

**Alecia Monaco**



**Virgin Vampire  
Vixen**

**Changeling Press**

# **Lone Star Vampires 4: Virgin Vampire Vixen**

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Editor: Crystal Esau  
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## **Lone Star Vampires 4: Virgin Vampire Vixen**

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**Cameron Zane, rogue slayer, can't stand the sight of vampires until he gets an eyeful of his new client, soon-to-be vampire empress Eden Lockhart.**

**Eden's got more curves than most guys can handle -- and a killer hot on her trail. Will this vampire vixen fall prey to a bloodthirsty criminal, or will her new bodyguard take care of all her needs... in more ways than one?**

## **Dedication**

To my beautiful editor, Crystal Esau --  
One of the most patient people God ever created.  
Thank you for everything.

## ***Vampire Murders Continue, Special Taskforce Formed***

*by Maria Vega*

*Houston Vampire Press*

*A special taskforce is being formed in order to hasten the capture of Houston's now-infamous murdering vampire, announced Captain Alvin Davis, head of the regional Texas Slayer Squad, at a press conference Monday.*

*The body of a human female was found behind Undead Threads in the Vampire District last Friday, the victim of an apparent homicide. The remains have since been identified as Melanie Bates, 23, of Houston. Bates was employed as a seamstress at Undead Threads.*

*Although law enforcement declined to confirm details of the case at this time, inside sources tell us that Bates is believed to be the eleventh victim of the vampiric killer.*

*"We have a definite profile," Davis said Monday. "This killer goes after young women almost exclusively." Though he refused to cite specific evidence, Davis did say that the killings do not appear to be sexually motivated.*

*"There's no evidence of sexual assault in any of these cases, nothing to suggest anything of that nature took place," Davis said. Although Davis would not comment on the method used to kill the human victims, it has been widely reported that all ten of the confirmed victims had severed carotid arteries and appeared to be drained completely of blood.*

*The killer is believed to be at minimum a seventh-generation master vampire of exceptional skill, perhaps with abilities previously unknown among his kind. Anyone with information about the case is urged to contact local police or the Houston offices of the Texas Slayer Squad as soon as possible.*

## **Prologue**

### **Crimson Hungers**

No one noticed the Merrow at first.

She stood there beneath the sign announcing that Unholy Hour, the vampire equivalent of Happy Hour, began at midnight.

She was just in time for a ninety-nine cent Vlad's, if she so desired.

Rex Fountainebleau held court at the VIP table on the side of the bar furthest from the entrance. His future wife, Agent Katya Stern, a bottle of Corona in one hand, was doing what Rex fondly called her Borscht Belt Comedian routine, much to the amusement of the vampires, human swans, and other random paranormal entities seated around their table.

Master vampire Sebastian Hale pounded the table and let out a howling laugh when Katya delivered the long-awaited punch line. Everyone at the table joined in the laughter, except for a royal personage in the form of a fairy named Phaedra.

Phaedra, as queen of a local band of fey, traveled with her own personal security. One of her men in black had noticed the dripping creature standing just inside the door of the bar and brought it to the queen's attention.

Phaedra rose to her feet, keeping her gaze fixed on the Merrow, and took a step toward the creature.

Katya drew her gun beneath the table.

The bar went silent. The crackling energetic hum of vampires communicating telepathically gave every human in the bar a severe case of chills.

Phaedra gave the Merrow an uncertain smile. "Hail, friend." She inclined her head slightly, no stranger to diplomacy under duress. "What brings you to dry land tonight?"

That was indeed the question on everyone's mind. Merrows almost never left the depths of the sea where they made their homes. Unlike the more flirtatious Mermen and Mermaids that lived nearer to the shore, Merrows congregated in the deep waters, where sunlight seldom permeated and shadows reigned.

The *Gulf Coast Paranormal Almanac* claimed that the last Merrow sighting in Texas occurred in 1973. Yet here one stood before them, her fingers and feet webbed with white, her blue-tinged skin covered with a shroud of seaweed. A single mother of pearl comb held her tangled green hair in place.

She held a red cap in her left hand. The *Almanac* informed readers that Merrows donned the red cap when they wanted to return to Mer form. Diving beneath the waves, their legs would fuse into a turquoise colored tail with fins and scales.

Apparently, she hadn't come to stay.

The creature turned her dark gaze on the assembled crowd. "I have come tonight to warn you."

A shudder went through everyone present. A Merrow had appeared in a bar down in Louisiana weeks before a hellish hurricane struck, warning the humans of imminent danger.

The waters of the Gulf churned just miles to the south of where they stood.

"A terrible evil lurks among you." The Merrow's oddly toneless voice sounded rusty, as if the salty sea water had corroded her vocal cords. "We feel its rage down at the bottom of the sea." She turned to Vance Carmitrue, a seventh-generation vampire and the oldest among them. "It is an ancient evil." She flicked her gaze over the crowd. "Bloodthirsty."

Katya held her gun at her side. "What is the nature of this thing you've come to warn us about?"

The Merrow looked at Katya. "It is not of the sea. Not a force of nature." She shrugged. "Be cautious."

"That's all you can tell us?" Katya inched closer to the Merrow. "You come in here and tell us to be careful out among them English when we have a serial killer on the loose?"

Phaedra let out a nervous giggle at the reference to the movie *Witness*.

"Can't you tell us what it is we're supposed to be on the lookout for?" Katya's voice rose with every word.

The Merrow raised her green brows. "You already know."

She left as suddenly as she'd appeared.

## Chapter 1

Full dark. Showtime.

Cameron Zane checked the watch secured to his wrist with a spiked leather band. Already 8:00 PM, and full darkness had just begun to settle across the Texas sky like an ink stain consuming the rich pink and gold of a fine silk scarf.

He didn't like full dark. It couldn't be trusted. Things lurked in those shadows, things that would steal your very life without looking back in regret.

But since the bloodsuckers in the upscale townhouse in front of him didn't rise until the sun went down, he'd agreed to an interview after dark.

An interview with a vampire, he thought with a snort. How fucking cliché could you get?

He shut off the engine of his black Chevy Tahoe and pulled the keys from the ignition. Time to go in and meet his potential new client.

He locked the doors and headed up the driveway, gravel crunching beneath his black Lucchese boots. He had a .45 Magnum in a shoulder holster beneath his black leather jacket on his right side, and a .38 Special Colt Cobra for backup in an upper arm holster on his left. Both were loaded with silver. The Glock 23 tucked into the back of his jeans stood ready in case all hell broke loose.

The scent of honeysuckle mixed with the perfume of magnolia blossoms hanging heavily from the tree a few feet from the black wrought iron porch railing. He breathed deeply, inhaling the fragrance of the coastal evening. The heady perfume reminded him of his grandmother, her homemade chocolate chip cookies and the radio playing gospel in her kitchen.

A scenario about as far from his current circumstances as the sun was from Pluto.

He noted the discreet brass plaque above the mail slot, bearing the house number. An obviously expensive intercom system blinked its yellow light at him from beside the front door. He hit the talk button. Might as well test their current security system and see what kind of improvements it would need.

"Yes?" A cultured English voice came through the speaker.

"This is Cameron Zane, here to see a Mr. Charles." He pulled a sheet of wrinkled notebook paper from his jacket pocket, looking at the information he'd hastily scrawled. He had the correct address.

"Yes, of course," the voice responded. "I'll be right with you."

Cameron stuffed the paper back into his pocket. Finally getting to meet the famous Mr. Charles was quite an honor for a mere mortal like himself. The human liaison for the fang gang was legendary in the slayer world. For a vampire killer to meet Mr. Charles was like a Fed getting an audience with the Godfather's consigliere.

A faulty analogy at best, he thought with a scowl. He had a hell of a lot more in common with the Godfather than the good guys anymore.

The front door swung open suddenly, revealing an older man in a tweed suit who looked like he'd tumbled out of the pages of a Sherlock Holmes novel. "Mr. Zane, I presume?" The Englishman held out his hand.

"Mr. Charles." Cameron shook the older man's hand. "So, this is House Black Rose?" Mr. Charles moved aside and Cameron stepped into the foyer of the townhouse. The crest of House Black Rose hung on the wall just inside the door, alongside a massive Star of St. Germain.

Nice. They had all the trappings of good little vampires, law abiding citizens who just wanted to be treated like everyone else, thank you very much.

Who cared that they were a pack of walking corpses who fed on the living? After all, what's a little blood among friends?

"If you'll just step into my office..." Mr. Charles inclined his head toward a carved oak door to their left. A huge Abusson rug covered the gleaming parquet floor. A crystal chandelier sparkled overhead, and vases -- real Waterford, unless he was

mistaken -- overflowed with roses on both of the mahogany Chippendale end tables as well as the antique sideboard.

Nice digs, Cameron thought, catching a glimpse of himself in the gilt framed mirror hanging above the sideboard. His freshly shaved head was already rough with dark stubble. Maybe it was time for a new razor.

"Melaina collected antiques," Mr. Charles said, referring to the former empress of the Gulf Coast Vampire Court. He opened the office door and sat down in a delicate chair behind a desk large enough to double for a dining room table. "After she married and returned to Europe, she left the residence as it was for her successor."

Cameron flopped down in an equally diminutive chair opposite the desk, hearing it groan as his six foot two form unfolded onto it. He stretched his legs out in front of him. "Will the *successor* be joining us for this meeting?" He didn't try to keep the undertone of condescension out of his voice. *The residence?* Please. Who did they think this bitch was, the Queen of fucking England? Being head of the undead didn't mean jack shit to anyone but a vampire groupie. She was still just another vampire, as far as he was concerned.

"If you decide to take the position, I'll take you to meet Eden." Mr. Charles folded his hands on top of the desk. *Eden*, he mused. So that was her name. "Agent Stern recommended you highly for this job."

Yeah, and if Katya hadn't called up every favor he'd ever owed her, he probably wouldn't have even considered it. "I think I'm more than capable of protecting your future empress."

"I understand that you and Agent Stern worked together on several cases when you were with the Texas Slayer Squad." Mr. Charles leafed through some notes on his desk. "Your record with them is quite... impressive."

"If killing more vampires than anyone else on the squad makes me impressive, then yeah, you'd be right." He shrugged out of his leather jacket, revealing both of his holstered guns as well as a silver knife strapped to his tattooed forearm in a wrist sheath. "I have more kills than any other slayer in Texas, as a matter of fact."

"I see." Mr. Charles' gaze traveled along Cameron's tattooed arms with a look somewhere between alarm and admiration. "You're aware of the fact that the squad sees you as rogue now." It wasn't a question.

"I rid the Earth of one of House Minotaur's less desirable residents." Cameron shrugged. "So I didn't have a warrant. No great loss to humanity."

"Alvin Davis would beg to differ," Mr. Charles observed, dropping the name of the captain of the slayer squad like a grenade between them.

"If Alvin Davis was doing his job, you wouldn't need me, would you?" Cameron leaned forward for emphasis. "You've got some psycho vampire roaming the streets, draining humans for God knows what purpose. You've got House Minotaur in an uproar protesting this new queen of yours, making threats right and left. The shapeshifters are fighting amongst themselves, so their allegiances are all over the place." He shook his head. "Do you want Alvin Davis offering you his brand of protection, or do you want someone who shoots first and asks questions later?"

"I believe we want the latter," Mr. Charles said, meeting Cameron's gaze with eyes as cool and deadly as any he'd ever seen. A silent understanding passed between them.

Cameron relaxed a notch. "Then we can do business."

"Tell me this, Mr. Zane." Mr. Charles dropped his voice. "Your loathing of vampires is no secret. Why would you agree to take a job protecting one?"

"That's easy." Cameron felt himself grinning. "I'll rack up a hell of a lot more kills guarding her than I would sitting at home waiting for the phone to ring."

Mr. Charles processed that in silence. Cameron matched him stare for stare. The older man broke first.

"Perhaps I should take you upstairs to meet Eden before you sign on the dotted line." Mr. Charles rose from his chair. "If you'll follow me..."

Cameron grabbed his jacket and fell in step behind the older man. They passed through the foyer to the staircase. The muted sound of a television drifted down from

the second floor, along with the aroma of food cooking -- tomatoes and garlic, if he wasn't mistaken.

*Dinner, at a vampire house? Must be for the human help.* Cameron shook his head. God knew the vamps didn't do anything but suck down some Vlad's synthetic blood or sink their fangs into their human swans.

They reached the landing and met with a sight strange enough to banish his musings on the subject of vampiric dining habits.

An enormous greenish-brown skinned oaf of a creature stood guard on the landing. His sloped shoulders hunched forward inside his hide vest, and the thick fingers of his right hand were tightly wrapped around a wooden club studded with countless nails.

Holy shit. They had an honest to goodness ogre on the payroll.

"Good evening, Clow." Mr. Charles gave the creature a polite nod. Clow grinned, baring teeth that made Austin Powers' smile look like a model of dental hygiene. "This is Cameron Zane. He'll be joining our staff, if Eden approves."

Cameron had never met an ogre in a social setting. In fact, he'd never seen one in person except for the cadaver he'd viewed at the preternatural morgue in New Orleans a few years back. He extended his hand toward Clow, hoping the ogre had been in human company long enough to know a few of the ropes. Getting bitten by Shrek's evil twin wasn't on his agenda for the night. "Good to meet you, Clow."

"Likewise," Clow grunted, taking his hand in a firm shake. "You going to help us guard the mistress?"

*The mistress?* Jesus. "That's what I'm here to find out." He felt his mouth tightening into a frown. He could hardly wait to see what kind of throne room this chick had. It was bad enough that her staff acted like she was the freakin' pope.

"Come." Mr. Charles gestured for Cameron to follow him, past Clow's post and up the flight of stairs leading to the third floor.

He waited until they were out of earshot to speak again. "Where on earth did you find an ogre willing to work as a bodyguard?"

“Eden ransomed him from House Boudreaux in Lafayette, Louisiana.” Mr. Charles paused. “The local vampires had captured him in the swamp and were using him for... most nefarious purposes.” A visible shudder went through the man.

“What made her do something like that?” Cameron’s voice broadcasted his disbelief. “Vampires aren’t known for their compassion toward lesser beings.”

“Our Eden,” Mr. Charles answered, “is not like other vampires.”

Cameron snorted. He’d believe *that* when werewolves grew wings and sang soprano.

## Chapter 2

Speaking of werewolves, one stood guard outside what he assumed to be Eden's room. She was in human form, but he'd experienced that hot shimmer of energy too many times not to know a werewolf when one stood in front of him, no matter how normal he or she happened to look.

Not that this one was a shining example of conventionality, he observed, but then who could be, in an environment like this?

"Evening, Sable." Mr. Charles inclined his head to the tall woman. "I believe Eden is expecting us?"

The werewolf glared at Cameron, her whiskey colored eyes narrowing with disgust. "I'm not letting that butcher anywhere near her."

Ah, his reputation had preceded him. Good to know he had the furries scared shitless too.

"Sable," Mr. Charles began in a patient tone, "Mr. Zane has accepted the position as our new head of security."

"Do you know how many of our people he's killed?" Sable spat.

"Except they weren't people." Cameron gave her his special *sticks and stones will break my bones but insults only amuse me* smile.

Sable's mouth curled into a snarl and a deep growl rumbled in her throat.

"Charles, call off your dog if you want this meeting to continue." Cameron sighed, letting all and sundry know just how bored he was by the posturing werewolf. Actually, he was tensed to draw in a fraction of a second if the shifter made one false move. She was attractive with her cocoa colored skin and ebony cornrows cascading to her waist, but he wouldn't hesitate. He'd waste her if she tried anything with him.

"Sable, I think Eden is perfectly safe with you, Clow, and the Speedway Pack guarding the building." Mr. Charles gave Sable a pat on the shoulder. "You simply must let Mr. Zane through."

The Speedway Pack? Impressive. How had the Gulf Coast Court secured Houston's most badass werewolves to guard their ruler? He filed the question away to be asked later, because at that very moment, Sable relented and moved her leather-clad form away from the door.

Mr. Charles opened it, and they stepped inside.

\* \* \*

Cameron blinked his eyes, waiting for them to adjust to the sudden dimness of the candlelit room. The scent of roses hung in the air like an invisible fog, filling the darkness with an incomparable fragrance. The hazy blue glow of a plasma television hanging on the wall a few yards from the door added a bit more light, but not much. The sound was turned down low, but he recognized the theme music from *Endless Eternity*, a popular vampire soap opera.

He barely had time to mentally sneer over her ladyship's choice of entertainment when he caught sight of a figure seated on the massive canopied bed that occupied most of the room. There were other objects in the room -- vases of roses spilling over on every surface, for starters -- but the figure on the bed snared his attention and held it.

She was dressed in unrelieved black, from her blouse -- one of those poet shirt things with the open neck and ruffled wrists -- to her short black skirt, fishnet stockings, and black lace-up boots. Her hair, black and glossy, framed her round face in a style like a vintage pin-up girl... what was her name, Bettie Page... the one with the short bangs.

It wasn't the hair or the clothes that made it so damned hard to look away. As far as that went, she could've been any kid hanging around a Goth club after dark. It was the face looking back at him with a scowl as good as anything he'd ever been able to muster -- a face so arresting it compelled the beholder to look twice, instantly searing itself on the shuddering surface of his memory like a brand.

"Eden." Mr. Charles bustled into the room, positioning himself between the gorgeous Goth girl and Cameron like a human shield. "This is Cameron Zane." The Englishman dropped his voice a notch. "The one I've been telling you about."

The beauty on the bed turned kohl-lined slanting green eyes back toward him, regarding him with barely concealed annoyance. "Do you actually want to take over my personal security?"

A synapse clicked belatedly in his brain. This unbelievably gorgeous female was *Eden*? Eden, the *vampire queen*?

No fucking way. Just... no.

"As I told you earlier, he's the most qualified person we could possibly find for the position." Mr. Charles smoothed down his red silk tie. "Agent Stern says she would trust him with her life."

The girl laughed. "Easy for her to say. Katya's not a vampire."

He wasn't about to let this babe in black question his professional abilities. He also wasn't going to imagine if her magnolia white skin was as soft as it looked. And he sure as hell wasn't going to notice the fact that her *extremely* voluptuous body had one of the finest sets of breasts he'd ever witnessed hiding behind the fabric of that loose top.

He kept his gaze fixed on her face -- distracting enough territory without dipping lower. "Look, Your Majesty --"

She cut him off. "I haven't been crowned yet." Her full ruby lips formed a bemused smile. "You may call me Eden."

"Eden --" he began again.

"For now." She interrupted him again, this time with a smile revealing tiny white fangs.

He felt a pulse beating in his forehead. He'd pulled weapons on other vampires for less. "Look, whoever you are. You need protection from a vampiric serial killer, one who happens to be terrorizing the entire vampire community." He took a step forward. "You need someone who understands bad little vampires, someone who knows how

they think. You want someone who knows how to kill a vampire quickly and cleanly, no fuss, no muss, no questions asked." He met her green gaze. "In other words, you need me."

"And you need the money, since rogue hits are all you can get now." She wiggled her curvy frame to the edge of the bed, dangling her legs over the side.

He felt a deadly stillness inside him. "I'm not in this for the money." Sammy's face flashed through his mind like a falling star... something you could only see through the corner of your eye before it was gone, leaving a trail of stardust behind it.

"Is it too much to ask you *why* you'd take this job?"

He could feel the weight of her gaze on him. If she were like any other master vampire, she'd sense a lie. "We all have our reasons." He paused, forcing the past back into the mental locker where he kept it stashed away. "Let me assure you... you have no reason to question my loyalties. Yeah, I've executed a lot of vampires, but if you're my client, my life is on the line for you and only you, twenty-four seven."

She folded her hands over her knees and looked at him with a softer expression. "I can accept that."

The door behind him swung open, and he drew before the person on the other side could cross the threshold.

"Holy shit!!" The woman standing in the door held a dinner tray covered with those silver domes like they use for room service at hotels. A wave of power rolled off of her, hitting him like an electrical current.

"No one comes in here until they've cleared it with me first." He kept his gun trained on the woman and turned to Eden. "You know this one?"

"Hell yes, Lisa is my totem!" Eden slid off the bed, rose to her full height of somewhere just around five foot two, and crossed the room to take the tray from the slim, dark haired woman.

Well, that settled that. She was a master vampire. Only masters had totems.

On the other hand, he'd never seen a master vamp attack a plate of spaghetti marinara before.

"We'll get radios for the entire staff," Mr. Charles was saying, giving Lisa one of those pats on the shoulder like the one he'd given Sable. "I assure you, that won't happen to you again."

Cameron watched Eden twirl strands of pasta around the tines of her fork. She looked up, catching him mid-stare. "Yes, I eat human food." She opened the lid of what he knew to be a synthetic blood warmer, revealing a bottle of Vlad's Chocolate Truffle. "I also drink synthetic blood once a night." She met his dumbfounded expression with a half-smirk. "What, am I the first dhampire you've ever seen?"

She was a dhampire? Holy mother of fuck. That explained a lot.

He swallowed, forcing his face to go blank. "You're the first one I've ever seen alive."

She put her fork down to peel the paper wrapper from a straw. "We *are* a rare breed, I'll give you that."

"Most don't live to adulthood," Lisa commented, settling herself in a chair opposite the bed and shooting a glare in his direction.

"Most weren't sired by Master Cain." Eden smiled and put her straw into her bottle of Vlad's.

Master Cain was her sire? Shit, this kept getting better by the minute. If she'd been sired by the most ancient vampire in Texas history... "You must have some interesting powers," he said, finishing the thought out loud.

"She can't daywalk," Mr. Charles jumped in like a game show host eager to extol his wares. "She's confined during daylight hours, just like any full-fledged vampire. Her need for both human and vampiric food sources has given her..." Mr. Charles appeared to grope for words. "Let us just say that she has an extremely compromised metabolism."

What was that, a way of calling her fat? Cameron allowed himself a quick visual trip up and down Eden's form. Apparently blood did a body good, because all the padding appeared to be in the right places.

"And she has a minor allergy to silver. But her elemental conjuring abilities are quite remarkable."

"You control the element of earth?" He directed his question to Eden.

"How did you guess?" She twirled another bite of pasta.

"It would explain the roses everywhere." He looked at the blood red flowers, frothing over in vases, climbing an indoor trellis against the west wall. "You conjured them."

"There's one more thing... an important thing." Eden put down her fork. "I'm not immortal."

"That you're not." Mr. Charles turned to Cameron, an expression in his eyes that implied far more than mere words could convey. "She can be killed -- maybe not as easily as a mere mortal, but she has nowhere near the strength of a full vampire." The older man paused for emphasis. "You can see now why we must guard her so carefully."

Cameron let his gaze travel from Mr. Charles to the almost fragile looking female totem to the voluptuous beauty on the bed. "If I'm going to protect the mortal offspring of Master Cain from a psychotic vampire serial killer, I'm going to need to move in here."

Mr. Charles nodded. "We expected as much, and have a lovely guest suite on the second floor, if you'll..."

"No." Cameron cut him off and made his way to a door on the wall beside the bed. He opened the door without knocking, revealing what appeared to be a sitting room. "I mean that I need to move in *here*." He gestured through the open door. "Eden, looks like you've got yourself a roommate."

\* \* \*

*Gulf Coast Paranormal Almanac*

*2007 Edition*

*Predator Press*

### *Dhampire*

*A dhampire (also dhampir, dhamphir or dhampyr) is the offspring of one human parent and one vampire parent. The term is of Serbian-Balkan origins. It became widely used in North America when vampires gained legal citizenship in both the United States and Canada. Dhampires are not to be confused with the more common daywalker (see separate entry), who are "full fledged" undead vampires possessing a rare strain which gives them immunity to sunlight.*

*The first live dhampire birth recorded in North America was that of Bella Grey, who was born to a human mother and vampire father on November 15, 1967 in Cavendish, Maine. The high rate of infant mortality among dhampires has kept their numbers consistently low. However, with hospitals steadily adding preternatural departments to their neo-natal units, more dhampire infants are surviving into childhood every year.*

*Dhampires have unique nutritional requirements. Not only do they need a balanced diet of human food, they also must ingest blood -- whether human or synthetic in origin -- regularly. Additionally, some dhampires have the ability to consume human vital energy, or prana (see separate entry; also see psionic energy for further discussion).*

*Given their extreme sensitivity to sunlight and varying degrees of allergy to silver, combined with their status as mortals, the number of dhampires who have survived into adulthood is low. Experts estimate that there are less than two thousand adult dhampires worldwide.*

*Certain factors seem to increase longevity in dhampires. Having one parent possessing master-level vampire powers appears to improve the immune system and metabolism of the dhampire infant. Furthermore, dhampires can gain strength by drinking the blood of a more powerful vampire. A few rare dhampires have risen to the master power level by ingesting the blood of an ancient vampire.*

*In the event that an adult dhampire succumbs to illness or injury, they can sometimes avoid final death by making the transition from dhampire to vampire. However, this technique is not recommended as an alternative to prompt medical care, as it has a success rate of only fifty percent.*

*--Susan Lee*

## Chapter 3

If he didn't have such a shitty attitude, she might have been happy -- maybe even a little *too* happy -- about having the arrogant prick guarding her person.

But having him move into the room next door, where he could breathe down her neck during every waking moment? No thanks... even if he *was* pretty damned attractive, in that tattooed -- shaven head -- hired gun sort of way.

"I really don't think that's a good idea." Eden pushed her dinner tray forward and reached for the remote control, switching the channel to the vampire cable news network. They were replaying the same grainy footage of a body bag holding the remains of Melanie Bates as it was being wheeled to a waiting ambulance.

A shudder ran through her. No matter how many times she saw footage of the bodies being wheeled away, they still made her cold with fear. Her senses were sharp enough to know that this *thing*, whatever it was, wanted a piece of her.

A big bloody piece, served up raw.

"Perhaps you should consider it, Eden." Mr. Charles fiddled with his tie again. "Mr. Zane is an expert in his field."

She kept her gaze fixed on the television screen. "I have the Speedway Pack crawling all over this place during the day when we're sleeping."

She heard a hissing sigh coming from somewhere in Cameron's vicinity.

"Fine." He shrugged his wide shoulders and put his hand on the doorknob. "Find someone else to handle security for you. I'm out of here."

Her last frayed nerve snapped. She couldn't cope with all the stress in her life and an asshole bodyguard with a God complex too. "So that's how it works? Your way or the highway?"

He put his free hand on the butt of his gun, unintentionally drawing her attention to his thickly muscled bicep. "I'm trying to keep you out of a pine box here. I don't have time to play games. If you can't trust my judgment, you need to find someone else." He turned the doorknob with a click, his jacket slung over one shoulder.

She closed her eyes and took a breath. "I just don't understand why on earth you'd need to be next door to me."

The glacier chill of his blue eyes met hers. "You have the Speedway Pack posted outside your bedroom door when you sleep?"

"Of course."

"Got 'em stationed outside these windows?" He gestured to the row of heavily shaded windows on the rear wall.

Eden blinked. "We're on the third floor."

He nodded. "So you're saying a master vampire couldn't levitate all the way up here and smash the glass before you had time to notice it?"

Aha! "Not during daylight." She had him there.

The corner of his mouth turned up. "Not even a daywalker, huh?"

Okay, so maybe she hadn't played an ace with that one. "Well..."

"Not to mention that a master daywalker could simply break in here and expose you to sunlight. You'd be a crispy critter before any of your little furry friends could rescue you." His gaze flicked over her. "And that would be a real waste."

She felt heat burning her cheeks and cursed it silently. She would *not* blush over an interested glance from that shaven head ruffian. She would *not*.

"So you're going to do what? Stare at me while I sleep?" She tossed the remote aside and tried to look bored, despite the fact that her heart was hammering like a power tool.

"Basically. Or you could just invite a few members of the Speedway Pack in here to sing you lullabies. I'm sure they'd be *real* interested in checking out your nighties." He leaned against the door and folded his arms across his broad chest, a satisfied smirk on his face.

Bastard. He'd won and he knew it.

"So when do you plan to sleep?" She scowled. He may have won the battle, but the war was far from over.

He gave her the closest thing to a genuine smile she'd seen since he'd arrived. "When I'm dead."

She laughed and threw all her vampire wiles into it, making sure it was a sound that would crawl up a human's spine. "That might happen sooner than you think." She grinned, baring fang.

"Meaning what?" His smile vanished.

"Tonight is the Lesser Feast of St. Germain." She folded her hands over her lap. "And I have to go to the service at the chapel."

He thought he was so tough? Let him try that act in a building full of vampires.

She could hardly wait.

## Chapter 4

Funny, but Cameron had never expected to come face to face with his own personal vision of hell inside a chapel.

But if wall to wall vampires didn't comprise his idea of Satan's back forty, nothing did.

Talk about a target rich environment.

He shifted on the hard wooden pew, trying to ignore the prickling sensation on the back of his neck -- the result of so many vampires in a confined space, all of them throwing off energy. He wasn't psychic by any means, and only somewhat sensitive to supernatural energy. But he'd have to have been certified morgue material not to feel the power rolling through the room.

"All this vampire mojo getting to you?"

He looked down to see Eden eyeing him with a carefully blank expression. "You mean it's not getting to you?"

She shrugged. "Number one, I can feed on energy. I'm shielding."

"Feeding on energy, huh?" He shook his head. "The whole world is just one big snack bar to you people."

She stood up and smoothed down the skirt of her dark red brocade dress. His gaze unwillingly tracked the movements of her small manicured hands over every delicious inch of her rounded hips, then lower to the fullness of her thighs...

He shook it off. Yeah, he was attracted to her. She had the face of a dark angel and the body of an ancient goddess. Despite her uppity attitude, he could easily waste a few hours fantasizing about getting her naked in various positions.

But he didn't *have* a few hours to waste. Hell, he didn't have a single *second*. Someone in his line of work couldn't afford distractions. Distractions got you killed.

Too bad that in this particular case the client *was* the distraction.

"You, sir, are a bigot." She raised her dramatically arched black brows at him.

"And now, if you'll excuse me..." She turned to exit the pew.

He grabbed her by the elbow. "Where are you going?"

She threw his hand off. "Where do you *think* I'm going? Mortal body, mortal needs."

Two of the werewolves who'd come with them as backup drew in closer.

"I've got this." He held up his hand to them before turning back to Eden. "You can't go to the ladies room until we've swept it."

Something flickered in the depths of her eyes... something that told him the full impact of her situation had finally registered with her.

"Am I to expect you to stand outside the stall and hold my purse, or do I actually get to go in there alone?" The venom in her words pierced him like a dart.

"We'll sweep the room for any devices." He gestured to the members of the Speedway Pack stationed at various corners of the room. Damn, they needed radios yesterday. "Then Lisa and Sable will go in with you."

Sadness filled her face. Somehow, he knew the expression wasn't foreign to her. "This really is the end of my privacy, isn't it?"

He steeled his heart. Poor kid, hadn't she inherited Master Cain's entire estate when the old bloodsucker made himself into hot roasted vampire? She could buy her own island and run away from all this shit.

Going soft and feeling sorry for her wasn't an option... at least, not where he was concerned.

\* \* \*

Eden tried to focus on the service. Usually the soothing hymns bellowing forth from the pipe organ and the dancing flames of hundreds of candles could quiet her inner storms.

But not tonight.

What had she gotten herself into? She focused her gaze on the beautiful visage of Mother Rachel, the raven haired high priestess of St. Germain. When the crowd, prompted by the priestess, intoned their petitions to the great ascended master, Eden forced herself to go through the motions.

She truly believed in the Germainian faith. Her father had schooled her in it since her earliest memory, and as the empress of the Gulf Coast and head of a major vampire house, she would be a *de facto* representative of the church. But the new circumstances of her life had hit her with the force of a wrecking ball.

She had no privacy. What little autonomy she'd managed to gain had slipped out the back like a shoplifter making off with a major score.

She rose to her feet to join in the concluding hymn, conscious of the newest member of her staff beside her. He hated vampires -- that was clear enough. All she'd needed was a bodyguard, but somehow she'd ended up with a rogue vampire assassin by her side.

What the hell had she done to her life by accepting her father's succession?

The long vista of the years rolled out ahead of her like a red carpet. Endlessly being guarded, protected, isolated from the rest of the world. It had been that way for as long as she could remember. A succession of caretakers obsessively monitoring her health, keeping her out of the sun, watching her diet like hawks.

She'd learned early on that being protected had very little to do with being loved.

She hadn't been guarded because she was loved. No, she was merely rare... an exceptionally healthy dhampire and successor to the master.

She was a hothouse flower and a freakshow, all rolled together in one chubby little package.

The hymn came to an end and one by one, the congregants -- vampires all, with the exception of a few swans, human servants, and a scattering of shifters -- filed into the center aisle to receive their blessing from Mother Rachel.

"What is this, some kind of undead communion?" Cameron snorted from behind her.

She stifled the impulse to use her elemental conjuring powers and shake the ground beneath his feet. "Ever heard that old saying... if you can't say something nice, don't say anything?"

He grinned down at her. "I've never had much use for old sayings."

She felt her blood racing, partly with anger and partly with the desire to rise to his bait and match wits with him. Most of the men in her insulated world were so busy bowing and scraping before her that witty repartee was sadly lacking. "What about a new saying, then?" She returned his mirthless grin. "Sit your ass down in the pew or the big bad vampire bitch is going to make you regret it."

"You know I can't leave your side, oh royal one." His gaze traveled down her body again, in that same blush-inducing way he'd demonstrated earlier. "Besides, you're not a big bad bitch. You're not a big anything."

Conversations about her weight always made her cringe and want to run for the nearest exit. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

"Flattery?" He snorted. "You're what, all of five foot two in your stocking feet?"

Oh, so he meant she wasn't big *height*-wise. So not only was she fat, she was also short. "I'm five three." Yeah... if she stood up *really* straight.

Sable had reached the front of the line, and Eden watched as she inclined her head to receive Mother Rachel's blessing. The priestess raised an ancient crystal wand that sparkled with the entire prism of a rainbow and touched it to the supplicant's head.

Sable murmured a prayer and stepped aside. Eden moved to the front of the line and bowed her head.

Cameron's voice cut through the peaceful tableau like a razor. "Don't touch her."

She heard Mother Rachel gasp. Eden's eyes shot open to be greeted with the sight of the high priestess's horrified face and the equally shocked expressions of the two blond acolytes, Veronica and Malice.

"Make your blessing from St. Jerome or whoever he is, but don't touch her and don't let that oversized mood ring of yours anywhere near her."

Eden winced. This wasn't happening. If she clicked her heels three times, surely she'd wake up back on Uncle Henry's farm.

The temptation to open a hole in the ground for a quick getaway almost overwhelmed her.

She made a hasty apology to Mother Rachel and then turned to Cameron. This time she did the grabbing. "We're out of here." She pulled him by the elbow, aware that the entire congregation was riveted to the scene.

Her privacy wasn't the only casualty of her new situation. Apparently, her dignity had jumped ship as well.

\* \* \*

"You did *not* just fucking do that." Eden climbed into the back seat of Cameron's SUV, groaning when a werewolf crowded in on either side of her.

Cameron put the vehicle in gear. "Do what?"

"Humiliate me in front of my people? Insult the high priestess of my faith?" She dug her nails into the upholstery. "Shall I go on?"

"I have the feeling you will anyway." He shot her a glance in the rearview mirror.

She couldn't keep going like this. Something had to give, and it couldn't be her temper. "Just don't talk to me anymore, okay? When we get home, you go to your room and I go to my room. Don't let me lay eyes on you until tomorrow night." Her jaw clenched. "Got it?"

"Yes, your ladyship." He turned up the radio and soon the sound of Dwight Yoakam singing *Fast As You* filled the car.

It was a hell of a lot better, Eden reflected, than listening to herself scream.

\* \* \*

Cameron tapped on the door between his room and Eden's. He'd had Katya run by his place to pack a bag for him -- just the essentials. The sofa in Eden's sitting room would do fine for a bed. He'd certainly slept on worse.

An impatient sigh drifted through the closed door. "Yes?"

He cracked the door and peered into the dim room. The blackout drapes were all closed, and Eden was curled up in bed with a romance novel.

"Good book?" He took a few steps into the room.

She sighed and closed the book. "Let's not pretend you came in here for small talk, okay? You don't like me, I don't like you, and the only reason our paths ever crossed is because a serial killer is on the loose." She stood up to turn back the covers.

"Who says I don't like you?" She looked different, somehow. Younger or something. He peered closer at her face, realizing it was scrubbed clean of the dramatic makeup she'd worn all evening. Standing there barefoot, wearing nothing but an Astros nightshirt, she looked surprisingly innocent.

Dangerously so, if his aching body were any indication.

"Vampires are obviously not high up on your list of favorite people." She sat down on the edge of the bed.

He could feel a smile forming despite himself. "How could you not be one of my favorite people? You're an Astros fan."

She gave him a faint smile. "Houston born and raised... being an Astros fan is in my blood."

There was that word. Blood. He cringed at a memory that he couldn't -- wouldn't -- allow to resurface.

"You were born here, huh?" He reached for a change of subject. "How old are you, anyway?"

"How many years have I lived, or how old is my body?" The look on her face told him she expected a negative reaction either way.

"Both, although I didn't realize dhampires aged differently than the rest of us."

She sighed as if she'd explained this too many times already... which, he realized, she probably had. "I was born twenty-seven years ago, but I began taking my father's blood when I was twenty-one. Blood that powerful can retard the aging process in humans, so I guess it really worked me over. I get carded anytime I try to order something stronger than ginger ale." She rolled her eyes. "Most people think I look about nineteen or twenty."

No wonder she gave off a mixed vibe of world-weary innocence. But he had another question, one he had to ask before she closed herself off again. "Did you love him?"

Her eyes widened. "My father?"

He nodded.

She shrugged and looked into the distance. "Yes, I loved him... as much as you can love someone so ancient." She shook her head. "It's complicated."

"But you miss him?" He leaned against the door frame.

"I miss him more than I ever imagined possible." She heaved a sigh.

Cameron checked her window locks and said goodnight, leaving her to fall to the dawn. The door between their rooms remained temptingly ajar, but his mind was wide open with thoughts of the beautiful enigma on the other side.

\* \* \*

### ***Houston Homicide Believed To Be Serial Killer Victim***

9:46 AM EDT

by David Goldman

*HOUSTON TX (Global Newswire) -- The body of a young female found in Houston's vampire district may prove to be the latest victim of the city's notorious serial killer.*

*The victim has been identified as Chelsea Yates, 32, of Houston. The body was spotted in a vacant lot near the Hotel Ruthven by an unnamed informant.*

*While the coroner has yet to confirm an official cause of death, sources close to law enforcement are reporting that Yates appears to be a victim of the serial killer.*

*The killer, believed to be a master vampire of unusual strength, has terrorized Houston's vampire district in recent months. The addition of Yates would bring the number of homicides to twelve.*

## Chapter 5

"Chelsea Yates was a shifter." Cameron slammed the newspaper down on Mr. Charles' desk.

"She had close ties to the Speedway Pack." Mr. Charles leaned back in his chair, looking as worried as Cameron felt.

"The killer is moving in closer." Cameron paced the floor of the small ground floor office. "I don't like this." He stopped, leaning against the wall. "I don't like it at all."

"One wonders how long it will be before the killer starts going after members of our staff." Mr. Charles folded his hands on top of his desk.

"Let me look at the folder of threats against Eden one more time." Cameron flopped down in the chair opposite the desk.

Mr. Charles sighed. "I can't imagine what could be gained by you pouring over those insane ravings yet again."

Cameron ran a hand over his head. "A pattern... something we've missed." He rubbed his forehead and sighed. "Why the hell do the Minotaur vamps hate Eden so much?"

"She advocates feeding on energy and synthetic blood rather than upon humans." Mr. Charles opened a desk drawer and retrieved a manila folder. "House Minotaur prides themselves on being natural predators, and are outraged at the thought of giving up their more... *organic* food sources."

"Which means you've got Eden, the Gulf Coast Court, the Germainians, and all their affiliated houses on one side," Cameron drummed his fingers on the desktop, "and House Minotaur on the other?"

"Minotaur has a band of rogues on their side." Mr. Charles handed him a second file. "This is everything we have on Minotaur and their associates."

"You know they're behind this." It wasn't a question.

"As they say... where there's smoke, there's fire." Mr. Charles stood up.

What was it with this group and old sayings? Cameron exhaled slowly. "We've got to cancel her appearances for the next day or so."

Mr. Charles nodded. "I figured as much."

Cameron leafed through the file, seeing nothing. "She's not going to like it."

Mr. Charles smiled. "You're catching on quickly, Mr. Zane."

Cameron squeezed his eyes shut and sighed again. If only he could catch the killer's trail and end this insanity -- for Eden and everyone else.

\* \* \*

"This is beyond unnecessary, you know." Eden tightened the sash of the terry cloth robe she'd put on over her swimsuit.

"I'm not letting you outside after dark without protection." Zane opened the back door of House Black Rose and held it for her.

"I've been to the hot tub by myself a thousand times." She stepped out onto the covered patio. "There's never been the slightest hint of trouble."

"There's never been a serial killer targeting you before, either." Cameron led the way down the stepping stone path to the pool and hot tub. "Either I go with you, or you don't go."

Eden groaned inwardly. Letting Mr. Buff Body see her in a swimsuit wasn't high on her list of fun activities, but she was so desperate to get out of the house that exposing her pudge seemed like the lesser of two evils.

"Clow could've come with me, you know." The ogre wasn't about to win any bathing beauty contests himself.

"Clow is guarding the back gate." He stopped at the cabana to eye the sound system. "Music?"

She shrugged. "Sure." It would distract him for a minute so she could toss her robe and climb into the hot tub unseen.

While he fiddled with the sound system, she made a beeline for the hot tub and tore off her robe. She tossed it on a nearby chaise lounge and plunged into the bubbling hot water just as Cameron made his way to the tub.

She sank down until the water reached her shoulders. Her red two-piece suit was fine for Lisa and Sable to see, but she had no intention of letting Cameron get the full visual.

"How's the water?" He kicked off the flip-flops he'd worn and took off his shoulder holster. She watched as he took the gun out and checked the safety. The strains of Patti Smith's *Because The Night* began to play softly on the sound system.

"Hot." She sighed with pleasure and leaned back against the edge of the tub. "Blissful, actually."

"Glad to hear it." He laid the gun to rest carefully about a foot from the edge of the tub and placed his radio beside it before he began to peel off his black sleeveless T-shirt.

"What the hell are you doing?" She stared at the broad expanse of smooth, muscled chest and strong, tattooed arms.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" He tossed his shirt aside and stood there in a pair of black swim trunks she'd mistaken for track shorts, grinning like the proverbial Cheshire cat. "I'm getting in."

\* \* \*

He didn't know which brought him more pleasure, the steaming water or the curvaceous woman by his side. But, as he managed to sneak a glance at the abundant curve of her cleavage, he had to vote for the woman.

"Is this your idea of professional conduct?" Eden leaned forward in the tub, improving his view dramatically.

Actually, it wasn't. Getting into the hot tub with Eden was substantially more arousing than, say, going to the therapy pool with Mr. Hoffmeyer, the client on his last

gig. But strictly speaking, it *was* a potentially risky situation for her. Why not protect her and enjoy one of the perks of his job at the same time?

And getting an eyeful of Eden in a two-piece swimsuit was a *definite* perk.

"If we make it back inside without incident, I'll say it was pretty damn professional on my part." He checked to make sure his gun was within easy reaching distance. "Do you always complain this much?"

She knit her brows together. "Yes."

Her truthful answer caught him off guard and he laughed before he could check himself. "At least you're honest."

She shrugged and ran a hand over her upswept hair. "Why lie? I'm probably spoiled rotten by your standards."

He mulled her words over. "Maybe, but everyone around here is completely loyal to you. They wouldn't feel that way if you were as difficult with them as you are with me."

"I'm the master's daughter." She spoke as if those few words defined her every relationship.

He shook his head. "It's more than that. I heard what you did for Clow. And you mediated a resolution for the Speedway Pack during their big feud. They're willing to put their lives on the line for you." He met her gaze. "You don't get any more loyal than that."

She regarded him with an icy expression. "You're putting your life on the line for me right now, and I don't see anything resembling loyalty in you."

"Is that what you really think?" Anger tightened his chest. "Are you blind, or just really dense?"

Her eyes darkened. "Neither, last time I checked."

"Well, maybe you need to check again, if you can't see what's staring you in the face." Cameron felt every muscle in his body tense. He was on the verge of blurting out something that would put the word *unprofessional* in an entirely new context.

"The only thing staring me in the face is an arrogant ass who thinks he's some kind of hero for taking money to kill people." She folded her arms over her chest with the air of having had the final word.

"You want to know why I'm still here?" His cock throbbed with sudden need. "Despite the fact that you're the biggest pain in the ass I've ever met? Because I can assure you, your ladyship, it's not for the money."

"Oh, *do* enlighten me." She smirked at him, anger coloring her cheeks.

He opened his mouth to blurt out a confession when something stronger than speech overwhelmed him. He wrapped both of his hands around her upper arms and pulled her to him, pressing his lips against hers in a silencing kiss.

\* \* \*

His kiss was rough, half pleasure and half punishment.

Eden sighed when he pulled away, dragging her eyelids open. Cameron stared down at her, an expression in his eyes she couldn't decipher. Something between lust and rage, though whether at her or himself she couldn't fathom.

He didn't speak as he twisted his fingers into the back of her upswept hair, willing her to conform to the angle he desired. Then his lips met hers again, and she couldn't think, couldn't do anything but feel.

He forced her mouth open, his tongue demanding purchase. She complied, although she couldn't have made herself refuse if her life depended on it. His tongue swept against hers, thrusting into her mouth even as he pressed the hard length of his cock against her bare stomach.

She sucked her stomach in almost reflexively. Even though she'd never had sexual contact with a man before, her instinct to appear desirable to him kicked in on autopilot.

But she didn't have long to think about her shape, not with his hands pushing up the top of her swimsuit. She gasped when the whirling water of the hot tub swirled against her bare breasts.

"Eden," he whispered against her lips, cupping her breasts. The weight of them rested against his palms, and she felt her nipples harden painfully.

He circled the swollen points with his thumbs, eliciting a tortured sound from her. Had anything ever felt more euphoric than this man's hands on her body? Something stirred low in her body, a deep throbbing, an aching need that only he could fill.

His lips worked their way down her neck. With one hand, he lifted her breast until the nipple was above the water line. The cool air against it tugged between her legs, as if an invisible current connected it to her breasts. Cameron lowered his head and took her nipple into his mouth.

The feeling of his warm, wet tongue lapping at the peak of her nipple was almost more than she could bear. She could feel an orgasm rushing forth like a pack of wild horses, furious and unstoppable. If he didn't take her and put an end to the delicious torture, she'd expire from sheer need.

His radio crackled, Clow's voice coming through. "Cam, we got a car pulling into the driveway. Texas plates."

Cameron released her breast and growled a curse. He reached for the radio and depressed the *talk* button. "Be there in a minute, Clow. Just follow procedure."

Eden watched as he put the radio aside and covered his face with his hands. His chest heaved in a deep sigh.

"I'm... I don't have any excuse for that." He scrubbed his face with his hands, refusing to meet her eyes. "I'm sorry."

He was sorry? Humiliation washed over her like an icy wave, shooting needles through her heart. She'd been about to hand him her extremely overdue virginity on a silver platter, and he was *sorry*?

"I won't let it happen again, all right?" He gave her a pained glance. "I know better than to get involved with a client. It would be the worst thing I could do, especially on a tough job like this."

She slid back through the water to the other side of the tub. Was that how he saw her... as a tough job? Maybe he'd been without a woman long enough to settle for a chubby chick with no experience in the heat of the moment.

Her devastated pride wouldn't allow her to spend another minute with him. "You're right." She turned her back to him and climbed out of the tub. Suddenly it no longer mattered if he saw her body. He'd already rejected her. What did she have left to lose? "Don't let it happen again."

She put on her robe and headed back to the house. For once, he didn't follow her.

\* \* \*

### ***Dracula's Ball Promises To Be Gala Event***

*by Anastasia Levoux*

*Houston Vampire Press*

*Preparations are in full swing for this year's annual Dracula's Ball in Houston. It will be the Bay City's first time to host the event in nearly a century.*

*"We're expecting delegates from every vampire court and house in North America," Gavin Charles, spokesman for the Gulf Coast Court, told the Houston Vampire Press. "Of course, security will be high for the festivities. Local citizens need not worry about any trouble resulting from this gathering."*

*With only two months until Dracula Week kicks off, the planning committee is in constant motion tying up final details.*

*"We want this to be the most glittering Dracula's Ball in the history of the event," Jade Simon-D'Aria, owner of Nocturnal Nuptials and co-chair of the planning committee, told us in a phone interview. The ball will launch with performances from several well known vampire musical acts and conclude with the coronation of the new empress of the Gulf Coast Court, Eden Lockhart.*

## Chapter 6

"Eden, let's go."

She looked up to find Cameron standing in the doorway between their respective rooms. "Just a minute, they're almost finished with me."

Veronica, half of Houston's infamous identical vampire duo, wrinkled her forehead as she worked a shine serum into Eden's hair. "You cannot rush beauty, Monsieur Zane."

Malice, from her perch on a stool at Eden's side, nodded as she brushed deep red gloss onto Eden's lips.

Cameron scanned the floor with his eyes. "Did you try on your entire closet?" He gestured to the piles of discarded clothing littering the carpet. She was sure it looked as if a gothic laundromat had blown up in there.

Eden gave him what she hoped was a withering stare. "Did you remember to put on clean underwear?"

He shot her a grin. "I don't wear any."

Okay, she deserved that one. But she had to admit, he did look good in his black leather pants and matching silk shirt.

Good? She snorted to herself. He looked like a walking, talking treat. If she hadn't been still smarting from his rejection, she might have even told him so.

But she couldn't, not after she'd let him make a total fool of her in the hot tub a few nights ago. Even worse than her wounded pride and sense of total humiliation was the fact that he seemed determined to act as if nothing had happened.

As if kissing her, holding her, and touching her naked body had meant less than nothing to him.

"Finished!" Veronica put down her comb and clapped. Malice moved out of the way and joined the applause.

Eden rose to her feet. "Thank you, girls."

Veronica turned to Cameron. "Is she not a work of art, Monsieur Zane?"

Eden crossed her arms over her chest. The form-fitting black dress with its lace trim revealed more than she normally allowed herself to show, and Cameron's intense scrutiny made her wildly embarrassed. She could only imagine how she'd pale in comparison to the other female guests at Katya's birthday party that night.

Finally, the weight of his stare forced her to look up and meet the heat in his eyes.

"I couldn't have said it better myself." He leaned against the wall, still watching her.

She hustled Malice and Veronica out, closing the door behind them with relief.

"You've got those two on your payroll?" He chuckled.

"I inherited them." Eden sighed, rubbing her hand against her forehead. "I'm going to go change before we head out to Crimson Hungers. This dress is all wrong."

His hand shot out to stop her. "Are you crazy? You look incredible!"

She rolled her eyes. "Incredibly fat, maybe."

"Come on, Eden." His hand was warm on her bare arm. "You're not one of those, are you?"

"One of what?"

"One of those women who has a killer body but thinks she's too fat because she's not built like some bony supermodel."

She felt a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I don't think anyone is going to mistake me for a bony supermodel in this lifetime."

"Why would you want to be one?" The vehemence in his voice surprised her.

"Are you kidding me?" She tried to keep tears from sneaking into her eyes, but any discussion of her weight always touched the sorest spot in her heart. "Guys love those bony chicks."

"Fourteen-year-old guys who want to impress their friends, maybe." His gaze burned into hers. "You have everything that makes a woman's body what it's supposed to be. You just have more of it."

To hell with it. How could she fight a compliment like that? "Fine, I'll wear this dress."

He smiled down at her, his eyes sparkling. "Good."

\* \* \*

The crowd of bodies on the dance floor at Crimson Hungers made Cameron uncomfortable, but not for the normal reasons.

There were just too damn many people there.

Rex, the owner of the club, had top notch security. A pair of werewolves the size of professional wrestlers scanned everyone with wands. Everyone had their IDs checked against the guest list. No one got in without a hand stamp.

Rex had even made sure that Cameron had a card key to a private VIP room in case Eden needed it. But he knew she'd resent being dragged off to watch the party from a distance, so he'd settled down at a corner table with her.

Cameron stole a surreptitious glance at her as she stirred the ice cubes in her ginger ale with a swizzle stick. She looked about as happy as your average funeral attendee.

"Having fun?" He put his hand on her wrist.

She started at his touch, splashing ginger ale on the table. "Yeah, it's a good party."

"You don't look very happy." That was the understatement of the year.

He followed her gaze to the dance floor. "Just tired, I guess."

All right, he didn't need a sign from heaven. The woman wanted to dance.

Cameron checked the perimeter. The Speedway Pack was there in full force, covering all the doors and exits. Clow was watching the front entrance. The radio would alert him to anything about to happen.

What could possibly go wrong taking one turn on the dance floor?

"Come on." He rose to his feet and offered her his hand.

"Where?" She stood and took the proffered hand.

"We're going to dance." He began to work his way through the crowd, past the tables and onto the dance floor.

Gnarls Barkley's *The Boogie Monster* pounded from the speakers. Cameron pulled Eden against him until her body was flush with his.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, letting him feel the weight of her breasts against him.

He went hard instantly.

She was a natural dancer and found the rhythm easily, slowly rotating her hips against his in a way that made him wonder what she'd do on top of him, underneath him, and in a few other positions.

He'd promised himself he wouldn't touch her again. Getting involved with her would weaken his focus. Getting emotionally attached to a client was the equivalent of serving them both up to the bad guys on a silver plate.

But when her eyelids fluttered shut and a soft sigh drifted forth from her lips, his promises were as good as dead. He wanted her more than he wanted his next breath.

He held her face in his hands and brought his mouth down on hers before she could protest, kissing her with all the ferocity of desire denied.

She made a sound deep in her throat and ground her pelvis against him. A few more minutes of that and he would come right there on the dance floor.

"Let's go." He pulled back enough to look into her eyes. "VIP room." He took her hand and pulled her along behind him while fumbling in his pocket for the card key. He finally extracted it from his pocket with an unsteady hand.

"Dammit!" He squinted down at the key.

"What is it?"

"I can't find the room number on here."

She looked down at the card. "It's on the other side. The one *without* a magnetic strip."

Feeling like a teenage boy desperate to sneak out with a girl, he checked the front of the card, and sure enough... Room V7.

He managed to locate the room without any further delays, nearly tearing the door off the hinges in his haste to get her alone.

The door slammed behind them and he had her in his arms, backing her toward the red velvet covered sofa against the wall. "Alone at last," he breathed. She nodded, reaching for him. He offered no resistance.

He claimed her mouth, desperate with hunger to taste her, to consume her, to immolate them both on the altar of passion. She didn't stop him when his hands skimmed the backs of her bare thighs until he met the stretchy lace fabric of her panties.

"Have you ever had a man go down on you?" His breath came in gasps.

She shot him a wary look. Just as he'd expected, she wasn't very experienced. That was all about to change.

"Get on the couch. No arguments." He steered her down onto the couch and knelt in front of her, parting her legs. He placed one over each shoulder, giving himself the kind of view that wet dreams were made of.

Her thighs were full and smooth, the skin as soft as rose petals. And between them... sweet lord. A swath of black lace and satin covered the small triangle where heaven waited.

She drew in a sharp breath when he skimmed his hands up her inner thighs. He didn't stop until he had her dress pushed up.

Silently he moved closer, pressing his lips against her mound through the thin fabric of her panties. He dragged his lips lower, flicking his tongue against the hot center of her, inhaling the perfume of her desire.

He knew that hers would be the sweetest pussy he'd ever tasted.

Mewling kitten sounds broke forth from her throat, and she ran the palms of her hands over his stubble-covered head. Experienced or not, it was plain to see her raw instincts were leading her on. He tightened his grip on her thighs and ran the tip of his tongue down her hot cleft, leaving a trail of moisture on her panties.

His cock ached with need, and when she'd had the chance to come at least twice, he would bury it inside her and thrust them both into oblivion. He would bet his entire gun collection that she was a virgin, and he'd never had that particular experience with a woman before. But he would do right by her, pleasuring her senseless before claiming his own reward.

A scream tore through the room. At first he thought it was Eden, but one look at her told him that she was as surprised as he was. And then the first bullet punched its way through the steel door. He barely had time to pull Eden to the floor before more shots rang out, a deafening rain of bullets coming from seemingly every direction.

He threw himself on top of her without thinking twice. She didn't scream, didn't move -- she simply held herself motionless beneath him, an expression of sheer terror on her face.

The shooting stopped as suddenly as it had begun, leaving Cameron's ears ringing. A bullet had lodged itself in the door.

It was silver.

Someone knew what they were doing.

A crackle zapped through the air, and a shower of sparks came from somewhere near the ceiling, giving Cameron just long enough to pull his gun before the building was plunged into darkness.

## Chapter 7

"Get the fucking car over here *now*," Cameron barked into the radio. Trent, the werewolf on the other end, responded in the affirmative.

He pulled Eden behind him, trying to keep his composure. Not an easy thing to do with bodies being wheeled out in bags.

"Who would've done such a thing?" Eden sobbed. He couldn't look at her, not with tears running down her face and terror in her eyes. If he let himself get caught up in her emotions, he'd lose it, and someone had to hold it together with the kind of shit they'd endured for the last half hour.

Thank God for cell phones. After they were ambushed from outside with silver bullets, some handy little vampire scout had cut their electricity. If some of the party guests hadn't called 911 on their cell phones, the death toll would've been twice as high.

As it was, there were more dead vampires and shifters than he'd ever seen in one place, and that was saying something. Their entire crew had survived, and everyone at Katya's table had ducked into a VIP room. But blood ran everywhere, like some apocalyptic nightmare.

"What now?" Eden clutched his hand.

"We get you out of here." He tightened his grip on her hand. "Sable and Lisa are packing a bag for each of us, and we're going to swing by the house long enough to pick up our stuff." He turned to catch her as she swayed. The left heel of her shoe had broken. Shit.

"Then what?" She made a clumsy swipe at her eyes with the back of her free hand.

His jaw clenched. "Then we're going to haul ass."

"Oh my God." Eden came to a dead stop behind him. He paused, turning to follow her gaze to the brick façade of the Sanguine Guest Quarters across from Crimson Hungers.

He would've echoed her shocked sentiments, but his voice stalled in his throat. For scrawled across the wall in letters too big to miss was a single word, written in blood so fresh it still dripped in tear-like streams to the sidewalk below.

The word was *Eden*.

\* \* \*

Eden played with the radio, changing stations restlessly. "Your presets suck."

Cameron sighed. "Put it on Vampire Radio. Maybe they'll have some news about what happened tonight."

Eden echoed his sigh and tuned the radio to the vampire station. The eerie sounds of Nox Arcana drifted through the speakers. She slumped down in her seat and stared out the window of the SUV into the dark night.

"It was nice of Vance to loan us his beach house." She turned to look at Cameron's profile. How unreasonable was it that she wanted him to mention what had almost happened between them before the shooting started? With everything that had happened that night, their few minutes of mutual heat naturally wouldn't be foremost on his mind.

So why was it foremost on hers? She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to think of something else. How her people had gone with her to the party to protect her and had almost lost their lives for it. How someone wanted her dead badly enough to shoot up an entire club with silver on the odds of hitting her. Not to mention that little *Surrender, Dorothy* style message in dripping blood waiting for her when she finally got out of the bullet riddled club.

"This is Penny Dreadful with your KVMP news," a smooth voice intoned over the speaker. "While tonight's shootout at local vampire haven Crimson Hungers has left authorities with more questions than answers, one thing is certain -- incoming empress of the Gulf Coast Court, Eden Lockhart, was an undeniable target of tonight's attack."

Calls to Lockhart's representatives were not immediately returned. Police say she has been taken to a secure and undisclosed location. In other news..."

Eden switched the radio off with a curse. "How long until we reach the beach house?" The deserted highway, shrouded by the looming shape of dark trees, made her uneasy. Without the radio, there was nothing to disrupt the hypnotic hum of the wheels.

"It'll be another hour or two before we get to Corpus. It takes longer on these back roads, but the fewer people who see us, the better." He kept his gaze on the endless stretch of dark gray highway ahead of them. "We should be safe there. Vance and Mr. Charles are the only ones who know where we're going."

She leaned her forehead against the cool glass of the window. "As long as we get there before dawn, I'm good."

He gave her a brief glance. "We will, I promise."

She knew he'd keep his promise. It was scary how much she trusted him. But then he'd rolled on top of her, ready to take a bullet to protect her. If that didn't inspire trust, what would?

"I know one thing." He continued to stare at the road.

"What's that?" She turned to face him.

"When we get to Corpus, I'm driving through Whataburger and getting us the two greasiest cheeseburgers in the great state of Texas." He shot her a grin, and she burst into laughter. She was about to comment that she'd wondered if she'd ever laugh again when the sight of something standing in direct range of their headlights stopped her.

"What the..." She peered out at the creature, noting its height of around four feet and its scaly green appearance before it vanished, rising into the air in the blink of an eye.

"Mother of..." Cameron leaned forward, slowing the vehicle just as the thing slammed into the windshield with a stomach-churning splat.

The vehicle spun as Cameron struggled to control it. The sound of screeching tires mixed with the unearthly scream of the creature, and Eden couldn't keep from adding her own terrified shouts to the mixture.

The thing had its face pressed to the glass, a trail of slime and blood smearing in the trajectory of its pug nose. Its eyes were pure reptile -- flat, black, and cold.

Cameron pulled to a stop on the shoulder of the road, and the creature slumped against the windshield, gasping. Eden shrank back.

The thing had a mouthful of serrated teeth, like the bastard offspring of a shark and a piranha.

"If anything moves, shoot it." Cameron took the automatic pistol from his shoulder holster and put it in her lap. "You know how to turn the safety off?"

She stared at him. "What the hell are you doing?"

He took the gun from the back of his waistband and turned the safety off. "Shooting it."

"You can't go out there!" She reached for him. "That thing could eat you alive!"

He rolled down his window. "Not if it's dead."

Before she could get another word, he fired into the creature's body. It let out a piteous wail and slid to the end of the hood. He fired again and didn't stop firing until the gun was empty.

Blood smeared all over the windshield and the hood of the SUV. Eden closed her eyes and said a prayer.

Cameron rolled up his window and pulled into reverse, turning them slowly back onto the highway. The creature rolled off the hood of the car with a thud.

"An honest-to-God Chupacabra." He stared out into the darkness. "I've lived in Texas almost all my life, and that's the first one I've ever seen."

"Do they travel in packs?" She rubbed her head with her hand. A few hours ago, had she actually been on the dance floor with this man's arms around her? It had begun to feel like another lifetime.

Before he could answer her, a small herd of the creatures appeared in the headlights of the car.

"Holy fucking shit." Cameron swerved the car around and took off in the opposite direction. Another handful of them waited on the other side.

"What now?" Eden clutched the gun in her lap with a sweaty hand.

"We run 'em down." He sped up, plowing through the mass of screaming Chupacabras like a super-charged bowling ball mowing down a rack of pins. Their shrieks reverberated through the air, and she could feel the sickening sensation of their scaly green bodies beneath the wheels like so much roadkill.

"They didn't move or try to save themselves." Cameron shook his head. "Whoever's after you obviously can call the Chupacabra into service." Reloading, he rolled down the window, shooting one particularly determined little monster clinging to the outside mirror. The creature's head exploded in a red splatter.

Eden winced as a gob of gore slid down the vent window like a slug. "That's a scary thought." She turned away and scanned the road ahead. "What now?"

"We get the blood off the windshield." He turned a control that showered the glass with streams of wiper fluid. "And we can't go to the beach house, not after that. Our bad guy planted his little friends in our path to intercept us."

"Where else can we go?" She glanced at the sky. Dawn was drawing closer... she could feel it.

"A safe place." He gave her a quick look. "Trust me."

The funny thing was... she actually did.

## Chapter 8

"Who's Allison Curry?" Eden checked the name on the black mailbox at the end of the sidewalk as Cameron turned onto a paved driveway in front of a tidy Craftsman bungalow.

"My stepsister." Cameron pulled to a stop and opened the driver side door. "Be right back."

She watched as he went to the garage door and unlocked it before raising it manually. It was the first time he'd mentioned anything about his personal life, other than an offhanded comment about having lived in Texas most of his life.

A week ago, she would've thought him too cold and soulless to have a family. Now, she wasn't so sure... of him, of her feelings, or anything else, for that matter.

He climbed back into the SUV and slowly guided it into the garage, pulling them to a stop. Eden could make out a bicycle, some gardening tools, and a few boxes marked "Xmas -- Misc" among the neatly organized contents of the small enclosure.

"Is she expecting us?" Eden twisted around in her seat, looking for a door leading inside. "I didn't see you call anyone."

"She's not home." Cameron shut down the engine and took the keys from the ignition. "Won't be back for a week." He opened his car door again. "Stay here while I lock the garage door and check out the house."

She waited until he returned and had given her the all clear signal before she climbed down from the vehicle.

"Don't walk around the front unless you want to see Chupacabra guts plastered all over the grill." He opened the rear door of the Tahoe and removed their bags.

He led her to a small flight of steps that ended with a door, which he opened with a key dangling from his own keychain. He and stepsis must be close, she mused, or he wouldn't have carte blanche to come and go from her house as he pleased.

Cameron Zane, super chummy with his family. Who'd have thought?

The door opened, revealing a cheerful yellow kitchen. Eden wandered in, touching the Formica countertops and retro dinette set, running her fingertips over the banded leather and chrome chairs. A vintage soda machine occupied one corner, and Bakelite cookware gleamed glossy jade green behind the windowed cupboard doors.

"She has good taste." Eden wandered to the window where a trio of African violets rested on the sill, their leaves edged with brown and their blossoms wilted.

"She's kind of... New Age, I guess." Cameron disappeared through the kitchen door with their bags and came back empty handed.

"Not good with plants, though." She held her right hand over one of the violets and gathered her energy, forcing it out through her palm. The little plant responded instantly, turning lush and green as if it had just been transported from some mythical paradise.

"How did you do that?" Cameron's voice held a note of awe.

She shrugged. "I control the element of earth, remember?" She moved her hand to the other two plants, restoring them to optimum health within seconds.

He leaned against the soda machine, arms folded over his chest. "I forget sometimes that you're not quite human."

She let out a rueful laugh. "I figured you had a hard time remembering that I'm not one hundred percent vampire."

His gaze fell on her with such intensity that she looked away. "Of all the things I think of when I look at you, your vampire side is the least of them."

The room went spotty suddenly. Eden clutched the edge of the countertop to keep her balance.

"What's wrong?" Cameron caught her by the arm to steady her.

"Dawn is coming, and..." She so didn't want to say what she was about to say and spoil the moment, but... "I guess Allison doesn't have any synthetic blood stashed in her fridge."

Something in his expression told her that the moment had crashed to a halt, just as she'd feared. "No, I don't think she does."

Eden nodded slowly. Of course, she could feed on him, either through blood or energy, but she didn't think that offer would be forthcoming. Well, there was always the little trick Master Cain had taught to all of his fledglings. "Does she have any candles?"

"She's a massage therapist." Cameron's face relaxed. "She's got candles, oils, sounds of whales making love..."

Great, a nice hot rush between the legs was *not* what she needed just then. "I can feed on the candle flames and get by until you can run out to the grocery store and get a case of Vlad's for me."

He raised his brows. "Would a fireplace be better?"

She *had* noticed a chimney outside. "Yes, if you're sure a fire won't make it too hot in here for you."

"That's what air conditioning is for." He beckoned to her. "Come with me."

She followed him through the small living room decorated with shabby chic furnishings to a bedroom. A fireplace with a marble mantle graced the wall opposite the queen sized bed.

"I'll have one going in just a minute." He gestured to the bed. "Make yourself at home."

Eden eased down on the edge of the bed and watched him make a nest of small logs from the wood box beside the fireplace. "Tell me about Allison."

He turned the gas control on the hearth and struck a match. "Not much to tell. When my mom married her dad, I was ten and she was fourteen. She was a good big sister." He stepped back, eyeing the small blaze cracking before them. "Still is."

"She won't mind you bringing me here?" She held her hands out to the fire, letting its energy seep into her body, drawing it in with every breath.

"I've crashed here before, when..." He stopped, shoving his hands into his pockets. "When I've hit a rough patch."

She wanted to ask more, but he made a move for the door. "Dawn's coming... you better get ready for bed."

Why did every moment between them have to end that way? Either her nature, or his past, or the danger of their situation barged in like a vengeful intruder every time they got close to the edge.

"Yeah," she sighed, admitting defeat to herself. It didn't matter how much she craved his attention and wanted him. Something would always be in the way. The right time didn't seem to exist. "Thanks for everything."

"No problem." He gave her a look, and for a moment she almost thought he was going to do something, *anything*, to bring the everlasting dance between them to its logical conclusion. But then he headed for the door. "I'll be right outside on the couch if you need me."

"Okay." She nodded, and watched as he closed the door on her and what could've happened.

She needed him, all right. More than she'd ever hoped or feared possible.

## Chapter 9

It was full dark when she woke up. The sound of the fire crackling reminded her where she was.

And why she was there.

She stirred under the blanket, rolling over to look at the fireplace. Someone had kept a low fire going while she slept, and it blazed red and gold, sending its energy out in waves. She sat up on the edge of the bed and held her hands out to it.

"Sleep well?"

She looked up to see Cameron framed in the doorway. He was shirtless, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans that were tight without being too tight. His usual array of weapons was missing. She could detect only one gun, an automatic pistol tucked into the waist of his jeans. The knife sheaths were nowhere to be seen.

"Like the dead." She grinned at him, letting her fangs show. He chuckled and sat down on the edge of the bed. A week ago, any reference to her vampire side and a show of fangs would've elicited a derogatory remark from him.

Maybe she wasn't the only one who'd begun to question their differences and the feelings those differences aroused.

"I need to make a run to get you some Vlad's and those cheeseburgers I promised you." He stretched his arms over his head, and a wave of dizziness washed over her.

God, she wanted him. She could admit it now, no more hiding behind flimsy excuses and dismissive thoughts. She wanted him so much she ached with it.

"Just send out for pizza." She threw the covers off, warm from the fire and her own heated emotions. "I can go without the Vlad's until we find a store that delivers."

"It's not good for your health to go for a long time without feeding." He leaned back on an elbow to look at her.

"There are other means of feeding, remember? We talked about it that night at the chapel. There's fire, for one." She gestured to the fireplace. "Energy. Synthetic blood is better, but fire and energy can get me through for a couple of days."

"You can feed off human energy without taking blood, right?" He raised an eyebrow.

If there was ever a time to tread carefully, it had arrived. She took a deep breath. "Yes, it's perfectly safe for the donor."

She watched his mental wheels turning. Finally, he sat up straight. "Let's try it."

She blinked. "Are you serious?"

"Couldn't be more serious." He beckoned to her with his hand. "Come on." When she hesitated, he scowled. "What, am I not a suitable food source?"

Was St. Germain a vampire? "Of course you are." She rose to her knees and positioned herself behind him, drawing a slow, cleansing breath as she placed the palms of her hands against the bare skin of his back. His muscles were knotted with tension. "Just relax, all right? It's not going to hurt, I promise."

"If I'm tense, it has nothing to do with the feeding and everything to do with you in a nightshirt." He made a sound deep in his throat.

She froze. "Be serious."

"Once again, I'm being serious." He glanced at her over his shoulder. "For God's sake, Eden, what's it going to take to make you realize how much you turn me on?" He shook his head. "Do I need to hire skywriters? Do you want it written in blood?" He held up a hand. "Wait, don't answer that part."

She knew his last words were a joke, but what about the first part? If he was toying with her... "How do I know you mean it?"

He took her hand and slowly raised it to his lips, brushing it with a kiss before lowering it to his lap.

"Oh," she breathed. He was so hard she wondered how his jeans could contain him.

"Oh, yes," he answered. She could hear the unmistakable timbre of hunger in his voice and raised her gaze slowly.

His eyes told her that her moment had finally arrived.

She dragged in a breath as he grabbed her, his hands wrapping around her upper arms. He pulled her roughly against him, pinning her body to his.

She bit her bottom lip, wincing at the sharpness of her fangs. The look in his eyes was pure wildness, telling her the tables had turned and that the predator had become the prey.

She watched his gaze drop to her bottom lip. Every shuddering breath made her breasts rub against his bare chest, with only the thin red silk of her nightshirt between them. There was no sound but their rapid breathing and a clock ticking in the distance.

"Close your eyes, Eden." His voice was a growl.

She let her eyelids fall shut and he released her arms, only to thread his fingers through the back of her hair, just as he'd done that night in the hot tub. He used his grip on her tresses to gain purchase until her head was at the angle he desired.

Her heart clanged against her ribs like a church bell gone awry. Her life hovered on the great precipice between before and after, and she knew he was going to pull her down into the chasm of her own desires, possessing her completely until he'd marked her for eternity.

His mouth came down on hers, lips colliding in a fever of mutual need. His teeth grazed her lips, and her body shook, as if passion were a gale-force wind blowing over her.

His tongue parted her lips, and he stroked it against hers, staking his claim to her mouth. She surrendered to his plundering, to the hot swirling motion of his tongue stalking hers, thrusting into her mouth in an unmistakable prelude.

He broke the kiss long enough to lock gazes with her, pushing her back onto the bed.

She gasped as he took both of her wrists in one strong hand and pinned her hands above her head. He knelt on the bed over her, holding her captive between his knees. With his other hand, he reached for the front of her nightshirt, tearing it open in a single motion that sent the buttons flying.

"Don't move." He released her wrists, leaving them in place over her head, and skimmed both hands over her shoulders and down her collarbones until he reached her breasts.

"Even better than I imagined." He framed her breasts with his hands and let out a curse. "You could make a man your slave with those."

She arched toward him. "Let's try it and see."

He used his thumbs to stroke her nipples, pushing the swollen tips upward until they reached an almost painful degree of hardness.

Speaking of hardness... she swallowed as he stopped to peel his jeans off, revealing an erection so long and thick she wondered if she'd be able to take it. His cock was as perfect as the rest of him, and she reached for it, wanting to feel him beneath her hand.

"Not yet." He moved her hand aside and tossed his jeans onto the floor. "I'm going to touch you first."

Emotion clouded her vision, lodging in her throat until she couldn't speak. The need in his eyes left her speechless. No one had ever looked at her that way, really *seeing* her. When had she ever felt so accepted, so wanted by anyone in her life? The fact that she could affect him so filled her with a rush of euphoria so strong that it frightened her.

Anyone who could rouse such powerful feelings in her was a dangerous individual. Such a person would hold her heart in his hand, having the ability to treat it gently or crush it to powder without a second glance.

But those revelations fled her mind when he took her nipple in his mouth, sucking the hard point, nipping at it with his teeth. Molten heat flooded her already throbbing pussy, making her long to be filled with him.

He moved to her other breast, licking the entire surface before zeroing in on the nipple. She squirmed beneath him, moaning as the pleasure increased with each flick of his tongue.

When he abandoned her breasts to lick a trail down her belly, she opened her eyes and peered down at him questioningly.

He edged down farther on the bed and braced her thighs apart with his hands before settling in between her legs.

Her heart thudded like a wrecking ball. He pinned her with his gaze.

"When I put my mouth on your pussy," he said, nuzzling her mound with his chin, "you're going to know that I own it."

And then his tongue touched her clit, and reality shattered around her like a glass house in a hailstorm.

\* \* \*

He'd never fought so hard for control in his life.

Normally Cameron had no problem lasting until he'd given his female partners more than their share of orgasmic bliss. But the minute he had Eden displayed naked before him, he'd felt like a sixteen year old in the backseat of a stolen car, trying not to come before getting to second base.

He needed his much-lauded stamina more than ever before. Her maiden voyage had to be a five-star, no holds barred, all out ecstatic event. He'd take nothing less than reducing her to a quivering heap of sated lust in his arms. But if he blew his load just from sucking on her way too luscious nipples, the party would be spoiled, to say the least.

And now his cock was engorged and pulsing like a second heart, pre-come leaking out slowly, insisting that he plunge himself into her tight sheath not now, but yesterday, dammit!

But he couldn't. Not until he'd tasted her and made her come against his mouth.

She let out a pained sigh and closed her eyes, settling her head back into the pillow. A sign of trust on her part, he knew -- she was giving him permission to have his way with her body, no questions asked.

And he intended to do just that.

Her pussy was hot, dripping wet with the sweet honey of her arousal. Her clit peeped out from beneath its hood, a deep dusky pink bud begging to be sucked into blissful hardness. Her inner lips were flushed, open and waiting for his shaft.

The mere thought made his cock contract. He lowered his head, parting her outer folds with his thumbs, exposing her completely.

She was pink and wet, beautiful and inviting. He knew then that he'd never get enough of her.

He planted a kiss on her mound and moved lower again, barely touching the tip of her clit with his tongue. Her body arched as if he'd fired a jolt of electricity through her.

"Easy, baby." He stroked her inner thigh. "We're just getting started."

She squinted at him through narrowed eyes. "Is this a form of torture?"

He chuckled. "Only if it's done right."

She closed her eyes again and gave him a sigh of mock impatience, eliciting a laugh of surprise from him. God, he was crazy about her.

And suddenly, he no longer cared what that might mean. She wasn't the vampire queen to him anymore. Somewhere along the line, she'd stopped being the bloodsucking princess in an ivory tower. Her life had become as important to him as his own, and protecting her had become his reason for living. She'd stopped being a vampire and become a woman.

The woman he loved.

He buried his face in her pussy, stroking her inner lips with his tongue, darting it into her tight opening before dragging it up and over her clit. He lapped at the tiny bud with precise up and down movements of his tongue.

Her legs trembled, threatening to clamp together around him. He pushed her thighs farther apart, bracing his hands on her quivering muscles to keep them open.

But her legs weren't the only thing shaking. The ground beneath them rumbled, as if the earth itself could feel her pleasure.

He paused to look at Eden. Her mouth formed an embarrassed half smile. "I guess my element is getting a little out of control."

"I've heard of making the earth move, but this is a first, even for me." He ran his hand over the smooth skin of her inner thigh. "Think you can handle a little more?"

"I'll try not to activate the Richter scale." She rolled her hips against the bed.

"Same here." He let out a deep laugh and bent back down to take her sweet clit into his mouth and suck it.

The chain of broken moans coming from her let him know that he was on the right track. He rolled her clit with his tongue, sucking it between his lips, wetting it with his mouth. The tiny bud twitched and grew perceptibly harder with each passing second.

Carefully, he slid his index finger into her slick core. She arched her back, a cry sounding from her throat.

She was wet but oh, so tight. The thought of that silken heat squeezing his cock made his balls tighten with anticipation. But she needed a little more time to be ready.

He moved over her, keeping his finger inside her as he supported his weight with his other arm. He sought her lips, a scalding fire of hunger burning within him. Nothing short of possessing her completely would satisfy him, and he claimed her lips with a drugged desire to drink her in completely.

He withdrew his finger slowly, and with equal deliberation slid it back into her, this time making sure to caress the sensitive area on the upper wall inside her. Her pussy contracted around his finger and she moaned against his lips.

"Open your eyes." He thrust his finger back into her, stroking her sweet spot. "I want you looking at me when you come."

She opened her eyes, the expression in them feral and savage. He ground his knuckle against her clit, rubbing her g-spot as he watched a flush of hot color rising in her face.

Her pussy clamped down around his finger with the first spasm of her climax, contracting around it with violent force. He could feel her orgasm swelling through her entire body like the tide crashing into the shore.

He continued stroking her g-spot with his finger until the final aftershocks passed, then withdrew it, licking her sweet taste from his hand as he moved back to kneel between her legs.

She looked like a woman possessed, her black hair fanned out on the pillow, her face flushed. Her body glowed with a sheen of sweat, and her eyes reminded him of a cat in heat.

"Now," she said in a shaky voice, reaching for his cock. She grasped it, stroking it in an unpracticed motion but one guaranteed to make him lose it if she didn't stop. She tried to guide him inside her, lifting her hips from the bed in an invitation.

"Not yet." He gently moved her hand away from his cock, even though he wanted to whimper at the loss of sensation. "We'll have plenty of time for that later." He pushed her legs apart, carefully sliding two fingers inside her. They went in easily, and he moved them inside her still quivering channel, trying to ready her body as much as possible.

He wanted to be inside her more than he wanted his next breath.

"There's no way to do this without it hurting a little."

Cameron's voice came to her through the fog of her senses. Eden forced herself to focus on his words.

Did he honestly think she cared about pain? All she wanted was to feel him inside her, to sate herself with everything his body could give her. What was a little pain compared to finally making love to the only man she'd ever wanted?

He ran his hands over her thighs. "Don't tense up. Try to relax."

"How did you know I'd never done this before?" She made an effort to unclench every muscle in her body.

"My awesome sexual mojo has a sixth sense about these things." He wrapped his hand around the base of his cock. Her stomach rolled over with a combination of nerves and anticipation.

"Sit up a little so you can see." He placed the swollen, wet head of his cock at her entrance. "Watch me going inside you."

She propped up on her elbows. Inch by inch, he fought against her tightness until his shaft was halfway inside her.

If there had ever been anything more erotic than the sight of his hard length disappearing into her, she couldn't imagine it. And the feel of it... the heat of his cock pulsed inside her. She could feel the tapering curve of the head, the warmth of his body so close to hers.

"Almost there." His voice revealed the strain of taking it so slow. He reached down, parting her legs further than she knew they could go, and then braced himself, breaching her pussy even more.

She could feel her body stretching, her inner walls adjusting to the invasion. It wasn't painful, really... just new, like using a long dormant muscle.

"Put your legs around me." He let out a shuddering breath.

She wrapped her legs around the hard planes of his ass, and felt him slide home, until he was all the way inside her.

"How does it feel?" He rocked his hips slightly.

She could feel her inner walls tightening around him. "Full... hot." She gasped. Having him inside her was beyond words, beyond completion.

He rocked his hips again. "God, you feel so good." He eased back slightly. "So wet."

She moved her hips at counterpoint with him. "Does it always feel this good?" She couldn't control her voice or her breathing, or the shaking in her limbs. She couldn't do anything but feel the bliss he gave her.

He backed slowly out of her, until only the head of his cock remained inside her. She looked down at his shaft, glistening wet from her. Then he worked his way back inside, until he was seated balls deep in her.

She gave up trying to watch. She fell back on the bed and closed her eyes, letting sensation take over. When he pulled out again, this time she let her hips rise to meet his answering thrust.

They found the perfect rhythm, his cock slowly entering her and withdrawing, heightening the tension inside her with every thrust. He was so slow, so precise in his movements that she wanted to cry out from the erotic torment of it. Her clit pounded, her nipples ached. Her entire body responded to him like an instrument being tuned by a maestro.

Then he quickened the pace, moving into her faster, taking time to press against her clit with every thrust. Instinct guided her, and her hips rose and fell in time with his grinding assault on her pussy.

Sweat ran down his body, and she could feel her pussy leaking wetness down her thighs. His cock seemed to swell inside her, filling her even fuller. She reached down to touch it on the outstroke, and he swore.

She looked up, her gaze locking onto his. He stared into her eyes, driving his cock even harder into her, then stopped to grind his pelvis against her clit. The combination sent her flying over the edge.

Her second orgasm was stronger than the first. She came, her pussy contracting around his cock, milking it. She ran her nails down the bed, crying out in sheer euphoria as her climax claimed her, all the way from her burning nipples to her throbbing clit.

He stilled himself inside her until the tremors had passed, then slowly withdrew. She looked at him, amazed to see him still erect.

She suddenly felt like a failure. "You didn't come."

He stroked the head of his cock, working her moisture over his shaft. "I'm not done with you yet." His breath came in gasps as he rolled her over onto her stomach. He climbed off the bed and stood by the edge, pulling her down to him.

He entered her from behind, his cock sliding in easily. She threw her head back and moaned.

Had anything ever felt better than this?

## Chapter 10

Cameron groaned as his shaft sank into Eden's slick pussy. The sight of her backside before him was almost more than he could take. That combined with the scorching heat of her shuddering core made his already tight balls ache with the need to come.

But he wanted to savor this, and taking her from behind would give him the chance to go as deeply inside her as possible.

He withdrew his cock and gripped her hips, steadying himself to thrust back in. She slammed her hips back, meeting him.

Her strangled cry made his cock jerk inside her. He grabbed her hair and pushed her forward, wanting her breasts against the bed so that her nipples would drag the covers with every thrust.

She was so wet that he could pump into her with quick, short movements. The angle of her body allowed for penetration so deep, he felt as if he could touch the very heart of her.

Knowing he was painfully on the edge, he reached around and found her clit. He rubbed it with steady strokes as he pumped into her.

God, had he ever felt like this before? Words seemed flimsy, mere letters and syllables attached to feelings too powerful to describe. What he felt for her was beyond articulation, too vast for human vocabulary.

He'd taken possession of her body, and she'd taken possession of his soul.

He rolled her clitoris between two fingers, thrusting slow and deep, letting the fluttering of her inner walls bring him over the edge. When she came, he lost all control. His cock contracted and his entire body jolted as orgasm shook him. His come spurted

deep inside her, filling her with its warmth. The sensation of completion overwhelmed him. This was the kind of contentment he'd never imagined he could have.

Shaking his head, he slowly pulled his sensitive shaft out of her. His knees buckled and he sank to the floor, gasping for breath. "Eden..."

She propped up on her elbows, her brow furrowing. "What is it?"

"You sure you were a virgin until tonight?" He rose up on his knees to look at her.

"Positive." She looked at him with a bemused expression. "Why?"

"You don't make love like an amateur, that's why." He rested his face against her inner thigh. "If they ever add a sexual category to the Olympics, I think you'll have yourself a gold medal."

"I didn't think I'd be very good at it." She leaned back and averted her eyes. "I never saw myself as being sexy or anything."

He gaped at her. "Why the hell not?"

She shrugged, still avoiding eye contact. "It's a fat girl thing."

A fat girl thing? Mother of fuck. The woman looked like the patron goddess of debauchery and she thought she wasn't sexy? "I'll let you in on a little secret." He propped his chin on her thigh.

"What?" She finally looked at him.

"The first time I saw you, I was expecting some ice queen vampire type, like Melaina." A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I couldn't believe my eyes when this totally gorgeous girl turned out to be the infamous Eden."

She smirked. "You're trying really hard to get the pillow talk thing right, I'll give you that much."

"Hey." He nudged her thigh. "This isn't pillow talk. I almost turned down the job because I knew I'd be too distracted by you to keep it professional." He looked at her, naked and disheveled on the bed in front of him. "Obviously, I was right about that part."

She frowned. "Are you sorry you took the job?"

"No," he answered emphatically. "And I'm not sorry about tonight either." He punctuated his words with a kiss on her thigh.

"Mmm..." She fell back onto the bed. "Why don't you work your way up?"

"Sounds like a plan." He planted a line of kisses up her thigh, over the curve of her hip, and across the roundness of her belly. Feeling his blood rushing lower in his body, he rejoined her on the bed, pulling her flush against him.

There were a thousand things he wanted to say to her, but they all lodged in his throat when she looked into his eyes. The only thing he could do was kiss her, letting his body tell her how he felt about her.

Her mouth was warm and inviting, and he slid his tongue between her lips gratefully, slaking his thirst for her like a man in the desert who'd finally found an oasis. Her breasts were cushioned against his chest, and when she draped one leg over his hip, it was like being engulfed by softness.

He let his hands roam her body, exploring every lush curve, every secret place. His fingers delved between her legs, feeling the gush of liquid heat there. He went hard again instantly, his need echoing hers.

He rolled her onto her back, and supporting himself with one arm, guided his cock back into her.

The heated urgency had eased enough for him to hold himself still, feeling her around him, the pulsating warmth of her. Each breath brought their bodies together, and he shifted his weight to his elbows, lacing his fingers through hers even as he began to thrust into her.

She brought her knees up, allowing him to go so deep inside her that he couldn't tell where he left off and she began. The barriers between her flesh and his seemed to dissolve until they were a single being, bound together in mind-altering pleasure.

Something brushed his back and he opened his eyes. Rose petals of the deepest and most velvety red framed Eden's face on the pillow. They rained down from the ceiling, drifting like ruby colored feathers to land on the bed and the carpet.

"Element of earth," she gasped. "Remember?"

The heady fragrance of roses began to fill the room as the petals collected on the bed like red snow. Soon they were making love on a bed of rose petals. Mounds of petals covered the floor like sand dunes.

It was pure sensual overload. She was so wet he could barely stay inside her, and her orgasmic cries made it impossible for him to keep it slow. Lost in the scent of roses and the feel of her hips undulating beneath him, he drove into her.

She responded in kind, pushing her hips up to meet his thrusts. When she reached down to clutch his backside, whispering in his ear to go deeper, he had to pull back.

She made a sound of protest when he climbed off the bed. But when he pulled her to the edge and parted her legs, she sighed with pleasure.

He plunged back into her, her tight pussy milking his cock. When she squeezed her inner walls around his shaft, his last shred of control shattered, and he put his hands beneath her ass, lifting her hips and pounding her pussy like a jackhammer.

The bedsprings squeaked with every motion, and Eden's body shook from head to toe. Sweat ran between her breasts, and wetness seeped from her pussy down her legs. She thrashed on the bed before him, tremors running down her legs as her inner chamber spasmed around his painfully swollen cock.

Fractured moans sounded deep in his throat, and her keening cry joined with it, making a sound as primal as anything heard in the most savage jungle. He slammed into her again and again, feeling his balls tighten, knowing his orgasm was imminent and wanting her to come when he did.

He lifted her backside higher and she let out a sob when he ground himself against her clit. She reached down to touch him, and the feel of her fingers on his cock sent him flying. He exploded, his come shooting into her with contractions so powerful that he thought he might see God.

He sank to the floor, pulling her with him until they landed on a perfumed pillow of rose petals, leaving him with the feeling that he could die right then and his life would've all been worth it.

\* \* \*

"I need to go out later and get some Vlad's for you." Cameron ran his hand over her hip, his voice groggy. "Not to mention some rations for a meal, in case we ever decide to leave the bedroom again."

Eden sighed and wrapped herself around the man beside her. She felt boneless, warm and blissful. "You don't have to do that. Stay here and sleep."

He turned slightly to look at her. "After that, you probably need to feed worse than ever."

She bit her bottom lip. "Not exactly."

He shot her a look. "Care to explain?"

She averted her gaze. "We sort of... had a tantric exchange."

"Meaning?"

She cringed. "I'd always heard that it was possible to feed through sex, but..." She squirmed against him. "Tonight I got to test the theory."

"And it's true?"

"It's *way* true." She watched as he flopped back onto the floor.

"So not only am I a good lay, I'm also a tasty snack?" He stared up at the ceiling.

"Let's just say that I'm satisfied, in more ways than one." She exhaled, studying his grim expression. "This really bothers you, doesn't it?"

He rubbed a rose petal between his fingers. "It would, if it were anyone but you."

She felt the magic of their intimacy slipping through her fingers like sand. "You offered to let me feed from your energy, remember?"

"Yeah," he chuckled, "but I didn't think it would work."

It was her turn to sit up. "So you just waltzed in here tonight with your little bullshit offer to let me feed on you, trying to do *what*, exactly?"

His mouth turned up in a half-smile. "Any excuse to get you to put your hands all over me would've done. I was so tired of walking around with a massive hard-on that I would've let you tap a vein at that point, just to touch you."

"But in retrospect," she continued, "you're a little icked out at the idea of a vampire munching your mojo?"

"You're not really a vampire, though." He dropped the rose petal, and she watched it drift to the floor.

"Is that what you're telling yourself?" Her chest tightened as she stared down at him. "If you can convince yourself that I'm not a *real* vampire, it makes it more palatable for you to get naked with me?"

"There's nothing unpalatable about getting you naked," he drawled. "And you're a dhampire. *Not* a vampire. Case closed."

"But what if I was?"

"You're not." He looked at her, annoyance crossing his face. "Besides, it's not like you're just some random dhampire feeding on me. I have... feelings for you."

"Feelings?" That stung. "Wow, big confession there, stud."

"I don't like discussing my... feelings." He made a pained face.

Good thing she hadn't blurted out an admission of love in the heat of passion. Huffing out a breath, she folded her arms over her knees and turned away from him. "Why do you hate vampires so much, other than an irrational prejudice on your part?"

Silence pressed itself into the space between them. When he finally spoke, it was in a voice more subdued than anything she'd heard from him. "A vampire killed someone I love."

The tightness in her chest expanded. "Who was it?"

He paused for a heartbeat. "My son."

Her throat felt as if it were collapsing with the weight of sudden sorrow. "What happened?"

He lifted a handful of rose petals from the floor. "I was at Quantico. There was a girl... a waitress at the diner where I used to go, off the base." He let the petals fall to the floor one by one. "I was lonely. About two months into it, she told me she was pregnant."

She kept silent, overwhelmed with the weight of his grief.

"We got married and Sammy was born. I wasn't in love with Brenda, but I cared about her. I thought we could make a go of it, you know, be a real family for our son." He raked his fingers through the petals beside him. "And we did, for a while. I wanted to bring them back to Texas, maybe move back here so he could grow up with Allison and my grandmother. Then..." He stopped, his voice thick with emotion.

"You don't have to go into it." She reached toward him tentatively, placing her hand on the side of his face.

"No, it's okay. I just haven't talked about this in a long time." He let out a long breath and seemed to regain his composure. "I'd never given any thoughts to vampires before. I knew about House Christabel there in Quantico, but..."

"They're a sister house of Minotaur," she said.

"Believe me, I know." He stretched his arms behind his head. "Brenda had taken Sammy to a fast food place for dinner that night while I was working, one of those with the indoor playground and... we never knew how the vampire got him. Brenda bent down to tie her shoe and when she looked up, Sammy wasn't on the slide anymore." He trailed off for a moment. "The vamp who took him was crazy. She'd been turned against her will, and wanted a child. She tried to turn Sammy... I guess she thought she'd be able to keep him a child forever. But she didn't know what she was doing and he didn't..."

Eden couldn't stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks.

"Everything fell apart then. I stayed drunk all the time and Brenda finally gave up on me. Not that I blame her. Without Sammy, there was nothing to hold us together anymore. The vamp who killed him met the dawn before we could track her down, so I didn't even get the satisfaction of seeing justice done. One day I was a father and a husband, and the next day, it was all gone."

He cleared his throat and went on. "I moved back to Texas and started training with the paranormal crimes unit in Fort Worth." He let out a bitter laugh. "The sergeant said he'd never seen anyone so driven. It became the focus of my life. I stopped drinking, I stopped feeling sorry for myself... I stopped everything but killing the

monsters who'd taken my son from me, until I went too far one day and killed without a warrant." His gaze stopped drifting around the room and settled on her. "And then I met you."

"And now what?" She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"We're together." He reached for her. "There's more to my life than revenge now."

"We're not all like that monster back in Quantico, or the ones that are after me, you know." She rested her cheek against his chest, listening to the pounding of his heart. "I know there are some evil vampires out there, but we're not all like that."

He gave her a look of doubt. "All I know is... if I save you, then in some small way, I've made up for what happened back in Quantico."

She didn't answer him with words. Instead, she rolled over on top of him, and gave him the comfort of her body, making love to him until sleep finally forced them to stop.

## Chapter 11

Cameron woke with a start. His hands were resting on something incredibly warm and soft, and the room was filled with the scent of flowers.

Then he remembered. He had his palms cupped over the swell of Eden's breasts, and they'd fallen asleep on the floor after a marathon lovemaking session.

He smiled, burying his face in her hair and inhaling the scent.

Something nagged at him. What had he forgotten?

The blood. She needed a case of Vlad's.

He eased away from Eden, careful not to wake her, and took his watch from the bedside table where it had landed during their hasty undressing of each other.

4:00 AM. Still two hours before dawn. He could go to the all-night liquor store, pick up a case of Vlad's, and have it back in case she wanted a bottle before she went under for the day.

He got to his feet quietly, taking a blanket from the bed and placing it over Eden's sleeping form. God, he felt so much for her that just watching her sleep made his heart ache.

He pulled on his jeans and went into the living room, grabbing a T-shirt from his bag. Within minutes he'd finished dressing, put on his weapons, and helped himself to a cold soda from the machine in the kitchen. He quickly scribbled a note on the little chalkboard hanging by the telephone, letting Eden know where he was going and that he'd be back soon.

One task to go, he told himself, stepping back into the bedroom. Sure enough, the automatic pistol sat on the bedside table where he'd placed it earlier. He quickly took a silver knife from the sheath on his right wrist, placing it beside the gun.

There was no reason to think anything would happen to her while he was gone. They were in small town Texas, where nothing *ever* happened, much less vampire warfare. But just to be on the safe side, he wanted her to be armed if she needed it.

He took his keys and stepped out into the garage, closing the door softly behind him. Soon he'd backed out of the garage, stopping to get out and close the overhead door.

Having secured the garage, he turned the SUV onto Orchard Lane and headed out into the dark Texas night.

\* \* \*

Eden rolled over sleepily, seeking Cameron with her hands. When his taut, warm body didn't materialize under her searching grasp, she opened her eyes with a start.

The room was empty, except for her and the dying embers in the fireplace. The blanket draped over her body told her that he'd been there. She stood up, wrapping the blanket around herself, and checked the bathroom.

Empty.

Wrapping the blanket tighter around her chest, she padded into the living room. His bag was still there, so he couldn't have gone far.

She made her way into the kitchen, sighing with relief when she saw his note on the chalkboard. He'd be back soon, and she could sleep the day away with the peace of mind he always gave her.

Humming to herself, she found some orange juice in the fridge. After having a glass, she wandered back into the bedroom, getting fresh underwear and a clean nightshirt from her bag. She had just enough time for a hot shower before Cameron got back.

As she stepped under the stinging spray, she couldn't stop humming, couldn't stop smiling. Just knowing he was coming back to her was enough to make her happier than she'd ever been.

\* \* \*

Cameron heard the door of Luther's Liquor & More shut behind him with a jangle of bells. Not exactly a gourmet supermarket, but he'd picked up a case of Vlad's for Eden -- the chocolate truffle flavor she seemed to prefer -- along with milk, eggs, and a loaf of bread. Limited provisions, but he'd made do with less before. He was pretty sure he'd be able to whip up toast and an omelet for two before the sun rose.

He clicked his remote to unlock the rear door of the Tahoe but stopped short when he reached the vehicle.

Every single tire had been slashed.

A thin coating of slime on the mirror told him that he'd likely had a visit from some Chupacabras. Turning on his heel, he ran back to the store at breakneck speed.

The sleepy-eyed clerk behind the counter looked up in surprise. "What seems to be the problem, son?"

Cameron rushed to the counter. "Someone slashed my tires."

The older man shook his head. "There's one all-night wrecker in town. You need me to make the call?"

Cameron plunked his bags down on the counter. "No, I need your fucking car keys. I've got to get back to my girlfriend right *now*."

"Now, son," the older man began, "I can't just hand over my truck so you can go see your lady friend..."

"You don't get it." Cameron took out his gun. "This is life or death. And unless you want this entire town to turn into a vampire bloodbath, you better close this rat hole of a store and take me to your truck this fucking minute."

The clerk put his hands in the air. "All right, son, no one needs to get hurt here."

Cameron's gut tightened as he led the man out of the store at gunpoint. He'd explain everything to the poor clerk once they were in the truck and rolling. He didn't have time to wait for a wrecker or a ride. He had to get to Eden before someone else did.

\* \* \*

Eden stepped out of the bathroom, towel drying her hair. The silk of her white nightshirt swirled around her legs, a sensation she'd never noticed before. Was this what love did for you -- heighten all of your senses, making you feel as if you'd never been so alive? She wanted to twirl around the room, giddy with happiness. She giggled, imagining Cameron walking in on her doing just that.

"I think he might find that very amusing."

"Me too," she answered. Then she opened her eyes.

She dropped the towel, a scream tearing itself from her throat as she backed into the bedroom wall behind her. The woman who had spoken to her in a clear, melodious voice sat on the edge of the bed, composed and watchful.

"Surely you've been expecting me, Eden." The woman lifted a hand to examine her nails. "You knew I'd catch up with you eventually."

"Who... and what..." Eden trailed off, silenced by terror.

"Oh, yes. Where are my manners?" The woman came to her feet, but not by any human means. One moment she was seated, then a split second later, her body unfolded itself to a standing position, like some perverse marionette. Eden swallowed back a rush of bile.

"I'm the Countess of Bathory." The woman glided toward her, floating rather than walking. "But those closest to me call me Elizabeth." She drew closer, so close that Eden could smell her -- a strange mix of reptile and lilacs.

"I do hope we're going to be close, Eden." The countess leered at her, baring fangs that looked more like something you'd see on a cobra than a vampire. "Very, very close."

\* \* \*

The Dodge pick-up truck roared down the highway. The old guy from the liquor store floored it.

"Son, if you'd just told me the whole story back at Luther's, you wouldn't have had to pull a gun on me." The clerk took a nervous drag from his cigarette and gave

Cameron a glance before turning his gaze back to the road. "Last thing I want is for some hellspawn vampire to kill your lady friend."

"Look, man, I'm sorry about the gun." Cameron clenched and unclenched his fists. Would they *never* get there? "It's just... I swore on my own life to protect her and..." He broke off, pounding the dashboard with the flat of his hand.

"Does this woman know you're in love with her?" The clerk turned off onto Main Street, nearly clipping a mailbox in the process.

Cameron slumped down against the seat. "I think she does, yeah."

"You mean you haven't told her?" The clerk looked at him.

"Not in so many words." Cameron couldn't hide the defensive note in his voice.

"Son, there's only one way to let a woman know you love her." The clerk shook his head. "You have to tell her. That means *words*."

"I'll tell her as soon as we get there." Cameron clenched his eyes shut and said a prayer to anyone who happened to be listening. "Once she's safe, I'll tell her until she can't take it anymore."

Once she was safe. Because she *had* to be all right. He couldn't lose the only woman he'd ever loved.

\* \* \*

"You're supposed to be dead." Eden inched away from the countess, hoping that her slow trek to the bedroom door would go unnoticed.

"A simple matter, really." The countess waved her deathly white hands in a dismissive gesture, looking at Eden with cold blue eyes. "I'd been moldering away in my grave inside that church in Hungary since 1614 when those delightful little scamps from House Minotaur decided to raise me up." She shrugged her narrow shoulders, making her icy blue gown move artfully around her petite form. "A witch did a little blood magic over my grave, and there I was, in the flesh." She smoothed her skirts. "You really underestimated me, dearest. I tracked your scent all the way from the place where you slaughtered my Chupacabras and followed you here. And so we meet, at last."

"My bodyguard will be back soon," Eden told her.

"No, dearest, I don't think he will." Elizabeth let out a snarling laugh. "My Chupacabras took care of his car. The slashed tires should slow him down nicely."

"You killed all those girls, didn't you?" Eden held her breath. If she could just get close enough to the fireplace, she could get the poker...

"They were mere distractions. Practice kills, if you will. But their blood made me even stronger. All the better to catch *you* with, dear Eden." The countess tossed her long white hair over her shoulder. "The vampires from House Minotaur despise you, you know. They resent the way you, a mere half-vampire, are trying to change our ancient ways with your synthetic blood and energy feeding." Her overly large, soulless blue eyes peered at Eden. "You can't make a snake into a lapdog."

"What does any of this have to do with you?" The poker was so close... if she could just keep the old hag talking...

"They brought me back to kill you. They knew they couldn't do it. What they didn't realize was how strong I'd be. Too strong for them to control." She grinned, showing her hideous fangs. "They can't put me back in my grave now. It's too late."

"So why did you kill those other girls?" Eden backed into the frame of the fireplace, her heart thudding in her throat.

"Surely my legend must be better known than *that*." She frowned. "I bathed in their blood. Hence the severed arteries." She ran her tongue over her bottom lip. "But what I truly crave is virgin blood." She hedged closer. "Minotaur staged that shootout at the club, trying to kill you before I could get my hands on you. They fear me. They thought if they killed you first, maybe I'd just go away." She threw back her head and cackled. "As if anything could make me lose my... desire for you. All those victims during my first lifetime couldn't compare to you."

She reached out, tracing a frigid finger over Eden's cheek. "I was put in solitary confinement until my death... over mere servant girls!" The countess sighed. "But you, Eden, are a different story. What could be more potent than the blood of a virgin dhampire?" She tilted her head, studying Eden's face. "And the daughter of Master

Cain? With your blood, I will be strong enough to rule the entire vampire world. You were worth waiting a few centuries for.”

“Too late.” Eden wrapped her hand around the handle of the poker. “I’m not a virgin anymore.”

She swung the poker out before the countess had time to react, striking the vampire so hard that the creature flew across the room.

Eden’s breath came in painful gasps. The countess lay on the floor, giving all appearances of being dead.

Trying to collect her ragged nerves, Eden backed her way toward the bedroom door, never taking her eyes off the countess.

The countess’ gaze rose. “Oh, Eden, you disappoint me so.”

In a motion so swift that even Eden’s dhampire vision couldn’t detect it, the countess grabbed the silver knife from the bedside table and threw it.

It was intended to be a strike to the heart, a killing blow. Eden dropped to the floor, watching her blood spurt out in a ruby torrent. The silver burned her chest like a fiery brand.

“You see, Eden.” The countess glided toward her, her head wound already healed. “I shall have my way with you yet.”

“Not if I send you to hell first,” Eden gasped. She was down to her last moments of consciousness -- she knew this beyond a doubt. Marshalling the last reserves of her power, she did something she’d never done before.

She called upon the earth to open. A gaping crack formed, taking the countess down into the fault line which Eden knew ran into the depths of the earth. She willed it to close again, hearing the crunching sound of the countess’ form being ground to a powder, and when she saw that it was done, she closed her eyes and surrendered to the darkness.

## Chapter 12

Cameron ran into the house, the clerk, whose name had turned out to be Bud, following a safe distance behind him.

At first nothing seemed amiss. But his gut knew better. Even as he approached the bedroom, he knew deep down what he'd find.

She was crumpled on the bedroom floor like a discarded doll. Blood pooled around her, and the handle of his silver knife stuck out of her chest, catching the overhead light.

"No." He sank to his knees beside her, oblivious to the blood soaking into his jeans. "No, Eden. Wake up."

Her eyes remained shut.

"Come on." He checked her wrist. Only a faint pulse.

"Bud, call a fucking ambulance! Tell them we have a dhampire with a knife in her chest." He squeezed her hand. "Don't die on me, not now." His voice broke, and suddenly every tear he'd never shed for his son, for all the sorrow in his life, began to fall. The old wounds reopened, combined with the gut-wrenching horror of losing this woman he'd come to love with emotions more powerful than anything he'd ever imagined.

"Just stay alive for me, all right?" He took the knife from the sheath on his left wrist. "Because I love you." He took the knife and made a cut on his left hand.

"Drink from me." He pressed the bleeding wound to her inert lips. "Take all the blood in my body if it will keep you here a minute longer."

She stirred, an almost imperceptible sign of life. He heard the sirens approaching at breakneck speed.

Bud had the door open and showed them the way. The paramedics burst into the bedroom. "Sir, you'll have to wait outside," one barked at him.

Cameron stood in the bedroom doorway, watching as they frantically but methodically checked her vitals. An oxygen mask was strapped to her face and an IV port inserted into her hand.

"Someone have the ER page Dr. Orloff and tell him we might need him." The female paramedic stepped away as they loaded Eden onto a stretcher. "Do you know if she has a living will?"

Cameron shook his head blankly. "I can make one call and find out."

"It would be best if you did that, sir." The paramedic glanced at Eden, who looked painfully pale and fragile. "That's why I had them page Dr. Orloff. We may have to bring her over."

At first, the words didn't register with him. Then the full meaning hit him.

If she approached certain death, they'd make a full-fledged undead vampire of her.

\* \* \*

One call to Mr. Charles had settled everything. Eden did in fact have a living will. It specified that she was to be brought over in the event of her impending death.

Mr. Charles faxed the paperwork to the hospital and assured Cameron he was on his way via helicopter. "I'm her power of attorney," the Englishman had explained during their brief phone call. "I need to be there for any event that should arise."

Cameron waited outside the hospital. When the rain began to fall after dawn, he continued to stand, letting it pour over him like a penance.

He'd failed her. He could never face her again.

The same way he'd failed Sammy, the same way he'd failed Brenda, the same way he'd failed the Slayer Squad.

He wasn't worthy of love, hers or anyone else's.

He stared up at the blacked over windows of the fourth floor. Paranormal ER, the paramedics had told him. The nurse had given him permission to wait outside the ER in the hallway. But he couldn't.

He couldn't. He couldn't face the loathing she'd surely have for him if she survived this.

He stood in the rain until he couldn't tell whether the wetness on his cheeks came from the clouds or from his tears.

\* \* \*

"She's asking for you." Mr. Charles placed a hand on Cameron's shoulder.

He woke with a start. Somehow he'd fallen asleep on a bench outside the county hospital. The rain had stopped and day had come and gone, leaving the night to surround them again.

He took the paper cup of steaming coffee Mr. Charles offered him, clinging to its warmth. "She's not dead?"

"No." Mr. Charles shook his head. "I'm not at liberty to divulge more than that. She insists upon telling you everything herself."

Cameron stood up, stretching his aching muscles. Warring emotions tore through him. He wanted to see her so much it hurt, but he feared facing her after he'd failed to save her from the attack.

But he owed her that much. If she wanted to curse him and send him packing, the least he could do was to honor what they'd shared by taking it like a man.

He thanked Mr. Charles and went into the hospital, wondering if they had a doctor on staff who could stitch his soul back together.

\* \* \*

She looked more like herself, he realized, pausing in the doorway of her small hospital room.

The white hospital gown clung to her curvy form, and her jet black hair fell to her shoulders, mussed and limp. She was pale, almost deathly so. But still beautiful enough to rip at what remained of his heart.

"I didn't know if you'd come." She regarded him with a troubled expression.

He sat down in the chair beside her bed. "I didn't know if I would either, honestly." He looked at the IV in her hand. *He'd* put it there. *He'd* done this to her.

"Let's make this as quick and painless as possible for both of us." She raised her hand, and his spine stiffened in anticipation of her touch. But she merely brought it up to rest on the bedrail. "I know how you feel about vampires, and I understand why you feel that way." She closed her eyes, pain in her face. "If you want to walk out right now and never look back, I won't try to make you stay." She gripped the rail. "The evil bitch that brought this hell on me is dead and gone forever, you know."

He nodded. "Mr. Charles told me everything. They've got half of House Minotaur in custody back home, even as we speak."

She winced. "You don't owe me anything. I'll see to it that you're paid in full, and give you a good recommendation for your next job."

He gaped at her. "How can you recommend me for anything after the way I let you down?" He slumped forward in the chair, burying his face in his hands. "I don't know how you can even stand the sight of me."

A soft laugh bubbled from her lips. "Maybe because I love you, you arrogant jackass."

He looked up, not daring to hope. "You don't mean that. It's the meds talking."

She raised her eyebrows at him in her old sarcastic expression. "I *am* on a lot of meds, I'll give that to you." She finally reached out for him. "But I do love you."

He took her hand in both of his, intending to hold onto her for as long as he could. "Look, I know I fucked this thing up to kingdom come and back..."

"You did no such thing," she interrupted.

"Let me finish." He pressed her hand between his. "If you can forgive me and take me back, I promise I'll never let you down again." He let out a breath he hadn't been aware of holding. "God, Eden, I love you so much. When I found you back at the house and thought I'd lost you..." His voice went hoarse.

"But that's over now." She pulled her hand from his to stroke his face. "The wicked bitch is dead, and we can go home. Maybe we can even try living like normal people this time."

He caught her hand with his and brought it to his lips, imagining the moment when she'd be well enough for him to kiss her from head to toe. "I don't think the two of us ever have much chance of being normal." He managed a faint smile. "At least I don't have to worry so much about someone killing you, now that you're a full fledged vampire."

"But I'm not. I'm still a dhampire. Apparently my father's blood made me a little harder to kill than we'd thought. Besides, would I need all these tubes and wires if I'd become the immortal undead?" She pulled back, surprise etched over her face. "You really thought they brought me over?"

"You mean they didn't?" His tone of shock matched hers.

It was her turn to stare at him. "You came up here thinking they'd brought me over, and told me you love me anyway?"

He nodded slowly.

"No wonder I love you." She moved over. "Put down the rail and get in beside me." She held out her arms for him.

He lowered the bedrail and climbed in gratefully beside her, letting her hold him.

Cameron had finally come home.

## **Epilogue**

### **Dracula's Ball A Major Success by Maria Vega Houston Vampire Press**

Houston's first time in almost a century to host the world-famous Dracula's Ball was a roaring success, said planning committee co-chair Jade Simon-D'Aria.

"We had a wonderful turnout," D'Aria told the Houston Vampire Press. "The death of the vampire killer and the capture of her accomplices made it a much more enjoyable experience for everyone."

Agent Katya Stern was given an award from the Texas Slayer Squad during a special ceremony, bringing a difficult chapter of vampire history to a close.

The highlight of the ball, however, was the coronation of Eden Lockhart as the new Empress of the Gulf Coast Court.

A surprise came during the festivities when Eden's head of security, Cameron Zane of Houston, proposed to the new empress.

She said yes.

## **Alecia Monaco**

Alecia Monaco lives in a Gothic castle on the top of a remote mountain, where she's served by her retinue of vampire loves slaves and...

Oh, whatever. Alecia actually resides rather happily in Houston with her family and her three fur daughters (one feline, two canine). She manages to live out her wildest fantasies of sexy night creatures in her fiction, and hopes her stories have fulfilled a few of your fantasies as well.

When she's not churning out her latest heartbreaking work of staggering genius, she enjoys eating too much, napping, and playing Mah Jongg. She's also obsessed with the color pink and is a rather hopeless girlie girl.

Alecia loves to hear from readers. You can write to her at [AleciaMonaco@aol.com](mailto:AleciaMonaco@aol.com) or visit her site at [www.aleciamonaco.com](http://www.aleciamonaco.com). She looks forward to hearing from you soon!