees and waited. Once he appeared, she was going to tackle his ass.

Nothing, but the soft whisper of the night answered her. Slowly, she realized it was quiet save for the distant hum of the Lexus' engine and the wind. The nocturnal creatures were either not about or crouching in terrified silence.

A flash of a pale face appeared in one of the busted out windows of the motel, then vanished once more.

“C'mon. Enough of this,” Amaliya said in an angry voice.

She wanted to get this over with. Let him come out and play a real game with her. Not this following her around stuff, but an actual all out brawl. She grew up with brothers. She knew how to hit hard. And with her new power she was sure she could draw blood.

Again, there was a flash of a pale face, but this time in the trees to the right of the building. It took her a moment to register that it was too low to the ground to be The Summoner.

Standing up sharply, she felt another rush of fear flow over her and her stomach clenched tightly. Behind her, she heard a slight scrape against the cement and she whirled about.

There was no way in hell her mind could make sense of what was standing behind her. It was wrong in every way imaginable. There were too many legs and arms, yet its body was sleek and almost reptilian. But there was nothing reptile about the very human face staring out at her from the twisted flesh that made up its torso and what appeared to be a mockery of a head. It took her a second to recognize the face of the handsome black man who had let her into the

frat orgy.

“Oh, fucking shit,” she hissed and stumbled backward.

The thing swung a massive arm at her and she ducked away before the things massive claws, made of what looked like ribs, could rip into her. Twisting around, she saw the thing rise up on long legs and tower over her. Again, her mind struggled to make sense of what she was seeing. She could make out a combination of human body parts woven together into the thing, but nothing about it was human anymore. It was a nightmare.

With a growl of hunger, it lunged at her, claws slashing down at her. She dodged away and barely avoided another, smaller hand that desperately clutched at her. It had too many fingers and its claws looked like bone fragments. The reek of it was horrible and she gagged as she ran from it.

Another creature appeared from beside the gas station building. This one had a slightly different shape, but it was just as gruesome as the first one. A multitude of heads made up the torso and all the mouths opened in a scream at the same time. She barely had time to adjust her trajectory and whip past it as it swung at her.

“You're a sick fuck,” Amaliya screamed at the top of her lungs.

She felt like throwing up. All those faces lived in her nightmares. They were her victims from the frat house. Glancing behind her, she saw the two cadaverous creatures rushing after her. It was a stupid move because something massive grabbed her around the waist in that second she was distracted and hurled her straight toward her pursuers.

She slammed into them. Instead of tumbling to the ground, they frantically grabbed at her. She felt at least five hands grab hold of her arms and legs and she twisted her body as hard as she could, trying to

get free. Panic was seizing her as the things began to pull on her and she realized they were trying to tear her limbs off. With a terrified shriek, she kicked and thrashed and to her relief managed to get one leg free. Quickly, she drove her boot heel hard into the thing's mass of heads and felt the skulls breaking. Still they pulled on her. She kicked one of the hands gripping her other leg as hard as she could. There was a spurt of blood and other terrible liquid as the hand tore off from the arm and she was released. She fell hard onto her hip, her arms still held by the other thing.

The creature with the severed arm howled and struggled to find its balance. Meanwhile, she rotated her body around as fast as she could and felt her arms slide free of the disgusting hands as its fingers lost traction. Rolling away, she caught sight of its many hands lunging down toward her. The nails made a terrible scraping sound on the cement as it missed her.

Scrambling to her hands and feet, she crawled backward and tried to regain her balance. The creatures pursued her, howling and lunging for her. She could see now that the beasts were sewn together with what looked like thick black cord. The long nails were definitely human ribs and other cracked bones and she felt a wave of revulsion flow over her. Her gullet heaved.

One of the monsters made a mad dive for her and she darted to one side. But one of those terrible talons snagged her arm and she screamed as her skin was shredded and her cold blood oozed out. Clutching her wounded forearm, she backed away from it, her eyes skimming over the area for a weapon.

Nearby was a heap of scrap metal and she ran for it as the things lumbered after her. She now understood they wanted to destroy her. For revenge maybe? Who knew, but they wanted to rip her apart and

eat her flesh. They were desperate for her.

She reached the pile and just grabbed the first thing that she saw. It was the very rusty and worn remains of a shovel. Swinging it as she turned to face the creatures, it impacted hard with one of the thing's reaching hands. Ripping it away from the terrible grasping fingers, she drove it at the seam of its arm, aiming for the black cord sewn deep into the flesh.

The thing screamed at her and drew back as the second creature reached around it, trying to grab for her. With a hiss, she drove the end of the shovel hard into its many faces and felt it wedge in. Yanking hard on it, she felt the heads giving way and a few dislodged from the torso and rolled away. Wrenching the shovel free, she swung it just in time to deflect the claw of the other creature.

Kicking a head out of her way, she ran from her attackers, trying to gain some distance. It was clear to her she would have to kill them. There was no way that they would not stop their pursuit of her. Their milky dead eyes told that story all too clearly.

Her forearm was bleeding steadily and she wasn't sure if she should risk trying to heal herself or just let it bleed.

She readied herself as the two things drew near. One of them had a major seam across its chest and she decided to try to aim for that. Maybe if she could get the shovel in deep enough, she could pry the sucker in half.

Stepping back, her foot hit something hard and she looked down to see a very old tire wedged into the ground. Just half of it loomed out of the dirt. She looked up to see the things barreling down on her. She deliberately took a few steps back, positioning the tire between her and the creatures. The monsters screeched as they drew near her. One of them shoved the other out of the way as it lunged toward her. The second creature sprawled in a tangle of limbs and cried out in

frustration as it crashed to the ground.

She leaped back as the first creature came for her and she tripped backward onto the road just as its massive foot was caught by the tire and fell toward her. Quickly, she jumped to her feet and rushed it. She could clearly see where the seam cut across its midsection and she drove the shovel hard and deep into it. One of its massive hands gripped her leg and she screamed in pain as its nails dug into her. Leaning all her weight onto the shovel, she felt the body splitting apart as the thing howled beneath her.

Then, to her horror, the other creature suddenly loomed over her. Purely on instinct, she thrust out her hand at it and screamed, "Stop." Her cold blood from her arm splattered the thing and it staggered back. It's many eyes blinked and it's limbs trembled. She stood in shock over the thrashing creature at her feet as the other cowered and screamed before her.

Then she felt it.

That dark power was unleashed and flowing out of her. She could feel it, like a tentacle, pushing out of her and gripping the monster before her.

"Die," she said in a cracking voice. "Die."

The thing screamed at her as it suddenly began to fall apart. Legs, arms, coils of intestine, organs, heads, and other terrible things fell from the thing until it was a pile of body parts before her. And then, the pieces began to sink into the ground.

She was so shocked, she forgot all about the monster she was trying to cut in half until it knocked her off her feet and clambered over her. The shovel hung out of it like some terrible parody of a limb and she braced herself on the ground and kicked it as hard as she could with one foot. The shovel finally sheared through the thing and it fell into

two pieces beside her. Struggling to her feet, she reached out for the shovel. Her blood splattered over the thing at her feet and she felt repulsed by the sight of its many mouths opening to drink her blood. “Fuck you,” she hissed at the faces from her nightmares now twisted into something far worse. “Die. Die.”

The dark power inside of her twisted and writhed as it lashed out at the thing and she felt it impact with the creature. Those terrible licking mouths began to scream. Just as the other one had, it began to fall apart. Stumbling backward, she watched it disintegrate.

Tears flowing down her face, she clutched the shovel tightly in her hands and said in a low, commanding voice, “Die and don't fucking come back.”

The body parts slowly sank into the soil, disappearing beneath the overgrown grass. She could feel The Summoner nearby. She could feel her own dark power, her inheritance from him, shivering around her.

Slowly, she turned around.

Behind her stood Rob. This time he was part of another creature. But the major part of the monstrous beast was Rob. To make matters worse, his penis wiggled and squirmed below his massive belly.

Sobbing, she backed away from him. “Die, you bastard” she whispered.

But he kept coming toward her on his six legs.

“Fuckin' die!” Her scream was terrified and frantic and it angered her. “Die, you sonofabitch! Die!”

The Rob-Creature's tongue darted out at her and licked its swollen lips. It's teeth glittered at her and its rank penis danced before her.

Lifting up the shovel, Amaliya braced herself. She would not give into

her fear. She would not give into her hatred of this thing.

“Banish this one and I may spare your life,” a voice said from the darkness.

“Fuck you, Summoner,” she hissed, and swung the shovel.

It impacted hard with Rob's head and actually dented in the side, but he still came for her. Again she swung. This time the shovel caught in his flesh and terrible black fluid poured from the wound. Yanking hard on the handle, she managed to dislodge the shovel and back up a few more feet. There were black seams where the Rob-Creature was bound together and she decided to aim for those. It was hard to ignore the putrid erection of the thing as it lunged for her again. She managed to drive the blade into the things hipbone, just above two of the legs, but its huge hand made of multiple arms snagged her about the waist and heaved her over its head.

As her feet left the ground, she screamed and felt the shovel handle slip from her grasp. Trying to kick and twist her body, she was held over the thing's head. Its tongue continued to snake out of its mouth as it gazed up at her with Rob's dead eyes. Slowly, it lowered her toward that terrible mouth and she realized it intended to lick her.

Screaming with revulsion, she slammed her fist into its meaty face over and over again. Pain jolted through her wounded forearm as her blood splattered over her and the creature.

“Aw, he adores you,” the Summoner's voice teased.

Kicking at it, she felt the giant gruesome hand tightening around her. To her horror, she saw one of its hands stroking its penis.

“Oh, God,” she gasped, and tried to drive her fingers into its face.

“Do you think God is listening?” The Summoner asked from the darkness. “Do you think He listens to the damned?”

“Die, you fucker, die!”

She dug her fingers into the Rob-Monster's eyes and felt its dead flesh giving away. Its tongue slurped out toward her. Despair and madness were about to overwhelm her when she felt that dark tentacle of power shove into the Rob-Creature and she almost cried with triumph.

“Die,” she hissed. “Die.”

It dropped her and she hit the ground hard as it staggered back. She could see Rob's ruined face twisting in pain, then his hideous form fell apart far more quickly than the others had. As its grisly remains sunk into the ground, she watched with loathing as her battered body pulsed with power.

The last bit of the corpse vanished from view and she slowly looked up from where she lay on her side on the ground. The Summoner was standing over her, his cold gaze surveying her with great interest. His fair hair was long and flowing on the wind and his face was much younger than when he had pretended to be the professor. He was also leaner and a tad bit more imposing now. Slowly, he leaned down over her and tilted his head.

“Well, that was impressive,” he said with a slight smile.

Her answer was to punch him in the face.

The Summoner's head snapped back with the impact. With a snarl, he reached down and grabbed her about the throat and drew her up against him.

“Do not do foolish things, little girl,” he growled in her face.

Amaliya set her jaw and hissed back at him, “ Fuck you.”

Gripping her injured arm, he squeezed hard.

She screamed in agony.

“Do not aggravate me after you so enthralled me with your performance.”

Gasping with pain, she looked up at him through tearing eyes and

whispered, “Do I get an A, Professor Sumner?”

He smirked at her and yanked her closer. Pain clouded her senses as his fingers dug into her wound. She struggled to keep her wits about her. She had felt absolutely high with her power after her battle, but now she was feeling weak again. The dark power that had been hers to use was now drawn tightly inside of her.

The Summoner pressed his lips to her forehead and his long tongue snaked over a wound she had not even known was there. “Delicious. Powerful. What did I create in you?” Dragging her about, he set off toward the motel. “I knew you were special when I took you. You were so pretty when you died. Exquisite in death. More lovely than you had been in life.”

Stumbling along beside him, Amaliya saw her battered cowboy hat lying in the street. The sight made her want to cry. One more piece of her humanity lost to her.

“Now, we must talk and discuss what we shall do. Never have I had a child such as you,” The Summoner said as they walked over the crumbling walkway.

They entered the old office area that was now fully overgrown with bushes and the young tree. He dragged her along, not bothering to help her evade the obstacles before her. She thought he rather enjoyed dragging her through the brambles.

Stepping through a doorway, he pulled her even closer.

“You smell of death. Of blood. Of sex.” He licked her mouth and she spat on the ground immediately afterwards. “You and Cian having a bit of fun?”

He laughed and dragged her into what appeared to be an old restaurant. Light from the only streetlight in town filtered in through the dirty, broken windows and he shoved her into a chair. It was

moldy and had long ago lost all its stuffing. The springs bit into her flesh and she held her wounded arm against her.

Sweeping debris off a bar, he leaned against it and regarded her with interest.

“Speak to me, Amaliya. How did you do it? How did you command my creatures?”

“I dunno,” she answered. She truly wasn't really sure how she had done it. Somehow, it had just worked.

“I don't really believe you. This is what? The third time you've used this power? You absolutely shocked me the first time. When I felt my control slip, I could not fathom what was happening. Then I realized...ah...this is new.”

“I don't know how I did it,” Amaliya answered again. She began to will her arm to heal. Fuck it, she needed to heal even if she lost some of her power.

The Summoner stared down at her thoughtfully. He was dressed in black trousers and a maroon silk shirt under an Armani trench coat that hit him mid-thigh. He flicked a bit of dirt off his shoulder epaulets and pondered her words.

“Of course, you could be telling the truth. You always did just stumble about in the dark, didn't you? You haven't much improved on that since changing.”

“Fuck off,” she sneered, and ran her fingers over her healing wound.

“Where's Cian?”

“Oh, yes. I almost forgot,” he said. His eyes flashed white.

The gunshot made her jump and she leaped to her feet. The Summoner's elbow hit her square in the face and knocked her back.

“Now. Now. My game with him was done. What was the point of

keeping him around? You must love this new modern era. Exploding bullets. How wonderful. A whole new way to kill our kind.”

Amaliya was blinded by the rush of tears that filled her eyes. Her lips parted, but she could not speak. Her heart felt crushed inside of her.

“Oh, come now. Yes, he was handsome in his way, but in love with him? How terribly cliché. Falling in love with the very first vampire you meet? I'm rather disappointed in you,” The Summoner chided.

Her tears flowed freely down her face and she curled up on the chair, her arms wrapping around her knees. The despair inside of her was overwhelming. She felt no desire to go on. It was as if all her options had vanished. Not until that moment did she realize she had found solace with Cian. And now he was gone.

The Summoner stroked her hair as if she was his pet. “Oh, how easily you crumble. I see now I was wise to keep him alive long enough for you to show your powers. I'm glad you did show me what you are capable of. I am not quite certain what to do with you now. Do I kill you as a potential threat to me? Or do I keep you at my side and use you?” He came around her and sat down on a side table. “These decisions are always difficult.”

“Why? You already killed me once. What's the difference now?” She let her hair fall over her face and her fingers played with her scar centered in her tattoo on her arm. The rosary was long gone. She was damned. Sadly, she wondered what lay beyond true death for her.

“That was quite enjoyable though you almost escaped me. I barely kept you alive long enough--ah...” He trailed off. He was obviously deep in thought. “Was that it? That I kept you alive with my power and then brought you over? Ah, yes...”

Looking up through her hair, she saw Cian approaching The Summoner from behind. The gun Heather had held them hostage

with was in his hand. He tread so lightly, Amaliya could not even hear his footfalls. And neither did The Summoner.

Their creator was stunned when Cian pushed the end of the barrel of the gun firmly against the back of his head.

“I see,” The Summoner said.

“You forget I’m old and quick,” Cian said, and his accent was more pronounced than usual.

“Yes. I did. Heather?”

“Truly dead,” Cian answered.

“I should have kept my connection with her longer,” The Summoner decided.

“But you didn’t. And I was faster,” Cian said.

“Pull the trigger,” Amaliya exclaimed with urgency in her tone.

“Shoot him!”

The Summoner gave her a bemused look.

“Where is Roberto?” Cian demanded. “Dead or alive?”

“Does it matter?”

“He is stalling for time! Fucking shoot him!”

“He wants to know where his servant is,” The Summoner informed her with a condescending smile. “He is so concerned with others that he forgets that is his weakness.”

Amaliya barely made out the shadow descending from the ceiling before it struck Cian. Cian cried out and tried to shoot The Summoner, but their enemy was a flash of darkness as he escaped. Amaliya didn’t realize at first what had happened as the gun went off and the sound reverberated through the room. Then she saw the glint of light off the edge of the silver dagger shoved through Cian’s back

and the tip poking through his chest.

“No!” She rushed to Cian as he collapsed forward and she caught him in her arms as his blood flowed over her.

“Touching,” Roberto said, and wiped his hands on a handkerchief.

Amaliya clutched Cian to her and reached for the silver handle. Her fingers slid around it, then she yanked her hand back as her fingers burned.

“That’s why I used this to hold it,” Roberto said waving the white silk handkerchief and stepped around them. He grinned down at her.

“How could you?” Amaliya whispered.

The Summoner stepped out of the shadows and laid a hand on Roberto’s shoulder. “It’s simple, my dear. I offered him eternal life.”

“And I accepted,” Roberto said with a flash of fangs.

Samantha woke up at four in the morning and rolled over in her bed with a weary sigh. Soft voices were murmuring somewhere in the house and she could smell something wonderful cooking. Groggily, she pushed herself up out of the comfort of her bed and sat with her feet dangling over the edge. She was confused to hear voices until she remembered she had company.

Sergio, Jeff and the feisty old lady were all guests in her house. They had decided after their meal at Kerby Lane that they would leave early in the morning so they could arrive in the town as the sun came up. It would be hard work finding The Summoner’s lair and they needed all the sunlight hours. Or at least that is what Jeff had said.

Sliding off the bed, she pulled her oversize Longhorn t-shirt down over her butt and padded out into the hall. Beatrice was busy cleaning one paw and looked up at her with feigned interest. With a look of disapproval, the cat skipped away into the lighted kitchen. Samantha

glanced over at her sofa to see Sergio fast asleep, his big arms folded over his equally big chest. He was snoring lightly and he looked like a big cuddly bear. Then she noted the big cuddly bear was clutching his grandmother's makeshift stake.

Jeff's voice was soft as silk in the other room and she walked toward the archway that opened into the kitchen.

"You don't have to go with us," Jeff's voice said.

"If the little blond gets to go, so do I," the older woman's voice said firmly.

"Innocente," Jeff said in a gentle tone and Samantha lifted her eyebrows. So that was the old woman's name. "I know you are worried about your granddaughter, but—"

"Look, if you get to go with one leg missing and Blondie gets to go to save her vampire boyfriend, then I get to go save Amaliya. Besides, you need me and all my weapons," the old woman said firmly.

Samantha peeked around the corner to see Amaliya's grandmother busily making breakfast with stuff she had found in the refrigerator and pantry. It smelled amazing and Samantha's stomach growled lightly. The tiny woman was dressed still in her Virgin of Guadalupe t-shirt. Approximately, four rosaries rested around her neck. Flipping over a tortilla, she shoveled food onto a plate and slid it onto the table in front of Jeff.

"You eat. Once Sergio is up, you'll have to fight him for food," Innocente said soberly.

She then leaned over to spoon a few bites of scrambled egg into Beatrice's bowl. The little feline traitor purred loudly and slid around Innocente's ankles a few times before settling down to eat her delicacy.

“Food is great, Innocente. And I know I can't stop you from going, but I had to say something.”

Innocente waved a hand at him and set about making another tortilla, her tiny hands slapping the rolled dough into the correct shape. “No one can stop me once I get going. Not even that puto Summoner.”

Samantha frowned to herself and tried not to feel left out. The scene in her kitchen was very cozy and she suddenly wanted to belong. Besides, she didn't want to be alone.

She was still struggling with feelings of abandonment and betrayal when it came to Cian. She consoled herself with the knowledge that he was something more than she had ever imagined. Of course, she could not be certain, but she was pretty much convinced he had tried to be what she had believed him to be. A good guy with a human heart. But Amaliya had ruined all that. She had revealed not only to Cian, but to Samantha, that Cian was also a monster at heart.

Sadly, she padded into the kitchen and fell into a chair. She noted that Jeff was wearing a less cosmetically pleasing prosthetic leg under his long shorts. His hair was scruffy and he was wearing a t-shirt with some obscure band on it. He gave her a little smile and scooped more food into his mouth with a tortilla.

Without a word, Innocente set a plate in front of Samantha and returned to the stove. It was eggs with chopped up peppers, tomato and bacon with a big side of refried beans and some salsa.

“Ready for the day?” Jeff asked her.

Samantha shrugged and picked up a freshly made tortilla to eat. “No,” she answered truthfully and used her tortilla to snag some eggs and salsa. “I'm scared. I felt braver last night.”

“Kind of settling in, huh?”

She shrugged and rubbed her brow. “Yeah. If we don't find them before the sun goes down-”

“We will,” Innocente said firmly from behind them.

“Or what if they are already dead-” Samantha felt tears in her eyes. She wiped a tear away with frustration and shoved the food in her mouth.

“They're not,” Innocente said firmly and ate from a plate she had on the kitchen counter. “I know it. He will want her power, too.”

“Or kill her for having it,” Samantha suggested.

“I think he'll be intrigued,” Jeff cut in. “I really do. None of his other children ever had anything like his power. He'll want to see what she can do and figure out if he can use her.”

“But then, Cian...” She forced herself to swallow her food, but her throat felt dry and it seemed to get stuck. Gulping down some cold water, she felt more tears in her eyes.

Jeff averted his gaze and quickly ate more food. Innocente fell silent, too. It was clear to all of them that Cian was no longer needed. And possibly dead already.

Knowing she needed her strength, Samantha took another bite. She chewed slowly and tried not to look at her trembling hand. Last night she had been so full of bravado, now she was afraid.

The silence continued until Sergio appeared in the doorway. “So,” he said rubbing his sleep-weary eyes. “We going to go kill us a bad guy or what?”

Samantha looked up at him and she forced her hands to be steady. “Yep.”

“We're going to go kill that vampiro,” Innocente declared.

“I have always felt the need to play fast and loose with my life,” Jeff

said with a shrug and a wry grin.

“Then it's a plan,” Sergio said rubbing his hands together. “Oh, awesome! Fresh tortillas!”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cian came to slowly. He could feel Amaliya's arms around him and her lips against his cheek. The excruciating pain radiating out of the silver dagger in his chest nearly plunged him back into darkness, but he forced himself to stay alert. He could feel his blood seeping away and his power with it. Slowly, he raised his head and saw The Summoner standing nearby, conversing with Roberto. The vision was startling, yet, somehow, he was not surprised. The betrayal was harsh, but he could endure it if he and Amaliya escaped. She had changed him more than he had ever imagined. It wasn't that she had returned him to his former self, she had made him evolve into who he was now: the Master of Austin. Before, he had lived in the city without care of anything other than his own safety. Now, he wanted to step firmly into his role and protect his cabal and his city. He felt reborn.

He had made a fatal error. He had trusted Roberto.

But now he had Amaliya.

Turning his head, he caught her lips and the kiss was gentle and good. Her fingers slid over his hair and her eyes spoke of her emotions more than any words ever could. Looking down, he saw her terribly scorched hand and knew she had tried to remove the dagger. The weapon burned in him and he could feel it slowly killing him. With one hand, he slid his hand over his bloodied chest, then pressed it to her lips. Understanding, she quickly drew her tongue over it, taking his blood.

“None of that!” Roberto darted forward with preternatural swiftness and jerked Amaliya away.

Her tongue licked desperately at her bloodied lips as Roberto tossed her into the wall. She hit it hard and sank against it, her eyes tortured. “Now. Now. We were being kind and you took advantage of that,” the Summoner said in a put out voice, and kicked Amaliya hard in the ribs.

Cian could hear them shatter. She spit up blood and fell forward onto the moldy floor.

Cian looked down at the dagger and weakly drew his hand up to grip it and draw it out. Roberto was faster and hoisted him up off the ground and flung him into a table. Cian barely felt the pain as he impacted with the old piece of furniture. He was a furnace inside. He was dying.

Two massive men, obviously dead, entered and reached down to grip him under his armpits. They lifted him up so Roberto could bind his hands. Cian felt himself drifting in and out of consciousness as the room kept altering around him.

For a moment he saw The Summoner quite close, then the next he was standing over Amaliya.

Darkness swirled up again, then Amaliya stood nearby her dark hair falling over her shoulders to her waist. She was wearing a blue-gray satin dress that matched her eyes perfectly. It had a Victorian look about it, but Cian had seen a similar dress just recently in one of the haute couture fashion shows on TV Samantha had been watching.

“Dressing her up,” Cian mused. “Why?”

“She looks more like a lady this way, don't you think?” The Summoner sat in a nearby chair, his legs crossed. “It forces a certain dignity to her countenance.”

Amaliya looked toward Cian and she lifted her skirt enough for him to see her jeans and boots underneath. As usual, The Summoner was more about illusion than reality. Dressing her up was to make her unsure of herself and steal a bit of her identity.

Slowly, Cian took in his circumstances. He was bound to a chair with cord and the dagger had been drawn out. The damage was still there, deep and painful, but he was no longer dying.

Roberto lounged against the wall nearby watching the proceedings with a rather excited look on his face. Cian knew from experience that did not bode well for them.

Several dead creatures stood about the room. Some were fresh, but others were quite old. Cian had a feeling it was yet again another show of power.

Before Amaliya lay a woman dressed in a very pretty pink outfit and high heels. She was freshly dead and smelled of warmth and liquor.

“Now, where were we before he woke up? Ah, yes. Make her rise!”

“I don't know how,” Amaliya said in a tired voice. Her silky black hair was hanging around her face and Cian could only make out the tip of her nose.

“You defeated my creatures and now you can't raise this simple little corpse for me? I have a difficult time believing that.” The Summoner's voice was dangerous and cruel.

Cian could feel the tension ratcheting up and knew the violence was coming. He had seen Amaliya's battle through the back window of the Lexus. He had seen her eyes glow with the power over the dead and how she had cast down the creatures that attacked her. He knew, just as The Summoner did, that she was powerful. But what he understood without a doubt, but The Summoner did not, was that

Amaliya did not know how she had done it. The Summoner would take it as Amaliya being obstinate and it was about to get very, very bad.

“I just don't know how I did it. Okay?” She lifted her chin and her hair swung back to reveal her strong features. Defiance was etched in her expression.

“No, it is not okay. Show her it is not okay, Roberto,” The Summoner said in a cold voice.

Roberto stepped away from the wall and drew out the silver dagger. The hilt was wrapped in his silk handkerchief. He stepped purposefully toward Amaliya and she shrank back.

Cian knew what was going to happen, but Amaliya did not. He braced himself and clenched his teeth together.

Roberto swung about at the last moment and drove the silver dagger deep into Cian's upper arm. Cian felt the pain explode within him, but he did not cry out. Amaliya's cry was pained enough for both of them. Roberto's eyes gazed deep into his former Master's with curiosity, then stepped back and bowed slightly.

“Don't hurt him! I don't know how!”

“Try!” The Summoner slapped her and pointed his finger in her face.

“Try.”

Amaliya fell to her knees, the big skirt puffing up around her and laid her hands on the girl's body. It wasn't hard to see her struggling to draw on her power of necromancy, but the girl remained unmoving.

“Do it!”

“I'm trying,” Amaliya cried out.

The Summoner nodded at Roberto and Amaliya screamed just as the blade was buried into Cian's thigh.

Again, Cian fought the agony and refused to cry out. He was weakening and he knew he could not remain conscious much longer.

“Do it,” The Summoner snarled at her and stalked around her. His eyes were pure white as his power filled the room and his dead followers swayed in the waves of it.

Amaliya again placed her hands on the girl and closed her eyes in an attempt to concentrate. The minutes ticked by and blood tears streamed down her pale face. The girl remained unmoving.

“Roberto,” The Summoner said again.

“No!”

Cian saw Amaliya launch herself at Roberto and so did his former servant. Roberto turned and slashed at her. The blade caught her upraised hand and as she fell back, her hand swept over the room and her blood flew in an arc over both the raised dead and the corpse at her feet.

Cian could not process what happened next. By this point, he was close to blacking out. He could feel the sun hovering at the horizon and the dead drawing into a tight circle around him. He could see The Summoner looking down at shock as the girl with the pink high heels and glossy dead lips grabbed his ankle. He saw Roberto's look of sheer surprise as the leg of a wooden chair burst through his chest, impaling his undead heart. And, finally, he saw Amaliya falling back to the floor, her eyes glowing pure white.

Then he was lost to the darkness.

Amaliya didn't know how she did it, but suddenly her power lashed out, gripped the dead in its thrall, and wrenched them from The Summoner's influence. She cried out in anger and pain, and in her cry were the orders that the decaying bodies obeyed. She wanted Roberto

dead at her feet and the corpses moved to fulfill her desire as the dark, silky tentacle of her power filled them with life. The dead surged around Roberto, one of them impaling him from behind with a tree branch. The Cian's servant's eyes widened with horror before he tumbled forward. Several of the dead leaned down and fumbled with the hole in his back, then plunged their hands inside his body. As Roberto screamed, the dead pulled his heart from his body and silenced him forever.

Scrambling to her feet, Amaliya saw the girl in pink attacking The Summoner while the dead surged forward to help her. Roberto, truly dead, lay abandoned on the floor.

“No, Cease!” The Summoner ordered the dead, but they did not obey as they reached for him.

Wrapping her hand with the stupid skirt's material, she grabbed the silver dagger from Roberto's hand and cut Cian free as quickly as she could. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw The Summoner shove through the dead as he advanced on her. She hurled the silver dagger at her maker just as Cian tumbled forward into her arms. The Summoner ducked away from the weapon and the dead managed to trip him into their midst.

Grabbing Cian about the waist, she heaved him up in her arms and dragged him toward the window. She felt so tired and drained, but they had to escape.

An animated corpse flew past them and into the wall as The Summoner rose up and began to rip apart the risen dead. His fury was evident in his features and he bared his teeth at her. “Where will you go? The sun is about to rise!” He growled at her as he shoved the attacking undead creatures away from him.

Amaliya didn't even answer. She shoved Cian through the musty

curtains and out the window and followed him into the pre-dawn greyness.

Gripping him under the arms, she pulled him along, his feet dragging on the ground. The sky was turning a pale blue on the horizon and elegant pink and purple clouds swept across the hills. As she struggled along, she glanced behind her to see no one pursuing them. Glancing toward the horizon, she could see why. The edge of the new morning sun was emerging over the tree tops. The Summoner was safe in the darkened motel. Though he was able to stay awake, he would burn in the sunlight. Just as they would if they did not get to shelter.

Grabbing up the long skirt of the stupid dress The Summoner had made her put on, she lifted it over both of them like a cloak and tried to shield them as the sky continued to lighten. Cian stirred slightly and his legs began to carry him.

“The sun,” he whispered.

“I know,” she answered and tried to shield their exposed skin as they hurried along the rough terrain leading away from the abandoned town. They broke free of the overgrown foliage and into a golden field of grass. She looked behind them and considered trying to hide them in the trees, but she was sure the branches would not provide enough shelter.

Across the field was the dark shape of a structure and she glanced warily toward the rising sun. It burned her eyes. She flinched and looked away. The gray of the morning was fading fast. Adjusting the heavy satin skirt around them, Cian's face tucked into her neck, she pulled him with her across the uneven ground.

“Amaliya,” he said in a soft voice. “We'll burn.”

“No, we won't,” she answered, and half-dragged, half-carried him.

A soft morning mist flowed around them as they moved and she was grateful for the thick clouds sliding overhead. Maybe the clouds would buy them a bit more time.

“The sun,” Cian mumbled.

Determinedly, she kept moving. As they drew closer to the building, she made out its ramshackle countenance. It was long abandoned and appeared to be an old farm house. Grateful that she had kept her jeans and boots on instead of taking them off like The Summoner had wanted, she kept the skirt over their heads as they half-climbed, half-fell over the old decaying fence that surrounded the house. For a second, the sun caught Cian as he fell to the ground and he cried out in terror. She fell to her knees and quickly covered him. He reached out to her and she hid him in the safety of her dress.

“We're almost there,” she said softly and urged him to his feet.

Clutching her tightly, he struggled to walk with her.

She now understood that The Summoner's power was in her. She had risen during the day before and she was bound and determined to stay awake. Cian was obviously falling asleep despite his attempt not to, but she would keep him moving. She would not lose him to the sun.

Practically carrying him up the splintered steps, she heaved him onto the porch. He was nearly completely asleep. His body was a lead weight in her arms. The door was already partially open and she shoved it aside. The room beyond was full of debris. She dragged Cian inside and shut the door behind them. Sunlight was already beginning to pour through the east windows, filling the house with a soft morning glow. It also cascaded through the big holes in the roof and Amaliya fought back her panic.

Cradling Cian against her, she moved with her head down, keeping the skirt of the dress over their heads and faces. It was in the second

room down a narrow hall that she saw their salvation. It was a closet full of darkness. Avoiding the holes in the floor, she managed to maneuver through the room despite Cian's dead weight and shoved him into the closet. He fell into it and crumpled into a heap. She hastily followed him in and fell to the floor in exhaustion. Her hand found the doorknob and drew the door closed.

The fear that The Summoner would send dead servants after them rose inside of her and she looked for a lock. There was none. To her dismay she saw there were cracks in the door that were wide enough to peer through or for the sun to pour through once it hit the West walls. She quickly struggled out of the dress and pulled her t-shirt down over her belly. She had only pretended to change out of her old clothes into the dress. She was glad for it. Sitting down on the floor, she adjusted Cian's body close to her and covered them both with the heavy satin. Then, she raised her hand and closed it over the knob.

One thing she was certain of was that when she slept, her hand would lock into place. Cian had told her about the vampire's ability to protect themselves in sleep. Even holding a coffin shut from within was something their subconscious could instruct their body to do as they slumbered.

Tightening her hand, she willed it to stay firm and locked around the knob. She had to keep it closed at all costs. Sinking against Cian, she could feel sleep coming fast. She was weak and had no choice.

Her head fell onto his shoulder.

She slept.

Sergio's massive truck barreled down the county road just as the sun began to make its appearance on the horizon. Innocente sat in the

front passenger seat clutching her rosary and a statue of the Virgin Mary. Behind them sat Samantha and Jeff in the roomy backseat. Samantha had nodded off for an hour earlier and her head was snuggled onto Jeff's lap. He had found himself stroking her blond hair gently as he tried to mentally prepare himself for what was to come. He found the act very soothing.

They had swung by his place the night before and he had grabbed a lot of his father's hunting gear. It was packed into a big bag in the bed of the truck along with a lot of stuff Amaliya's grandmother had brought from her home. They looked like religious zealots with all the crosses and religious icons tucked in the back. He had switched out his prosthetic leg to a sturdier one and had left the more cosmetic one at home. There was a good chance he was going to have to run.

"We're almost there," Sergio said from the front seat as another sign flashed by.

"They'll be falling asleep very soon," Jeff answered. "Which is good. The last thing we need is an awake vampire."

The Summoner had almost pursued Amaliya into the gray dawn, but had resisted that urge. He was more susceptible to sunlight than any other vampire he had ever encountered. Ironically, he was now able to be awake during the daylight hours, but was unable to venture forth. Some vampires, he had known over the centuries, were able to survive in sunlight if they were heavily covered. Unfortunately, the sun seemed to pierce straight through his clothing. Perhaps it had something to do with his necromancy. He was not certain.

The day before, he had been carried out of Heather's apartment in a large chest and to the van his minions had secured. He had remained shrouded in darkness until the sun had descended and his powers

were fully returned to him. Then he had summoned Amaliya's victims, hacked them apart, and shaped them into new, deadly creatures. It had all been so entertaining to watch, but now he was trapped in the motel and he was seething.

He stood back and watched Amaliya flee as her undead servants fumbled around him, unsure of what to do once her presence left them. Lifting one hand, he drew them securely back under his power. He had felt her power drain out of them the moment she had disappeared from their view. Pulling the dead close around him, he whispered his instructions to them and then they shuffled off to obey. Turning, he tucked his hands behind him, he stepped over Roberto's dissolving body and walked slowly down the long hallway of the decrepit hotel. Roberto had prepared a haven for them in one of the inner rooms that had no windows. Two of his largest servants walked behind him. Opening the door into his temporary haven he gazed over the makeshift arrangements. Two cots from WalMart were made up for him and Roberto and several camping chairs were set up for the guards.

With a slight shrug, The Summoner walked over to one of the chairs and sat down. He was a patient man. He would wait out the sun, then he would venture back into the night with his servants and destroy Cian and reclaim Amaliya. He would not be foolish again. Her spirit was strong and he would have to break it quickly or he would never be able to use her effectively.

Closing his glowing eyes, he concentrated on his dead minions and sent the fresher ones into the day to do his bidding.

* * *

Sergio wondered for the hundredth time how he had been dragged into this madness. He also wondered how he could actually be having

some sort of warped fun. It was rather exciting being a vampire hunter. When he drove the big truck into the ghost town that was the supposed lair of The Summoner, he felt a shiver of anticipation flow over him.

“Yuck,” his grandmother said in a somber tone as she looked around at all the burned-out buildings.

Swinging his head back and forth, he looked over the abandoned town as the truck crept along. He was just thinking it looked rather ominous when his grandmother shouted, “Sergio! Stop!”

He slammed on the brakes and everyone jerked forward. Samantha fell hard into the back of his chair, woke up, and started swearing.

“What, Grandmama?” He looked around frantically, his heart thundering in his ears.

The little old lady threw open the door and tumbled out of the truck. Sergio shifted into PARK, swung his door open, leaped out and ran after her.

“Sergio! Innoçente, no! The sun isn't completely up!”

Sergio heard Jeff jumping down behind them, but he continued to run after his amazingly fast grandmother. He had several crosses around his neck. His revolver and a crucifix were tucked into his back pocket. He wondered if it was enough to fend off The Summoner.

His grandmother reached a discarded cowboy hat lying on the road and snatched it up.

“It's Amaliya's!” She held it out triumphantly.

Sergio heaved to a stop and leaned over, his hands resting on his knees. He seriously needed to work out. His lungs hurt from his short run and he gulped down air.

Jeff caught up to them, followed closely by Samantha. He snatched

the hat away and looked at it. "Are you sure?"

"Yes! Yes! I'm sure!" Innocente was breathing a little heavily, but she reached out to grab the hat back, her expression feisty and determined.

"It reeks like-like-" Samantha made a face.

Sergio could smell it, too. "Something dead."

Innocente drew her hand back and sniffed her fingers. "It's not her. It's something else. She's not dead."

Jeff tossed the hat into the nearby bushes that bordered an abandoned motel. Sergio could tell the young man was thinking over the situation quickly. Sergio looked over at the gas station to their right, then slowly toward the motel. He became aware that all four of them were now standing in the middle of the street, the truck idling nearby, staring at the abandoned motel. Probably not their smartest move.

"Shit," he muttered, and suffered his grandmother's automatic smack on his arm.

"In there," Jeff decided.

"Yeah," Samantha agreed.

Innocente drew near Sergio anxiously and he slung his arm down around her trembling shoulders. He cuddled her into his side and tried hard not to show his own fear. He was sure he was not imagining it. Even though the sun was showing over the trees now, the motel seemed abnormally dark and foreboding.

"I really, really, really don't want to go in there," Samantha said after a beat.

"You and me both," Jeff answered grimly.

"The dead are in there," Innocente said sadly. "I can hear them in my

head.”

Jeff looked toward her curiously.

“She's a medium,” Sergio answered the unspoken question. “She has always seen ghosts and heard the voices of the dead.”

Lifting his eyebrows high, Jeff said, “Oh.”

“That's creepy,” Samantha decided.

“You have no idea, mijita,” Innocente said sadly.

Jeff began to walk along the front of the motel toward the rural road that cut through the town. Sergio followed and touched Samantha's shoulder as he passed her. She gave him a faint smile.

“There's a Lexus down the road,” Jeff said, and started toward it.

“Stay here,” he said to Samantha and his grandmother.

He hurried to catch up with Jeff before they could protest him bossing them. Despite the vampire hunter's funky looking mechanical leg, he was fast on his feet. Sergio struggled to keep up.

A navy Lexus RX was pulled over into the trees near the hotel and Jeff motioned for Sergio to be cautious. Keeping an eye out for any trouble, they both crept up to the vehicle and peered inside.

“Oh, crap,” Sergio said softly when he saw the body of a young woman. Her blond hair was over her face, but she was obviously dead. Her head was completely twisted around on her shoulders. Her body was stuffed down behind the passenger seat.

“Window's shot out,” Jeff said, and pointed to the broken windshield.

“Whoa.” Sergio looked around nervously. His heart was beating even harder than before. He glanced back to where his grandmother and the blond woman were standing at the edge of the gas station's parking lot staring toward them. It was getting serious fast.

Samantha began to motion with one hand and he was relieved she

was smart enough not to call out. He had trouble figuring out what she was trying to tell them in pantomime, but Jeff seemed to catch it.

“It's Cian's,” he said softly to Sergio. “She says it's Cian's.”

They both looked toward the ascending sun that was slowly pushing back the gray remains of the night. The sound of shattering glass came from nearby and the men ducked down behind the truck. Sergio signaled for his grandmother and Samantha to get out of sight and the women darted off to hide behind a sign. There was nothing they could do about the truck parked across from the gas station.

Looking under the truck, Sergio watched three figures walk through the overgrown foliage to the vehicle he was hiding behind. One of the three was wearing high heels and the other two were wearing battered sneakers. Sergio smelled the stink of death on them and crouched down further. The dead gathered on the other side of the Lexus and opened up the back door. He could hear them moving about, but none of them said a word. He realized they were removing the dead body from the truck.

Well, that was what he thought until he heard a terrible cracking noise, then saw another set of feet join the other three.

Jeff looked sharply toward Sergio and Sergio slowly shrugged, not sure what to think. Together they crept along the edge of the vehicle and watched as the four figures now walked away from the motel into the trees and toward a vast open field beyond the “Y” intersection where the motel was huddled in the darkness of the trees.

“Follow them,” Sergio barely whispered.

Jeff nodded.

Sergio looked back toward the blond girl walking along with the other three corpses. Her head bobbed strangely on her shoulders, but she

was up and walking.

The walking dead.

Kind of like a Romero zombie film.

Totally creepy.

Jeff turned and motioned to the two women to hang back then motioned to Sergio to join them.

He was reluctant to leave Jeff, but he realized they would need more weapons and the truck. He'd give it a few minutes, then bring the truck up the road. Sweating profusely despite the coolness of the morning, Sergio ducked down and rushed back to his grandmother and Samantha.

Jeff crept after the dead making sure to keep his head down as much as possible. When he entered the field of overgrown grass, he practically crawled as he paced along behind the four animated corpses. Casting his eyes toward the horizon, he could see the sun was now further up and yet The Summoner's servants continued to walk. This did not bode well for them. It meant The Summoner was awake in the motel behind him.

The four dead were heading toward a distant building that was hidden behind a thicket of trees and not visible from the road that slowly curved away into the Hill Country. A few wild peach trees were adorned with brilliant purple and lavender flowers near it and Jeff could now see it had once been a large farmhouse. Crouching down, he watched the four creatures draw close to the house, one of them stumbling over a fallen fence. Slowly, they maneuvered through the overgrown yard and up into the abandoned house.

Wiping the sweat off his brow, he considered his options and just

decided to wait. After around five minutes, the four dead people reappeared and took up positions around the house. It was now obvious they were either guarding or watching the house.

Ducking down, he moved back toward the road until he was back a safe distance, then he ran back to the truck that was now idling near a burned out building away from the motel.

Hurrying around to the driver's side, he gestured for Sergio to lower the window.

“What's up?”

“I think there is a very good chance that one or two of your friends is in a farmhouse out in the middle of a field. I followed the dead out to this building. They went inside, then came back out and took up sentry positions.”

“What if it's The Summoner?” Samantha asked from the backseat.

“I don't think so,” he answered and looked toward the foreboding motel. “The dead came from the motel so my money is on that he's stuck in the there and Cian or Amaliya or both managed to make it to the farmhouse. I say we take out the four around the house and check inside. If we can avoid a direct confrontation with The Summoner, I am all about that.”

“But he's asleep, right?” Innocente's brow was furrowed and she was clutching her massive tote bag tightly. The head of the Virgin Mary statue was slightly sticking out the top.

“I don't think so,” Jeff confessed. “The dead are up and walking and he is controlling them. He has to be awake to do that.”

“Oh, crap,” Samantha said in an awed, yet terrified voice.

“Okay, so we go to the farmhouse, kill the already dead people, try to find sleeping vampires inside, somehow rescue them, and head back

to Austin,” Sergio said. “And avoid The Summoner at all costs.”

“Yeah,” Jeff answered.

Sergio pondered this, then shrugged. “Let's do it.”

Jeff hurried around the truck. His leg throbbed a little but he ignored it. He had a job to do and he intended to do it. As he slid up into the backseat, Samantha looked toward him, her eyes wide with fear and excitement.

“You okay?” she asked, and touched his shoulder lightly.

He was surprised to feel a slight shiver inside of his belly and he suddenly blushed. “Yeah.” He looked away from her and felt immensely awkward. Of course it was probably the adrenaline, but the concern in her expression had touched him. And he'd be stupid not to notice she was a very pretty girl.

Frowning, he redirected his thoughts. It was time to kill...no rescue...the vampires. He reached down and unzipped his bag and pulled out his baseball bat. Against the dead minions, this should work just fine.

“Mine,” Samantha said, and snagged it from him.

He looked at her, startled, but her grim expression shut up his protest. With a slight bob of his head, he reached in and grabbed a machete.

“Mine,” Innocente said, and held out her hand from over the back of the passenger seat.

Jeff sighed and handed it over. He reached down and pulled out another machete, this one smaller than the first.

“Mine,” Sergio said from the front seat.

“Oh, give me a freaking break,” Jeff exclaimed.

Sergio grinned over his shoulder at him. “Just joshing you,” he said. “I

got the truck.”

And before Jeff could ask what he meant, Sergio gunned the huge 4x4 vehicle and it roared into the field.

Samantha held onto the back of the driver's seat for dear life as Sergio maneuvered the big truck. The fence had long ago collapsed and the truck easily roared into the field. The four people inside were jostled around as the truck bounced and growled through the overgrown grass. A few times they hit something big and were thrown about, but the truck kept going straight for the old farmhouse.

The four dead minions turned slowly as Sergio found an old ruined drive and drove up over the rough terrain. It was severely potholed from numerous storms and Samantha fell into Jeff a few times. They hit one so hard, she hit her head on the roof. Jeff quickly pulled her close and checked to see if she was okay. She shoved him off and said she was okay, but her head ached now.

She wasn't even sure what Sergio planned to do until they hit the first dead minion of The Summoner. It was a blond woman whose head was listing horribly to one side. She looked like something out of a zombie movie. The truck barreled into her body and flung it aside. Samantha whipped around to see the woman's body hit a tree and fall to the ground. To her surprise, it struggled to get back up.

Sergio swore in Spanish as he whipped the truck around and aimed for two men rushing toward them. They were both more alive in appearance than the blond woman, but Samantha saw their dead eyes just before the truck hit them. The two bodies were flung backward and landed hard on the ground. A woman with a pink dress and high heels rushed toward the truck, a tree branch gripped in one hand. She struck the back passenger window and Samantha screamed as broken glass rained in on them. Sergio slammed on the brakes and they were

all thrown forward.

Innocente muttered something in Spanish, wrenched her door open, and leaped out.

“No,” Sergio exclaimed and grabbed for her, but missed.

Samantha shoved her door open and jumped out, wielding the bat. Immediately, she was confronted by the dead women clutching a branch in one hand. Sam swung the bat hard at the dead female. The impact reverberated through her arms and into her body and the woman in pink spun away from her.

Innocente came around the front of the truck and struck the woman with the machete. In eerie silence, the dead creature raised the tree branch she had clutched in one hand to strike Innocente. Samantha clenched her jaw and raised the bat over shoulder and slammed it down on the dead woman's head. There was a sickening crack and the woman's head split open. Turning slowly, the dead woman looked at Samantha with a blank expression. Her face was split and her neck was slashed open from the machete. Utterly calm and silent, the dead woman raised her branch again. It was then Jeff appeared and slammed his machete hard into the woman's throat. It knocked her back onto the ground and Jeff braced himself, feet apart, and commenced to hack the woman's head off.

Gagging, Samantha whirled around in time to see the first woman staggering toward her. Her head was falling over on her shoulder and her body was struggling to move.

“They're still moving!” she screamed

Sergio dove back into the truck and shifted into reverse. Gunning the engine, he drove backward at a fast clip and slammed into the advancing woman. Her body fell back and the big wheels of the truck rolled over her.

Innocente backed away from Jeff as he finished off the woman in the high heels and turned to see the two battered forms of the male corpses crawling toward her.

“Why won't they die!” she cried.

Sergio left the truck parked on the struggling blond woman and jumped out. He ran full force into the first man, tackling him to the ground. His big fist began to beat the man's face into a bloody pulp. Samantha shook herself out of her daze and lifted the bat over her head. Running toward the second man, she let out a scream that would make Xena proud. The first strike missed his head and bounced off his shoulder. He reached for her and she rammed the end of the bat into his mouth, shattering his teeth and nose. Not even noticing, he kept reaching for her throat, but only managed to grab her shoulder. Beside her she could hear Sergio slamming his fist over and over again into the other dead creature.

Trying to break free from the man's terrible grip, Samantha kept ramming the end of the bat into his face. Innocente began to hack at the man's arm. Samantha tried to keep distance between her and the swinging blade as she tried to break free.

“Destroy them so he can't use them,” Jeff ordered. He came up behind the dead man that was trying to get a better grip on Samantha and began to hack at the back of his neck like he was a giant tree.

Managing to finally squirm free, Samantha staggered away. Jeff and Innocente continued to hack away at the dead man, who was still trying to grab them.

Sergio climbed off the man who's head he had pulverized and looked toward the house. He looked at Samantha and she nodded.

Together, they entered.

The barren house was falling apart and as they walked over the rotting

floor, Samantha feared falling through. She was grateful she had worn her cowboy boots and jeans and nothing silly and frilly. Holding the baseball bat at the ready, she followed Sergio through the apparently empty house. She didn't immediately realize he had his gun out, but when she did, she wondered if it would stop The Summoner's minions.

The house did not seem very safe for vampires. The roof had completely rotted away and the sun poured through multiple holes. The walls were so decayed, daylight streamed through the cracks. But the wood was old and thick. It would probably stand a few more years before finally giving into the elements and collapsing.

It was in what looked like a bedroom that Sergio found the hidden vampires. He tried to open a door only to find it firmly shut. He strained to open it to no avail. Finally, he managed to get a peek into the closet through a thick crack in the door.

"I think they're in there," he said.

"What?" Samantha rushed to his side and slid onto her tippy toes to look inside. She could barely make out what looked like a large lump with a satin cover on it. It was hard to see with the limited light, but the sunlight coming through the broken roof was enough to dimly see the sheen of the satin.

"I think they locked the door," Sergio said, and got down on his knees to try to see through a keyhole. Fumbling with his belt, he pulled off a small flashlight. It took some maneuvering, but he finally managed to get a view inside. "She's holding it shut. I can see her wrist."

"Is Cian in there?"

"I don't know," Sergio answered, and handed her the flashlight.

She tried to see through the keyhole, but she couldn't manage it.

Giving up, she handed it back to him.

Jeff and Innocente entered the room, both of them looking weary and blood splattered.

“They're in there.” Samantha pointed to the closet.

“Then we get them and get out of here,” Jeff answered.

Innocente hurried to the closet and laid her hands on it.

“Amaliya,” the old woman whispered. “We're here, Amaliya.”

Her voice was full of emotion. Samantha reached out and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. Despite their rocky start, Samantha couldn't help but like the old lady. She was tough.

Sergio looked somber and said, “We should get the blanket and the tarp. We need to hurry before the sun moves any further overhead and we end up with more light in here.”

“Agreed,” Jeff said and moved to peer through the crack in the door.

“She's holding the door shut,” Samantha said.

“But she's asleep,” Sergio added.

“Amaliya, it's Grandmama,” Innocente said again. “Wake up, Amaliya. Let us get you out.”

“Go get the stuff from the vehicle and be careful,” Jeff said to Samantha. “We need to get out of here right away.”

Samantha nodded and lifted her bat again. “I'm on it.”

“Coming with you.” Sergio followed her out into the hallway.

“I just want to get the hell out of here,” Samantha said to him as they moved quickly to the front door. “Before anything else crazy happens.”

“I'm so with you on that,” Sergio answered.

Samantha heaved the door open and stared into the gnarled, decayed, dried husks of the dead people standing on the porch. She had only a

second to realize that the corpses were all around the house and truck before the one nearest her lifted its masticated arm.

“Sergio,” Samantha screamed.

Then the thing stabbed her through and she fell back into Sergio's arms.

In his darkened room, The Summoner smiled as his eyes glowed with white light.

“Don't kill them,” he whispered softly. “Wound them, keep them in the house, but do not kill them. Save them for me.”

How nice of Amaliya and Cian to take refuge in the farmhouse that sat on the edge of the old cemetery. So convenient for him to call on the dead once his four more robust minions were downed. And how lovely of Amaliya's grandmother and cousin to come and provide ample fodder for him to use against her.

His smile broadened.

The situation was increasingly to his liking.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sergio looked out the window and sighed. “They're not moving.”

Jeff looked up from where he sat on the floor cradling Samantha in his arms. He had used his jacket to staunch the blood flow from her wound and now it was being used as a makeshift bandage. He could see the pain etched in her face and she looked very pale. As soon as she had been stabbed through a sword, Sergio had yanked her back into the house and slammed the door shut.

The dead remained outside in terrible silence. They were just standing there, emaciated, gnarled dead things, waiting for the night to come. The Summoner's power infused them with unnatural resilience and the four times the mortals had tried to shove through them to the truck, the living had been pushed back by the dead. The four humans all bore wounds now. They were bloodied, dirty, and trapped.

No matter how many of the dead they hacked apart, The Summoner's minions kept coming in a great wall of dead, dry flesh. The Summoner's own black magic infused the corpses and it was his will that had the dead pushing the living back into the house. The four humans had all felt the dark power within their opponents.

The Summoner wanted them here.

He wanted them trapped.

“It's like night of the fucking living dead,” Sergio said grumpily.

His grandmother was in the other room, sitting next to the closet

door, talking to Amaliya, trying to reach her through the vampire sleep.

“At least they are not trying to get in and eat us,” Samantha said in a raspy voice.

“No, they just stab us with swords from the freakin' Civil War,” Sergio responded with frustration.

They were all hungry, they were tired, and they were scared. Jeff couldn't hold Sergio's moodiness against him.

“You would have thought we would have noticed the graveyard in the back of the house,” Sergio said after a long moment of silence.

“It is behind that line of trees. How could we know?” Jeff answered, but they had been foolish and they knew it. They had been so desperate to rescue the vampires and escape they had not been thorough enough. They had all overlooked the overgrown graveyard tucked behind the house.

Sergio sighed and stepped away from the window. “And no one can see the dead from the road because of that line of the trees. Plus who the hell would be out here anyway. It's so off the map.”

“That's why he chose it.” Jeff looked down at Samantha. She looked so frail and pale. He had no idea how bad the internal damage was, but the sword had gone through her upper chest. His fingers lightly stroked her fevered brow and he sighed softly. Her breathing sounded very wrong.

“He'll come as soon as the sun goes down, won't he,” Sergio said in a sad voice.

“Yeah.”

Sergio sat down on the rotted floor and let out a long sigh. “Man, this sucks.”

“Yep,” Samantha said as she drifted back into consciousness. “And all the crosses are in the truck.”

“We could try again,” Sergio said looking toward the door.

But they all knew that the thick wall of the dead waited for them. Impassable and dangerous.

“Or we can just wait for a miracle,” Sergio offered.

No other option seemed viable.

And so they waited.

Amaliya woke up long before dusk. She came into consciousness abruptly and felt disoriented by her surroundings. Her hand throbbed painfully and she looked toward where it was gripping the doorknob tightly. Slowly, she remembered. Then she heard the voice of her Grandmama whispering softly outside the door.

“...and we're trying to make sure you're safe, Amal, but they are all around the house and we can't get through. They hurt Samantha real bad and I think she's dying...”

Slowly, Amaliya pushed the heavy satin off her and looked around the closet. The sun was pushing through a few cracks in the door, but the narrow beams were high above her. The light illuminated the narrow closet enough that she could see Cian was unconscious. His wounds had not healed at all and she touched his face lightly. He did not stir.

“...I can feel his power and I'm afraid. I keep praying that God will see us through, but I don't know what to do. I tried to speak to the dead, but he fills them. This is much scarier than the movies...”

“Grandmama?” Her voice sounded raw and the dark need swelled inside of her. She needed to feed soon.

“Amal! Are you okay? We're here! We came to rescue you, but the

dead are outside and they won't let us escape!"

Amaliya managed to get to her knees and dared to peek out of the keyhole. Her grandmother's eye came into view. She was staring right back at Amaliya.

"What time is it?"

"Six-thirty, baby."

Two hours until sunset. Shit. Not much time.

"You okay, Amal?"

"Yeah. Okay as can be. Cian is still asleep. He's wounded pretty badly. How did you find us?" She was having trouble wrapping her mind around the reality that her grandmother was actually here.

"Sergio and I went to Austin to save you when you didn't answer your cellphone. We met with Samantha and her friend, Jeff. He's a vampire hunter."

"Samantha knows a vampire hunter?" Amaliya blinked. "Okay. That's just weird."

"And we went into the apartment and saw the map on the computer. So we came here. We saw some dead people guarding this place so we came in and found you. After we killed the dead people...again."

Amaliya almost laughed, but she could hear the dread in her grandmother's voice. "Then what happened?"

"There is a cemetery behind the house. And it looks like they all got up and came to visit. We can't get out of the house or they attack us and drive us back inside. They hurt Samantha really bad. I think she's dying."

Despite the animosity that lay between them, Amaliya felt a pang of anger and regret. Samantha was a firecracker and annoying as hell, but she loved Cian. If she was here, it was out of love for him and

Amaliya could not fault her for that. As these thoughts flitted through her mind, she sighed, feeling guilty for her own involvement with Cian. She ran her fingers over the door slowly and leaned against it wearily.

“Is the sun coming in?”

“Yeah, it is. But the kitchen hallway is kinda dark. Do you want to come out?”

“Yeah. We need to plan before dark comes,” Amaliya hesitated as she considered the weight of her next words. It was hard for her to admit, but it was the truth. “I may be the only thing that can stop him since I have some of his power.”

“Okay. Let me get Sergio and Jeff and see if they can help me block out the sunlight so you can come out.”

Amaliya listened to her grandmother's light footsteps dart away from the closet. She leaned over and kissed Cian's forehead. He was very cold and she could feel death in him. He was significantly weakened and he would need to feed. But the only people he could feed off of were the people who had come to rescue them.

“Shit,” she whispered. As usual, her luck was bad, and now it had infected the others who were in her life.

But last night she had defeated the gruesome creatures that had come up against her and if she could just figure out how she did it, they would be home free.

It took some time, but Jeff and Sergio were able to block the windows and cracks in the walls with broken furniture, old curtains and even pulled down paneling off the walls in one room. Finally, they had blocked the sun enough to allow Amaliya to emerge from the closet.

She slipped out holding what looked like a satin dress over her head and moved into the area they had prepared for her. She was greeted with hugs and kisses from her family, then they retreated from her as she slunk toward the darkened corner.

Jeff had to admit she looked nothing like he had expected. He supposed Samantha's bias against her had painted her into a darker figure than she really was. The face framed by the long black hair was more unique than pretty and her tattoos and piercings didn't look shocking to him. Just rather Austin. She was wearing dark jeans and boots and a t-shirt that probably belonged to Cian. Sitting down cross-legged, she looked around the room they had barricaded and the four people gathered in the room.

Jeff sat next to Samantha, who had fallen asleep again. Her breath was ragged and she was burning up. Innocente had Samantha's hand between her gnarled ones. Sergio drew close to his cousin and reached out to touch her pale hand.

Amaliya took Sergio's hand gratefully. "We need to plan."
"Cian looks out of commission for awhile yet," Jeff said, looking toward the closet.

"He's badly wounded. Roberto turned on us and stabbed him several times with a silver dagger. He's not healing," Amaliya said softly. Her striking blue-gray eyes were glittering in the murkiness of the room. Her voice was distinctly East Texas.

"What happened last night? Tell us," Sergio urged.

And Amaliya did. She told them all about her battle with the undead monsters The Summoner sent against her and Roberto's betrayal. She told them about their escape in the morning and how she had briefly seized control of the dead from The Summoner.

“Can you do that now?” Jeff asked excitedly.

“I don't even know how I did it,” Amaliya sighed. “I really have no freaking clue.”

“But you can try, right?” Sergio looked at her desperately. “We have to get out of here before nightfall.”

“He'll use your family against you,” Jeff added.

Innocente looked up fearfully. “I don't like this vampiro at all.”

“None of us do.” Amaliya said in a soft voice.

“Try, Amal. Try to send them away,” Sergio urged her.

Jeff could see the fear in the vampire's face, but she nodded. Closing her eyes and lowering her head, she fell into silence. Jeff held his breath as he felt the tendrils of her power snaking out of her body. Samantha shivered in her unconscious state and Innocente ran her hands over her own arms as she obviously felt chilled. Sergio drew his hand back and looked very unnerved as cold, feathery touches of her power flowed around them.

“I'll go see if it's working,” Sergio said in a hushed tone, and hurried out of the room.

Jeff's hand swept over Samantha's hair as she slowly stirred. “Is he here?” Her eyes were full of fear and she gripped his arm tightly.

“No, no. Amaliya is trying to send them away.”

Samantha's gaze flicked toward the vampire in the darkened corner.

“How is Cian?”

“Wounded, but alive,” Jeff answered, and smiled at her.

Samantha's eyes welled with tears and her clammy little hand held on to him tighter. “We have to get out of here.”

“We're trying.”

Sergio ducked back into the room and shook his head. "They're not moving."

Amaliya opened up her eyes slowly. A sensation like a frozen silk scarf being yanked over his flesh sent chills down Jeff's back as she withdrew her power.

"Fuck."

"You tried, Amal," her grandmother said in a consoling voice.

"I'm weak," Amaliya said. "I need to feed soon to be strong enough to face him."

Jeff knew he wasn't the only one who froze. He swallowed hard and looked toward Sergio and Innocente. They were looking at each other with uneasy expressions. Jeff rubbed his hand lightly over Samantha's trembling fingers.

"Feed her," Samantha whispered through her dry lips.

"Huh?" Sergio exclaimed with a double take.

"She's our only hope. To get out. She needs to be strong enough to face him if Cian...if Cian can't." Samantha was looking worse and Innocente gently rubbed the girl's wrist.

"I can feed just enough to make myself strong. I have that control. Cian taught me," Amaliya said after an very tense moment of utter quiet.

"I'm game if you'll give Samantha some of your blood," Jeff said after careful consideration. He knew vampire blood could suspend Samantha's life.

"Eww," Samantha uttered.

"What will that do? Make her a vampire?" Amaliya looked uneasy.

"No. Give her some of your blood and..." he hesitated. "Lick her

wound.”

“Double eww,” Samantha whispered.

“I'm kinda with her on this,” Amaliya said with some distaste.

“It will make the wound heal and keep her alive,” Jeff said in a firm voice. “Just like Cian kept Roberto alive for a hundred years with his blood.”

“I don't want to be her servant,” Samantha protested.

“What she said,” Amaliya said.

“Just feed her once then,” Jeff said in a short tone. He knew Samantha was starting to fade fast as was their chance of getting out alive.

“Do it, Amal, if it will keep her alive,” Innocente urged.

“Yeah. Do it. Then you can have some of my blood,” Sergio decided. He folded his arms over his big chest. “Yeah. Do it. She came here to save you.”

“Cian,” Samantha corrected. “I came to save Cian.”

Amaliya slightly laughed at Samantha's comment. She knew the other woman couldn't stand her, but she rose to her feet. “Fine. But I can't promise you guys that I can beat The Summoner.”

“No, but we don't have many options,” Jeff answered, and looked down at Samantha. He didn't want her to die.

Amaliya nodded and came over to them. Innocente took the dress, stood and spread out the skirt over their heads with her hands as a precaution against the sunlight. Under the makeshift umbrella, Amaliya leaned over Samantha.

“I know that I'm not your favorite person, but I'm doing this 'cause it's right,” Amaliya said.

Samantha looked toward Jeff. "I'm going to kick your ass later." Her voice was raspy and full of pain, but her words made Jeff smile.

"I know."

"I'm Amaliya," the vampire said to him, extending her hand.

"Jeff Summerfield."

"The vampire hunter," Amaliya said with a wry smile. "You are definitely going to have to tell me how you two hooked up later."

Jeff smiled back at her. "Sounds good." He could see how Amaliya had intimidated Samantha. The longer he looked at her, the more alluring she seemed.

Amaliya carefully untied the makeshift bandage and looked at the deep, nasty wound it had covered. The blood was black and bubbly over the wound and Jeff could see hunger spring into her eyes.

"What do I do?"

"Give her some of your blood, then lick her wounds closed," Jeff answered.

Amaliya looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, then shrugged.

"Okay."

Amaliya leaned over Samantha. "Never thought it would be like this between us."

"Oh, shut up," Samantha answered and rolled her eyes.

Amaliya could feel Samantha's life fading and she felt sorry for the girl. She really wasn't too bad. Just rather zealous when it came to her boyfriend. But then again, that passion had brought her family and Jeff to their rescue. She owed it to the girl to save her.

"Okay, let's do this," the vampire said.

She let the blood lust fill her and felt her body pulse with the erotic

pleasure of it. Her teeth ached as they descended, sharp and ready. She quickly bit into her own wrist, feeling the sharp pain of her action. Holding her torn wrist over Samantha's mouth, she rubbed her flesh to get her cold blood to run out.

“Gross,” Samantha managed to mutter and the blood trickle hit her lips. She almost jerked away, but Amaliya grabbed her chin with one hand.

“Drink,” she ordered, and held her dripping wrist firmly over the young woman's mouth.

Samantha weakly responded to her order and Amaliya felt Sam's lips locked over the wound and drink for a few wonderful tantalizing moments.

As Samantha drank, Amaliya craved Cian, but knew she had to keep her blood lust in check. She pulled her wrist away and drew her tongue over the wound, willing it to heal. Such an action would drain her a bit more of blood and power, but there was a feast waiting for her.

Before Samantha could protest, she fastened her mouth to the terrible wound over Samantha's left breast and tasted the infection. It was gross and she spit it out, but the blood just below the surface called to her. She pulled hard on the wound with her lips and the dark blood slowly gave way to richer, redder vitae. She drank only enough to clear out the wound and refresh herself from what she had given Samantha. She drew her tongue over the ragged edges of the wound over and over again until she felt it knitting shut. It should have been repulsive, but her body reacted as though it was the most erotic of actions.

“This shouldn't be kinda hot, right?” Sergio said behind her.

That broke the moment and Amaliya laughed as she drew back. Samantha managed to give Sergio the finger, but she already looked better. There was color in her face once more.

Amaliya stood up and stretched out her body. The few sips she had taken were already revitalizing her. With a sly smile at Jeff, she said, "Next."

Nervously, he stood up.

"Don't worry," she said in a comforting tone. "I'll be gentle."

And she was.

Nightfall came too soon. Even though Amaliya was now well fed, she didn't feel ready to face The Summoner. As the sun descended, she felt her body growing more alert and she welcomed the feeling. They knew The Summoner would be coming soon and they had prepared the best they could.

Samantha was on her feet and her wound was nearly completely healed. She was stronger, much to everyone's relief. There was an uneasy truce between them now and she could tell Samantha was uncomfortable with what had passed between them. Amaliya wasn't a fool. The pleasure she had felt had gone both ways and it made them awkward with each other.

Innocente had pulled out some granola bars from the tote bag she kept clutched at her side and the mortals had eaten. There was actually a pump in the kitchen and Sergio managed to get the water to run clear after a few minutes. Everyone looked bedraggled and anxious and Amaliya didn't blame them.

They gathered in the bedroom where Cian slept in the closet to prepare for The Summoner's arrival. They had talked about trying to feed Cian as well, but instinctively Amaliya knew his wounds were too

dire and he would need her blood. And she could not risk her blood until The Summoner was vanquished.

Samantha and Jeff seemed cozier than they both realized and Amaliya watched them thoughtfully as they took up their positions. Samantha was clutching a baseball bat tightly and Jeff had a machete. Sergio had a piece of wood with rusty nails beat into one end of it like a makeshift mace. He had expended all his bullets trying to shoot his way through the crowd of the dead. Innocente had a machete in one hand and her tote bag over her shoulder. Amaliya was sure The Summoner would hate the Virgin of Guadalupe t-shirt her grandmother wore. It made her shiver every time she drew near it.

As she felt the sun about to slide down under the horizon, she knelt down beside Cian. Her hand rested on his chest and she waited.

He took a deep breath and his eyes flashed open. It was not a good sign that his teeth were sharp and cruel behind his lips. His hands lashed out and gripped her tightly. Those beautiful hazel eyes were full of hunger and desperation. His gaze darted over the room beyond Amaliya.

“Where are we?” he hissed.

“We escaped, but we're trapped in a house with about a hundred dead things outside. Oh, yeah, Samantha is here with a vampire hunter, my cousin and my grandmother,” Amaliya said.

“I think I missed a lot,” Cian said as he visibly tried to control himself.

Amaliya helped him stand and he leaned heavily against her.

“He's coming now, you know?” she said.

“I will do what I can,” Cian answered. He pushed free from her and steadied himself against the wall.

Samantha awkwardly raised her hand and waved at him.

He smiled at her slightly and looked to Amaliya. His fingers barely brushed hers and Amaliya had to respect his discretion. She knew he wanted to bury his fangs into her and feed.

“How much longer?” Sergio wondered.

“If Cian is up it shouldn't be-”

The ceiling collapsed. Everyone shouted and dove backward away from the falling rotted boards and shingles. The Summoner landed in their midst and stood brushing off his Armani trench coat.

“Ah, how lovely. This should be delightful fun.”

Amaliya stepped toward him and had no freaking clue what to do next. “Yeah, well, fuck off.” Her voice sounded surprisingly firm.

The Summoner smiled at her cruelly. “Let us play.”

“Yeah, let's,” Sergio said, and swung his mace straight at the vampire's head.

The Summoner easily ducked under it and with a thrust of one hand sent Sergio crashing into the wall.

Samantha bravely tried to take advantage of this moment and swung her bat full force at The Summoner's head. He caught it in one hand and used it to sling her into Sergio. Her scream was abruptly cut off as she landed hard.

Jeff went low and managed to strike The Summoner right below the knee with his machete. His moment of triumph was short lived when The Summoner simply reached out and shoved him off his feet. Jeff flew backward and crashed into a pile of debris.

Cian and Amaliya attacked together, teeth bared. Cian managed to get in a few hard blows, his actions a blur. The Summoner fell back and Amaliya attacked him from behind, her nails ripping through his coat and flesh. With an angry shout, he began to fight both his offspring simultaneously, his movements too fast for even the

vampires to track. Cian managed to deflect a few blows, but then The Summoner's long nails caught his throat and ripped it open. Blood gushing from the wound, Cian staggered back and collapsed at the mouth of the closet.

With a scream of rage, Amaliya punched The Summoner hard in the face a few times before he caught her by her neck. Lifting her off the ground, he held her firmly as she thrashed in his grip. She managed to kick him a few times before he slammed her through the wall behind her. Pain filled her and blood flowed into her eyes. Then he dragged her back through the debris of the wall and shoved her down hard onto the floor at his feet.

“Do not defy me,” he hissed.

Her nails clawed at his hand as his fingers dug in harder. Her blood flowed over his hand and down her front as he crushed her throat.

“I will kill you if you continue to defy me,” he said in a low voice. He smiled his cruel smile. “And that would ruin the fun of killing all your friends in front of you, then fucking you in their blood.”

Looking up at him through her bloodied eyelashes, Amaliya tried to form words, but could not. His face was terribly handsome and cruel with his fine features and glowing white eyes.

How could going to coffee one night after class end her up here?

His white eyes suddenly flashed to blue and his lips parted in a silent scream. His fingers released her and he staggered back from her.

Arching his back, he tried hard to reach behind him, but faltered and fell to the ground.

It took Amaliya a few seconds to realize that her sweet, little Mexican grandmother had creamed him with the Virgin of Guadalupe statue. Not only struck him, but had broken the statue over his back. As he twisted on the ground, she saw that the statue had struck his bare skin

where Amaliya and Cian's nails had torn open his clothing. A huge bubbling, festering wound was pulsating beneath the torn fabric.

Innocente stood staring at the broken remains of the statue in her hand, then down at the vampire thrashing at her feet. He was so overwhelmed with pain, he did not even notice the old woman until she thrust the top half of the statue into his corrupted flesh. It lodged there between his shoulder blades, the flesh blackening and dripping off his spine.

The Summoner swung his arm in a desperate bid to fight off the old woman and it caught Innocent's legs and sent her tumbling to the ground.

"No!" Amaliya staggered to her feet and grabbed hold of her grandmother tightly and pulled her away from The Summoner. She screamed as the old woman's shirt hit her bare flesh and the Virgin's image burned her. Rolling away, Amaliya crouched low and watched The Summoner writhe.

He managed to grab hold of the embedded statue and screamed in pain as his hand burst into flame. Most of the statue came out of his back, but a big white sliver remained firmly in his body. Whirling about, he howled at the mortals slowly crawling to their feet.

Amaliya's grandmother whimpered and Amaliya could hear the old woman's heart beating at a terrible pace.

The Summoner let out another terrible scream, then launched himself upwards. Amaliya scrambled after him, trying to grip his legs, but she failed. Looking up into the gapping hole in the roof, she saw The Summoner's form slowly dropping downwards beyond the house.

Not even sure if she could follow, she tensed her body, ran, and leaped. She sailed out of the hole in the roof and flew over the dead.

As her body slowly dropped downward, the blood from her grievous wounds dripped onto the dead below her and she felt her power unfurling within her. She landed hard and fell to her hands and knees. Turning around, she saw a few of the dead licking drops of her blood from their flesh. They were very old corpses and looked like mummies made of leathery skin and bone. But as they licked at her blood, they began to look more human.

As this registered in her shocked mind, she felt her power flash out, a dark tentacle of exhilarating magic. It snagged the few that were covered in her blood and they turned to face her fully. She felt her power coursing into them and understood at last what it was that let her control the dead.

It was her blood.

Turning back to the graveyard, she saw the wounded man who had created her leaning heavily against a broken mausoleum. The mass of dead began to move toward her. These were his and she could feel their intent to destroy her. Summoning her own dead, she backed slowly toward the graveyard determined to draw them all away from the house, the wounded mortals, and Cian.

Sergio knew his arm was broken, but there wasn't much he could do but hold it stiffly at his side as he hurried to his grandmother. Samantha and Jeff were bloodied and bruised, but okay.

He had seen his cousin fly out of the house after The Summoner and he could only hope that she could handle the wounded vampire. It had been amazing to see his grandmother nail the asshole with the blessed statue.

"I think we're okay," Sergio said when he saw his grandmother was fine except for a bruise on her cheek.

“Um,” Jeff said, and pointed.

Sergio looked up to see Cian slowly rise to his feet, his long hair hanging over his face.

“I think this isn't good,” Samantha said softly.

Cian raised his head and hissed at them, the hunger distorting his features. His feral expression sent the humans scrambling backward.

Innocente quickly pulled out a handful of rosaries and holy medals from her tote bag.

“You can't kill him,” Samantha said firmly as Cian advanced slowly on them. “He doesn't know what he's doing!”

“Okay, we just...keep him back until Amaliya gets back,” Jeff said looking uneasy with this plan.

Sergio held out his cross and watched Cian shrink back. “If she comes back.”

“She will,” Innocente said firmly.

As the four mortals faced down the famished vampire, they all knew that if she didn't return soon, it was going to become unpleasant very quickly.

Amaliya strode toward The Summoner just ahead of the dead that were intent on killing her. She wasn't afraid of them anymore. Her own tiny group of dead trailed behind her. Blood was still flowing from her neck and she let it. She understood the power in her blood now.

The Summoner raised his head as she drew near. The expression on his face was terrible. It was clear he was in agonizing pain and beyond that, he was furious. A tiny old lady had reduced him to a shivering weakling and she could see what a terrible blow it was to his ego.

“You shouldn't fuck with little Mexican grandmas or their family,” Amaliya said as she drew near him.

“Take it out and I will let them go. Stay with me and I will forgive you,” he said through gritted teeth. His eyes were white and burning. She knew her eyes were also white and glowing just as bright. She could feel her power filling her and flowing around her like dark whispers. Her magic was not quite like his. It was different. He had accidentally made her and his power had been mutated by her transformation. Her magic was uniquely her own.

The dead he controlled scrabbled at her flesh, but did not rip into her. If they drew her blood, she could seize them from him and she was not afraid. She could feel that he was holding his minions at bay and preventing them from tearing her apart. He truly wanted her. His need for her was strong. At last she could see him for what he really was. A truly old, bored, over-powered creature that was terribly lonely.

“Take the holy relic fragment from my back and I will spare them. Come to me and I will teach you how powerful you truly are. We can raise armies together,” he said in his rich, seductive voice.

He was sweating blood and she could see his struggle to remain upright. “You remember how it was when you first rose. When we made love in the blood of your victims. It can be that way again.”

Amaliya felt her sex throb at the memory. It had been deliciously erotic, but she had technically been insane with the hunger. She did not want to be in that state of mind ever again. That was another time, another version of herself and she would not let him take her new found strength from her. “Do you really think you can seduce me?”

He was close enough to touch her and he did. Their powers mingled

for a moment and she shivered as the horrible lust inside of her grew.

“Yes,” he answered, and smiled charmingly.

A shriveled-up dead woman staggered up behind him to take the relic from his back. Amaliya slid her gaze from his face to the corpse and watched as the creature's stiff fingers tried to grab hold of the lodged piece of plaster.

Moving close to The Summoner, she licked her lips as his hands slid over her bloodied skin and he began to caress her breasts. Her nipples tightened with a terrible need and she closed her eyes to gain control.

“Yes, you see,” he said in a low, pained voice. “We have just begun this adventure of ours.”

Amaliya reached past his shoulders as if to embrace him and moved in as if to kiss his pale lips. She flicked her hand at the dead woman busily working the piece of statue out of his back and her blood splattered the creature. Instantly, she felt a connection to the raised dead and she summoned the woman. The Summoner stared in shock as his salvation staggered to Amaliya's side.

“I'd rather see you dead,” she said against his lips and drew back sharply from his touch.

His anger overwhelmed him and he roared at her. She felt the rush of his power flow over her like cold water and into the dead all around her. They instantly turned toward her and rushed forward. She ran her hands over her wounded throat and flung them out at the crowd. Drops of her blood fell over the dead and instantly, they were tangled in her power. She leaped up onto a gravestone and ripped her wrists open with her teeth. With gleeful triumph, she rained her blood over the crowd of the dead.

Those closest to her staggered toward The Summoner. As they surged forward, he shrank back from them. She could feel him weakening.

The last bit of his power had been spent to turn the crowd of the dead against her. He backed away from them and she charged him.

She slashed him hard across the face with her nails and his blood splattered her. With a rage like no other, she pummeled his body as he tried to escape her and the dead that crowded around them.

Knocking him down onto his back, she straddled him and drove her fist into his face over and over again. She was beyond words and so was he. His fading power and her growing power fought against each other as the dead minions reached down to grab hold of them.

The majority of the crowd was now hers.

The Summoner's hands gripped her throat and with one last burst of power, he tried to rip her head from her shoulders. Earlier he would have succeeded. But now she was the greater power. She gripped his wrists and crushed them.

"You're done," she whispered, and unleashed her minions on him.

Slowly, she drew back as she listened to him scream as the dead moved over him in a wave. They tore him apart, bit by bit, as he tried in vain to wrestle control from her. But the dead were hers. They obeyed her and her blood. Her blood was their life and their redemption from his power. They knew she would release them back to their slumber and they obeyed her.

She stood and watched as they ripped him apart with their gnarled, dry hands and clutched the bits of flesh against their chests like treasure. One by one, she sent the triumphant dead back to their grave. She felt them sink down into the welcome silence of the earth and soon there was nothing left of the dead or The Summoner to gaze upon.

He was gone.

A hundred little pieces of flesh and bone clutched in the hands of the dead he had abused.

Closing her eyes, she let her power slither back into her. It curled up and slumbered sated fully.

When she reopened her eyes, they were once more blue-gray.

Victorious, Amaliya walked back to the farmhouse, the wind tossing her hair back from her bloodied neck. She felt powerful and different. And it was good.

A cry of pain erupted from the house and she heard her cousin shout out in fear.

“Shit,” she whispered, and ran back as fast as she could.

When she burst into the house, she found Cian backed into a corner with her grandmother standing in front of Samantha, Jeff and Sergio, holding out rosaries, holy medals, and a Bible. The heat of the holy items' power hit her hard and she staggered back.

“I'll take care of him,” Amaliya cried out.

She slunk into the shadows of the hall and cowered as the power emanating from the crosses pushed at her. Whimpering, she listened to the four mortals backing slowly out of the room. She looked up warily and saw her grandmother still holding the holy relics.

There was a terrible, agonized growl from the room and she felt Cian lunge forward in a desperate attempt to grab a mortal to feed upon. Amaliya caught Cian's arm as he burst out of the room. He spun around and attacked her. She let him.

“Go! Go,” she shouted at the mortals.

She saw them flee just as he pinned her to the wall. His fangs sank

into her throat. Her hands settled into his hair and she held him tight against her. He drank hard and deeply from her, but she could give it to him. Blood and death gave her life and she had drank deeply from The Summoner's death.

He was savage for the first few minutes of his attack and she trembled as he crushed her close. Then, as he was renewed, his hunger turned to something else. When his mouth closed over hers in a bloodied, passionate kiss, she shoved her hands down into his jeans to stroke him.

Pressed up against the wall of the old farmhouse, they struggled with each other's clothes, their bodies trembling with their great need for one another. She snagged his bottom lip with her teeth as he managed to bare one of her breasts and twisted her nipple.

“Need you,” he whispered.

“Do it,” she answered, and he slid down her body.

He bit her inner thigh hard. Her blood splattered her sex and his face. His tongue swirled over the wound then swirled around her aroused clit. She knew her family was nearby, but she couldn't care. He sucked hard on her inner lips, then licked away the blood. Her fingers tugged on his hair and he rose up to kiss her hungrily.

Their creator was dead. They were free. And they needed to reaffirm that fact in an act of passion. When he shoved himself into her, hard and brutal, she welcomed him into her body. It was rough and passionate. The house shook around them as they met each other's thrusts with ferocity.

After a few minutes, he collapsed against her and she held him close. He buried his face in her neck and she stroked his back gently.

“He's dead,” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“Your grandmother...”

“Yeah, he made the mistake of pissing her off.”

They both laughed and Cian drew away. He looked scruffy and tired, but he was no longer mad with the hunger. They both adjusted their clothes and Amaliya wondered briefly what the mortals thought they had been doing as the house had rocked.

Amaliya gave him a soft, awkward smile as she felt suddenly quite emotional. He tilted his head to gaze into her face. She wondered if he could read how much she loved him and see how much it terrified her. Slowly, he reached out and took her hand.

“You saved us,” he said after a beat.

“I managed not to fuck it up,” she said with a shrug, but she felt a wave of pride.

He kissed her cheek gently and led her out of the broken house and into the fresh air of the night.

The mortals were in her cousin's truck and it was idling. They were obviously waiting for them. Jeff was driving and Sergio was in the passenger seat.

“Need a ride?” Sergio asked in a tone that was so normal, it almost made Amaliya laugh.

It isn't as if I just vanquished a dangerous ancient vampire or anything like that, she thought.

“We got our car back over by the hotel,” Cian answered looking a little sheepish. He had attacked their rescuers, then sexed Amaliya up while they waited. It was definitely an awkward moment.

“You sure you're okay? The house almost fell over and you're both all bloody?” Innocente asked, eyeing them both suspiciously.

Amaliya could see Samantha's pained expression and she felt terrible, but she was not about to admit to anything. "The Summoner is dead. Cian is fine. I had the dead tear apart The Summoner. He's in pieces. We're a little beat up, but it's fine." She smiled at her grandmother who was leaning out the back window. She reached out and touched the old woman's hand lightly.

"You're one hell of a something," Jeff the vampire hunter said in an awed voice from the driver's seat.

"I'm just a girl," Amaliya said with a shrug, but she knew that wasn't really true.

Samantha leaned over Innocente to peer out at Cian intently. "Hey, Cian, I'm glad you're alive and sane and stuff, but the engagement is off."

Cian blinked slowly, then nodded. "I understand."

Samantha nodded solemnly, then sat, her hand resting on the back of Jeff's seat. It did not escape Amaliya's notice when Jeff took the blond's hand and squeezed it.

"We need to get Sergio to the hospital," Jeff said from out of the darkness in the truck's cab. "We'll see you tomorrow."

"We meet up at your place then?" Sergio asked as Jeff shifted gears.

"Yeah," Cian answered. "Sounds good...err...uh..."

"My cousin Sergio and my Grandmama, Innocente," Amaliya said quickly.

"Nice to meet you," Cian said a little awkwardly.

"We'll talk later," Innocente said in a firm tone. "We need to talk about your plans with my granddaughter."

Amaliya couldn't help, but roll her eyes.

“Do you realize the amazing reputation you're going to have in the vampire hunter circles,” Jeff said to Innocente as he began to roll up his window. “You took down The Summoner.”

“It was nothing,” Innocente said with a big smile.

Amaliya touched Sergio's cheek lightly as he began to roll up the window. “Thank you.”

He grinned at her and blew her a kiss. “It was nothing.”

Amaliya and Cian watched the truck drive off slowly.

“Your grandmother took down The Summoner with a statue of the Virgin,” Cian said after a long, thoughtful pause.

“And I had the dead tear him apart,” Amaliya added.

Cian shook his head in disbelief. “I can't believe it's over.”

“I'm not complaining.” Amaliya's gaze swept over the night sky. “It already feels so much better without him.”

“Very true.” Cian cocked his head to gaze at her. “You okay?”

Covered in blood, wounded, and a little dazed, she smiled. “I'm more than okay. For the first time in my life, I know who I am and what I am. I know exactly what I am capable of and it's the most amazing feeling in the whole damn world.”

Hooking his arm around her neck, he drew her close to him and pressed his lips to her forehead. She wrapped her arms around him and leaned into him. Together they walked across the same field they had fled across to escape the sun and The Summoner.

“Sorry about Roberto.”

“He made his own choices,” Cian said sadly. “We all do.”

Amaliya nodded as she sighed. “It still must have hurt you.”

“Yes,” he answered, and lapsed into silence.

They walked slowly back to the car.

“We're free now,” Cian said as the cool night breeze flowed over them.

“We can do whatever we want,” Amaliya agreed.

“Will you leave?”

“Yes. No. I'm not sure,” Amaliya answered.

He stopped and held her against him. “Stay.”

Resting her cheek against his, she gazed toward the cemetery and thought of The Summoner laying in pieces beneath the soil. If she stayed as part of Cian's cabal, they would be a mighty force to be reckoned with.

“Why?”

His fingers caressed her torn neck and his beautiful hazel eyes gazed into hers. “Because you love me.”

“Do not!”

“Oh, yes, you do!” He laughed and his lips brushed over hers in a tantalizing kiss.

“Do not,” she argued in a soft voice. She couldn't help but smile even though she was terrified out of her wits.

“You love me as much as I love you,” he assured her.

Tears slipped down her face and she thought of the dreams Pete had shared with her. This was no three-bedroom house with a pink canopy. It was much more and she knew it.

“Are you sure you want me?”

Cian laughed at this. “Yes. I'm sure. You have made me a better man. Or should I say vampire. For the first time in my very long life, I feel I have a distinct purpose. A reason to be strong and a reason to be.”

Amaliya tilted her head. “Really?”

“Samantha made me want to be a better human. You allowed me to be

a better vampire. I think it's time I truly became master of Austin. And I want you at my side.” His hands smoothed her hair back from her face and he kissed her brow. “Stay.”

“Okay,” she said at last as she fully took in his words and believed him. “I’ll stay.”

“And you love me,” Cian said softly.

“Yes,” she answered very softly. “Dammit.”

When, they reached the Lexus, Amaliya looked toward the passenger window. It was devoid of a reflection. “You said that you could teach me to see myself through someone else’s eyes.”

Cian slid his hands into her hair and kissed her again. “Yes. When you’re emotionally close to someone, you can see yourself through their eyes.”

“Close how?” She stroked his back lightly with her fingertips.

“Like this,” he answered, and kissed her deeply.

She clung to him as his mouth worshiped hers in a sacred kiss, then he drew back and held her close. Together, they looked into the glass once more and tears came to Amaliya’s eyes as slowly a reflection of a man and woman intertwined in a sweet embrace came into view. Nothing had ever been more beautiful to her eyes.

And for once, she knew, her luck wasn’t really all that bad at all.

In fact, she thought, as she looked at her expression as Cian kissed her brow once more, she had never been so lucky in her life.

Epilogue

Standing on the balcony of his apartment, Cian leaned against the railing and looked toward the glowing pale pink countenance of the Capitol. The night was muggy as a light summer rain fell over the city. The weather wasn't deterring the people heading out to the clubs and the sounds of conversation and the steady traffic drifted up to him from the street below. In the distance, the lights of suburbia twinkled in the hills and he smiled to himself.

Time had a tendency to heal all wounds. Of course, sometimes the wounds were very deep and it took a very long time for them to mend. When he had died at the hands of The Summoner, he had lost everything that had defined him up to that point: his position at the plantation, his family, and his people. He had felt hollowed out, empty a mere shadow of a man. Only the compulsion to survive had pushed him on for more years than he cared to think about. He had often thought of just lying down and letting the sun take him, but could never bring himself to do it. Despite everything The Summoner had done to him, he had the tiniest hope that someday, somehow, he would find his way back to life and to himself.

Now, at last, he felt reconnected to the man he once was. He had been foolhardy to think being with Samantha would make him human again and therefore closer to the man he had been. It had not been the mortal coil that had defined him, but the man within. He understood that now.

Strange how it had taken someone so completely unorthodox to awaken him.

He was not an overseer at a plantation anymore, but he was the master of Austin. Before, it had seemed like just a title, now it was his duty. He did not have a wife and two darling children anymore, but he had a strange makeshift family with a tattooed girlfriend, spunky former girlfriend and her new vampire hunting boyfriend, and two fearless West Texans. And as for his people, in the last four months he had held court to emissaries from four vampire masters in Texas. They had long steered clear of him, afraid of his creator, and afraid of the game he was entangled with. But now they saw him as an unknown equation in the constant struggles in the supernatural realm and were seeking him out.

And, of course, Amaliya standing at his side was what truly brought them to him.

They were afraid of her.

In the time that had passed since The Summoner's death, he had become more aware of the great upheavals occurring throughout the shadow world that lay hidden beneath what was considered reality. Since his overthrow of the Austin cabal in the Seventies, he had hidden away from the rest of the supernatural world, trying to avoid the politics he had been witness to during his long stay in the court of Etzli in Mexico City.

His last great move in the vampire realm had been to set up the Austin cabal and have the vampire hunters slay them so he could seize control of the city. He had been desperate to win against The Summoner and had felt no remorse when he had plotted to destroy the vampires in Austin and take over. At the time, Austin had been a

college town and it seemed his best chance at claiming a city. Slaughtering a few innocents had been something he had been willing to do to make sure Summerfield moved against the cabal. He was a vampire and had no real regrets about his choice at that time, but now with The Summoner gone, he was just as much of a target as the former master of Austin had been.

The “Satanist Murders” were now laid to rest. The real Professor Sumner's body had been found outside of Shreveport, Louisiana and since he had been the primary suspect to begin with, the media and public considered the whole affair closed. Cian knew through his growing number of contacts, that the police were still looking for clues, but the evidence trail was long dead.

There had been one frightening moment when they had questioned Sergio about the call Amaliya had made from the motel where she had killed Rob. But Sergio had quickly deflected them by saying he had many prank calls and how was he to know one was serious? Rob was considered another victim of the nefarious Professor Sumner and his unknown accomplices.

Amaliya received her newspaper obituary and funeral notice from Sergio. She was dead in every way to the mortal world. Strangely, she seemed to embrace this. Whereas Cian had hated becoming a vampire, she loved it. And because she loved it, it made him feel more at peace.

Sighing, he looked out toward the hills again and wondered how Samantha was doing. They had avoided each other for a week after The Summoner had died and then, as Sam had a tendency to do, she barged into the apartment and demanded to talk to him. They had spoken on the balcony while Amaliya lurked inside, looking pensive and he had received an earful from the tiny blond.

Samantha completely and utterly reamed him out, her eyes flashing, and her foot stomping. He was completely guilty of all she accused him of and had profusely apologized to her. She had burst into tears and told him he was still a good man and that obviously he should be with Amaliya because she made him be who he really was. He had embraced Samantha warmly and remembered all the reasons he had loved her and still did in a different way. She had clung to him and told him that he sucked and that she wanted Roberto's old job without the blood stuff. Cian had laughed and not refused her.

She was now his right hand person and better at the job than Roberto had ever been. Samantha would always be a tiny whirlwind whipping through their lives, but he rather liked that. She was dating Jeff and they seemed very happy. Jeff could hang out on Sunday afternoons with her family and go to football games. He was everything Samantha needed and everything Cian was not. He was very happy for both of them.

Meanwhile, his relationship with Jeff was steadily growing. They had made a new pact between them. Cian would police the vampires that entered the city and would make the call whether or not to let them stay. But if any of them should kill, Cian would take care of it. Jeff belonged to a society that believed in finding harmony with the supernatural community, but they both knew that there were other societies that believed in extermination of all creatures not human. It was best to keep hidden behind the veil of secrecy.

The most unexpected result of the death of The Summoner was Innocente's and Sergio's induction into the society to which Jeff belonged. Both seemed more than happy to embrace the secret life of a hunter and Innocente's fame in supernatural circles was amusing to Cian. He got along with her well enough, but every once in a while she

would remind him of what she had done to The Summoner and that he better treat Amaliya right or else.

The door opened behind him and Amaliya slid out onto the balcony. Dressed in a simple black sleeveless summer dress, she was talking on the phone in broken Spanish. She was learning the language from him. His years in Mexico had made him a fluent speaker and she was trying hard to grasp it. It was obvious from her exasperated expression that she was talking to Santos.

Snagging her arm, he drew her into his arms and kissed her forehead. Not really paying attention to her words, he listened to the tone of her voice and was comforted by it.

The Summoner was gone, but all was not well in the world. The placement of the body of Professor Sumner in Louisiana was disturbing to him. He was certain Rachoñ had done it and considering her long and passionate relationship with The Summoner, he was not sure the danger to them was truly over. The master of New Orleans was powerful and in the new modern world, the cities of Austin and New Orleans were not that far apart.

Amaliya clicked her phone shut and snuggled into him. “Santos wants to send an emissary again.”

“I think I’ll continue to let him sweat for another few weeks,” Cian decided with a wide grin.

“You just love him being scared of you,” Amaliya laughed.

“You mean, afraid of you,” Cian teased, and kissed her lips lightly.

Rolling her eyes, Amaliya held tighter to him. She didn’t speak about her powers that often. She wasn’t completely at peace with them quite yet. “Afraid of us,” she decided.

Cian shrugged slightly and held her close to him as he stared out over

Austin. His city. His home. His life.

And he was happy.

Cian was deep in thought and Amaliya knew better than to do anything more than hold him. He would tell her what he was pondering when he was ready. She was learning a lot about him and respected that at times he needed his silence. In his quiet moments, with his face set, he seemed more powerful than ever. He was a different man from when she had first met him. And she was a far different person from when he had first punched her lights out and kidnapped her to his lair.

The Summoner had changed them all.

Yes, Amaliya had woken up in a grave, but she had also woken up to a new life where she knew who she was and understood her purpose. She was a vampire, a necromancer, Cian's second, and his lover. Tucked into a beautiful apartment in the city she loved, she had found the happiness that had eluded her all her life. And though her presence had shaken the lives of many around her, they, too, had in an essence crawled out of their self-made graves and found a fresh, new life.

Resting her head on his shoulder, she looked back through the doors into the apartment and embraced the knowledge she was home. And as her reflection formed in the glass, shaped by Cian's vision and love of her, she knew, at last, she was done running.

About the Author

Rhiannon Frater works and lives in Austin, Texas. She became an Independent Author at the urging of her husband.

Rhiannon loves reading, movies, gaming, and hanging out with friends and family when she's not tapping away at her computer on her latest story. She also loves hearing from her fans and tries to respond to everyone who emails her.

Pretty When She Dies is the first vampire novel she has published and she plans a future sequel entitled ***Pretty When She Kills***.

As The World Dies: The First Days-A Zombie Trilogy is now available at Amazon.com and the sequel, ***As The World Dies: Fighting to Survive*** will be released March, 2009.

For more information on the author, her upcoming appearances, and her writing projects, check out her blog at: <http://rhiannonfrater.blogspot.com/>

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