



DARK LULLABY

...Ashara just barely caught a glimpse of the wicked fangs before they were in her neck. She felt an odd rapture, then a disconcerting swoon to weakness. She had to lie down. Her sister laid her gently upon the hardwood floor. The parlour piano was a giant monolith in her eyes—its glossy black wood had turned to stone. Her slowing heart felt as hard as granite, too. She cared about nothing...not even her own life.

“I’ve made some new friends,” said Zariaz, kneeling at Ashara’s side. She chuckled. “They want to meet you.” Ashara felt her sister’s hand at the back of her neck and behind her knees. With an easy strength, she lifted her twin and made her way up the stairs. They were going to Mother’s room.

Ashara’s vision was dimming, but she saw Marileta lying on the bed, her throat slashed open. Beside her, sitting cross-legged on the mattress, was a pale-skinned, dark-haired man dressed all in black.

“What have you done?” Zariaz asked, a note of thin panic rising in her voice.

“I finished her for you,” the man replied, licking his lips. “She sustained you for a few days, but she couldn’t last forever. You will have to learn to hunt, my child.”

PRAISE FOR DARK LULLABY

“In the year of the three J’s: Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison, the music industry is rocked by the vampire, Ashara, and her lover, Liam Archer, lead singer of Darkside. Follow their perilous journey from California to Portugal, complicated by Ashara’s evil twin sister. Why does Zariaz plot against her? And to what end? If you love rock-n-roll intrigue, gothic imagery, and vampires, *Dark Lullaby* is a must-read—and author Staci Layne Wilson delivers the goods!”

—T. M. Gray
Author of *Feast of Faust*

“Staci Layne Wilson has a gift for rich storytelling and a captivating imagination. *Dark Lullaby* draws the reader into her unique vampire world and never lets go!”

—Scarlett Dean
Author of *Unfinished Business*

“...A daring, colorful, and compelling horror story that honors the traditional paranormal rules and adds a dash of romance. Staci Layne Wilson writes sexy, believable characters, and slams out cliff-hanging suspense that keeps the pages turning well into the night. Wilson’s provocative prose is vibrant, engaging and sharp as a vampire’s fang.”

—L. M. Parkinson
Author of *Teeth*

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Rock & Roll Fantasy

DARK LULLABY

BY

STACI LAYNE WILSON

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

DARK LULLABY
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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Copyright © 2003 by Staci Layne Wilson
ISBN 1-59279-161-1

Cover © 2003 Photo by Enzo Giobbé, Back Cover art by Shelly Firsich, Cover design by Staci Layne Wilson

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CHAPTER 1

Hello, I Love You

He was dead.

Ashara couldn't believe it—he'd been just twenty-seven, vibrant and ready to take the world by storm with his visions of film-making and the creation of fresh, new music. He'd gone to Paris with his fiancée, and by all accounts he was happy, revitalized, rested and ready to come home to California a new man.

Ashara thought back to the first time she'd seen Jim Morrison, lead singer of The Doors. It was 1967, just four years previously, at the Whiskey A-Go-Go. She thought he was the most beautiful mortal she had even seen—she took dozens of photos of just him. When she turned the prints in to her editor, he'd been livid. Where was the rest of the band? He practically threw the photos back in her face.

She chuckled at the memory. Of course, her photos of Morrison had been published all over the world, made into posters, put into books—

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her then-editor seriously regretted his error and tried to get her back. But she found freelancing to be, well...freer.

She couldn't really call herself a close friend of Morrison's, but she'd spent a lot of time with him—behind the camera and having a drink or two with him. She was well aware of his problem with alcohol, and she remembered thinking that maybe going to Paris to dry out—where wine was served with breakfast, lunch, and dinner—wasn't such a great idea. She picked up the postcard she'd stuck to her mirror. The Notre Dame gargoyles leered from the front, and on the back was Morrison's confident scrawl. He certainly *seemed* happy, drug-free, and in command of himself.

How could he have died less than a week after mailing that?

The sudden deaths of mortals was something to which Ashara had grown accustomed over the past two centuries. And yet, it was like someone who kept cats and dogs, knowing they'd live only ten or fifteen years at the most—she still mourned their passing.

She liked mortals. They made her laugh, and they reminded her of what it was like to be alive and vulnerable. She had to be careful not to get *too* casual, though. When Morrison had told her about his pagan marriage to a practicing witch, about the handfasting ceremony and the spilling of the blood, she'd almost betrayed herself. Her fangs extended as she listened to his description of drinking his lover's hot, salty blood and she very nearly lost it.

That reminded her...Ashara was thirsty. She'd been awake for nearly an hour and was feeling quite weak.

* * *

A gentle breeze cooled the summer night, and Ashara drove her '65 Mustang with the top down. The wind ruffled her thick, wavy, cinnamon-colored hair as she drove, and the flowing sleeves of her silky blouse tickled her arms. It was a gorgeous night, and she longed to enjoy it...but first, she had to find breakfast.

It wasn't always easy. Ashara was finicky. If at all possible, she

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preferred to drink from someone who was already at death's door. But their blood wasn't very hearty...oftentimes, she had to take two elderly persons if she was to have a decent night. Evildoers were a second favorite on the menu.

The boulevard was fairly busy, even though it was a weeknight. She turned onto a side street, toward a bad neighborhood she'd come to know well. It wasn't very far from her Spanish-style villa in the Hollywood Hills, and she came here to hunt quite often. Evildoers were all too easy to find.

Then she saw him—a strapping, stocky young man, clad in worn jeans and white T-shirt with rolled-up short sleeves. His bulging biceps sported what she had come to recognize as prison tattoos. He cruised the sidewalk alone, and Ashara could feel the menace emanating from him. He was looking for trouble.

"You've found it, honey," she whispered as she slowed the car and tailed him.

It didn't take long for him to turn to see who was following him. He quickened his pace.

Ashara gently pressed her bare foot on the gas pedal. "Hey, slow down. I just want to talk to you for a minute. Aren't you Chico?" Ashara had seen the tattoo bearing his name, but he obviously wasn't quick enough to figure that out.

He slowed. "Yeah. Who are you?"

"My name is really not important. I—"

"Hey, I know you!" He peered at her in the illumination from the weak street lamp. "You're this month's Angel. Yeah," he went on. "I seen you in *Heavenly Bodies*."

Heavenly Bodies magazine? Ashara figured he had her mixed up with some centerfold. That was fine, whatever worked for him. Now all she had to do was get him to come closer. Once she could establish eye contact, she would have him. Mortals were so easy to mesmerize, particularly the males. She'd heard of vampires drinking from other

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vampires, and figured the trance couldn't be worked upon them, but she'd never tried that. The thought repulsed her—she'd hated nearly every vampire she had ever met, and the idea of taking nourishment from one was unthinkable.

"You saw me in the magazine?" she tittered. "Did you like what you saw?"

Obviously wary, Chico stepped off the curb and approached the Mustang.

Ashara raised her shades and set them gently on top of her head. He gasped. She knew he was admiring the intensity of her eyes, knew he could see the glow—and imagined he thought it was love he saw in them. He had no choice but to come to her. He walked slowly, as if through soft, hot honey.

Ashara leaned over and opened the passenger door. Chico got in, and slid his body close to her. Not a word was spoken. She made a U-turn and headed back for the Hollywood Hills, to the outskirts of the old Errol Flynn estate, where it was quiet, dark and private.

A few minutes later, they were parked at the top of the hill, the lights of L.A. sparkling like faraway jewels below them. Chico was still in a trance, but he seemed fairly alert. Ashara could still feel the pain, hate, and menace pulsating in his aura. It whetted her appetite, like the smell of curries and spices once had.

It had been a long time since she'd eaten food. She still could if she wanted to, but her body couldn't easily digest it, and she took no pleasure in it anyway. Ashara thought back to her childhood in Vienna. In the late 1700s there wasn't much variety in foods for most people, but her father was of noble blood and therefore had access to imported sweets and spices which most did not.

Her mother, his dusky-skinned mistress, loved his visits for he would bring treats for Ashara and her twin sister, Zariaz. Even the finest of West Indies delicacies, her mother said, couldn't compare with what Erik brought home. Mother's favorites were the Bavarian pastries.

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Ashara shook her head, as if to clear the thoughts. She hadn't thought about her mortal life in decades. Not since she'd last seen her sister.

Ashara's veins were starting to constrict, and the pain was getting to her. She cuddled up to Chico, breathing in his slightly salty smell. Her canine teeth grew and elongated. She felt the tips with her tongue. She could taste the venom starting to drip. She was so thirsty, so ready to drink the elixir of everlasting life. A lonely life, yes. A half-life, yes. But it was life and like any living thing, it was her instinct and her drive to keep it.

She placed her full lips against his neck and he moaned softly. She felt his hand on her shoulder. Was he trying to pull her closer to him or push her away? It didn't matter. She opened her mouth and pressed, her fangs piercing his jugular vein. It was ropy and not easy to penetrate, but ages of practice had honed her skill. She hadn't lost any prey in over fifty years now. Ashara closed her lips around the twin puncture wounds and suckled like a baby at the breast.

Chico's bloodstream had taken the paralyzing venom and sent it straight to his brain. He was unable to move, and Ashara knew the realization alarmed him. But only for a moment. Slowly, a rapture like none other would take him over. It would be like sex, but with none of the baggage. Like floating on an orgasmic feather of ecstasy. Then he would see stars burst before him, his vision would dim and there would be nothing but bliss.

Ashara's heart pounded with the young man's life-blood coursing through it. She drew back, and licked her lips. Her heart only beat that hard at first, just after a feeding. It would slow over the course of the night, and then at dawn it would inevitably stop.

It was hard; being born, living, and then dying, every single night. But the drive to live was stronger than her fatigue. Ashara wondered what drove her kind—for mortal beings, whether they actually reproduced or not, the desire to pass their genes on was what kept them

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going. Her own womb was dead.

But I saw a vampire child. The memory flickered like a film in a nickelodeon. It was in the 1920s, at a speakeasy. She'd caught just a glimpse of the little fangs as he nursed from his mother in a back room. Then the mother looked up at Ashara and grinned. There was no mistaking the curved, venomous teeth of a vampire. Ever since then, she'd wondered if *she* could give birth. But why would she want to? Why would she want to make another vampire?

She'd only done it once before, making one as she had been made, and that had been enough. She shut that thought from her mind. Compartmentalizing. Making chambers. She had so many; her brain had to be running out of rooms.

Chico slumped against her, and she heard the last of his air passing from his slack mouth. He sounded like a balloon with a slow leak, and then he gave a final wheezing hiss. Ashara reached across the body, and turned the handle to the passenger door of the car. She gave Chico a small shove, and he fell to the dirt with a soft thud.

Ashara took a deep breath. This was always the hard part. She reached over and popped the glove box open. She got her switchblade and stepped out of the car. Her bare feet, zinging with sensation, felt each tiny pebble, each shard of old glass and each grain of dirt as if they were knife-edge sharp. She tiptoed to the other side of her car, and she knelt beside Chico's carelessly tossed corpse.

She felt no more pity for him than he had when he'd eaten a hamburger for dinner earlier that evening, but she did feel about like he would if he'd had to slaughter the cow himself. Even after all these years, she was still a tad squeamish and found the killing difficult. And having to cover it up as if she were a criminal, not just a thirsty vampire, that was harder still.

She pressed the button and the steel blade sprang forth like the phallus of an ardent lover...she used it as such, plunging the blade deep into Chico's neck again and again, covering all evidence of her lethal

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bite.

To the police, Chico would look like just another victim of the harsh street life.

* * *

“Hey, I’m only an hour late,” Ashara said with a hopefully disarming grin.

She hated to be late for a job. She shouldn’t have waited ’til so late to feed, but Chico had been worth the delay. She hadn’t drunk such vibrant, thick blood in months. And there had been a trace of heroin in it, which made her feel even more euphoric. That was one of the pluses of being dead—no worries about things that would harm a living body. No cares, no conscience...were those pluses, too?

“True, only an hour,” said the long-and-stringy-haired young man at the studio door. “It’s not like rock-n-roll is a day job.” The flunky opened the door wide and grinned, showing crooked, discolored teeth. “The band is in Studio B.”

Ashara made her way down the long, shadowy hallway. She knew exactly where Studio B was. She’d photographed Iron Butterfly there a few years back. That was her first big break as a photojournalist. She’d followed them around for almost five months, shooting them in the studio, onstage, and just messing around. Her story on the band had won the Music Journalist Award in 1968. Whenever someone brought it up, she liked to quote Frank Zappa, who said, “Rock-and-roll journalism is writers who can’t write, writing about musicians who can’t play music, for readers who can’t read.” Of course she didn’t really believe that, but it was good cocktail party banter.

She wondered if Darkside was going to be another flower-power psychedelia band, or—heaven forbid—a Monkees rip-off. No, with a name like Darkside, they had to be serious. Ashara liked serious music.

She had liked it even before she’d met Ludwig Von Beethoven and become his lover in 1811. He called her his “immortal beloved.” He was the only living soul she’d ever fallen so deeply, completely in love

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with. But that was a long, long time ago. She wondered why she was so melancholy tonight...probably Morrison haunting her, she thought with a slight smile. He would.

She listened outside the door for a moment, then knocked and turned the handle. She stepped inside. The engineer and producer were at the mixing board, listening with headphones. The band and a scantily clad young woman had flopped themselves down wherever there was a comfortable spot. The coffee table by the threadbare sofa was strewn with magazines, beer cans, ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts and roaches, and half-empty bags of pretzels and potato chips.

No one noticed Ashara.

That was unusual. Even in the preening world of rock, with its gorgeous groupies and prettier-still rock stars, Ashara was a standout. She had the hard-planed Germanic bone structure of her father, and the dark eyes, lush lips and wild hair of her Jamaican mother. She was tall, with long legs, slim, boyish hips, and a small but full bosom. She was taller still in her platform shoes, and the tight, bellbottom Levi's, faded just so, and topped with a silky peasant blouse, should have made her even more noticeable.

"Ah-hem," she cleared her throat. A couple of pairs of bleary eyes cast a glance her way. "I'm Ash Konrad, the photographer."

"Hey, haven't I seen you someplace before?" asked one of the musicians, eyes widening at the sight of her, as he half-rose from his chair.

"Yeah. That's why I don't go there anymore," she quipped.

"No...I mean it, man." He started shuffling through the stack of magazines on the coffee table. He pulled one out and thumbed through it. "Yeah! Here you are, right here!"

He thrust the open magazine at her, and the *Heavenly Bodies* centerfold unfurled. Standing there, naked as the day she was born, was Ashara. Only, it wasn't really her...it was her twin, Zariaz.

Zariaz was back. Back from the dead...how could it be? It simply

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was not possible.

Of course, Ashara had never seen the *body*. At the time, she couldn't bear to look. It was her sister, after all. Now she cursed her folly, and she thought of Jim Morrison. And less than a year before, Janis and Jimi...musicians she'd not only known, but whose music she loved and whom she respected for their immense talent. There hadn't been such a burst of musical talent on the scene since...since Zariaz had been killed.

It was too much. Besides, she had to focus on the here and now. She smiled. "Yeah, I don't think they caught my good side, though."

"I'd say they're all good sides."

The voice came from behind her. Ashara turned, and a tall, golden-haired Englishman extended his right hand. As she reached for it, Ashara was nearly floored. She felt an extreme rush of emotion. A great attraction. It was strange...it wasn't the usual affection, or hunger, she felt for some mortals. It was almost lust, but not quite that either. She grasped his hand and shook it. His skin was cool and smooth, but she could feel the calluses on his fingers from guitar playing.

"You must be Liam Archer," she said.

"And you must be the photographer," he returned. He glanced down at her camera bag, then took it from her. "Let me carry that for you. Have you met the rest of the band?"

Introductions were made. A burly American with a round, jovial face, Buck Ferguson, was the drummer. He was the one who'd been so quick to recognize her from the centerfold. Next was Joel Morales, the keyboardist. He had a bird's nest of unruly hair and a long, kindly face. The rail-thin, apathetic-looking young woman she'd earlier mistaken for a groupie, Tera Anderson, was the bassist, and rounding out the band was lead singer and lead guitarist, Liam Archer.

Ashara learned that Darkside had come together just a few months before and, while the group was primarily American, Liam, the leader, was definitely British. He had the pale skin, aristocratic features, blue

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eyes, honey-blond hair and thin, curved lips that made contemporary actors like Richard Harris, Michael Caine, and Roger Moore heartthrobs. She loved his accent, but he commented on hers first.

“Usually I’m very good at detecting accents...but I can’t quite get yours.”

Ashara didn’t know she still had any traces of accent. She’d been all over the world, but she’d spent nearly the entire twentieth century in California. Of course, that wasn’t more than the equivalent of a few mortal years. “Well, I grew up in Vienna, spent some time in Hamburg, and lived for a few years in Jamaica.” Jamaica, where she’d *thought* Zariaz was buried.

“Sounds interesting,” Liam said. He caught her gaze and held it. “I’d like to hear more sometime.” He was definitely flirting with her.

But now it was time to get to work. Ashara led the band up to the roof, where she wanted to take her photos. The moon and stars were shining, and the hard-edged spill-light from the boulevard and the warm softness of the air would make the setting perfect. There was a slightly surreal ambience to the atmosphere. The roof was a perfect location because it reminded her of a turreted castle top. The ledge that bordered the roof was of steely gray stone in a gothic design, and there were even a few gargoyles posted at the corners.

She hadn’t heard any of their music yet, but she was already getting a feel for the personality of the band. Liam would be the center of attention—even if she put him in the back or off to the side, it wouldn’t matter; eyes would be drawn to him. And next would be Tera. Tera was small, waifish and flower-stem thin, but Ashara could see there was great strength and charisma within the tiny frame. Her studied indifference would make her seem mysterious and unattainable. Joel and Buck, easy-going fun-lovers, would round out the picture. The quartet worked naturally together, and each seemed to instinctively know what the others would be doing next. Ashara shot two rolls with mostly ambient light, then another two with a shoot-through umbrella

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and flash.

Before she knew it, it was 3:30 A.M. Ashara often lost herself in her work. She couldn't bear to play music anymore, not since Ludwig's hands had lain across hers on the ivory keys of her pianoforte, but taking photographs fed her artistic appetites almost as well. She'd always been a creative woman...first a musician, then a poet, writer, painter, dress designer, and now a photographer. She certainly didn't need to work for the money, but creating something beautiful and lasting from her heart somehow made up for the death and destruction she left in her wake.

She had authored most of her creations anonymously, as many women were forced to. One of her favorite quotes, which she had framed and hung in her bedroom, was from Virginia Woolfe on just that: "When one reads of a witch being dunked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet...indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman."

When Ashara and the band returned to the studio's interior, it was dark and empty. Tera, Joel, and Buck all wandered off, until it was just Liam and Ashara.

"Do you need a ride home?" he asked.

"No, thanks. I have a car."

"Can you give me a ride home, then?" His grin was boyish, irresistible. He was a charmer, all right.

She had to be home by sunup. "Where do you live?"

* * *

Laurel Canyon wasn't far from her home. Ashara had intended on just dropping him off, but when Liam invited her in for a drink, she found herself saying yes.

His two-story, rustic house sat high on a foliage-rich vantage point

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that allowed him a panoramic view of the city. Unshaded, floor-to-ceiling windows were everywhere she looked. It was sparsely but impeccably furnished. Tasteful, authentic antiques dotted the rooms. And, unlike most men—particularly rock music men—he kept it clean and tidy. Ashara wondered how he could have afforded such a place, a young man just starting out in the business. To her knowledge, Darkside hadn't even toured yet. She knew Laurel Canyon was a laid-back, bohemian community...but it was trendy and with trend usually came the price tag to match. The record company was probably renting it for him, she decided.

"Nightcap?" Liam's powerful hand was at the small of her back, guiding her toward the wet bar.

The feel of his flesh through the silky blouse awakened something in her, but the rest of her was ready to go to sleep. She could feel the darkness closing in. "Just one, then I have to go."

He filled two shot glasses with anisette, and she sipped at hers slowly. The fiery licorice taste was delightful, but she knew the more she swallowed, the more she'd have to purge later. She could easily digest liquids, as long it was early enough in the evening...but soon, she would be dead again. Her body wouldn't be able to process anything, not even thoughts. She hated having to die, but she'd learned not to dread it anymore. There was always a tomorrow. *Always*.

Liam stood behind the bar, while Ashara sat perched on an overstuffed leather stool. His blue eyes twinkled at her. "Not much of a drinker?"

Quite a drinker, actually, she thought. "Nah, I get high on life."

"That's a nice philosophy. Aren't you ever tempted, living the rock lifestyle?" He seemed eager to hear about what he was in for, should fame come his way.

"It's not all drugs and debauchery," she said. Almost all, but not quite.

These were certainly the freest times she'd ever lived in. The latter

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part of the Romantic era was fun, and so were the Roaring Twenties, but *this* time, “the dawning of the Age of Aquarius,” as the popular song went, was the best yet. She had rights as a woman, she wasn’t frowned upon for the color of her skin, and she could be totally independent without raising suspicions.

“Look at what happened to Jim Morrison,” she continued. “Do you think the rock lifestyle was healthy for him?”

Liam wasn’t biting. “I heard he wasn’t really dead. It’s all a big hoax.”

“And Jimi Hendrix?”

“He supposedly died in Germany...far, far away and under mysterious circumstances.”

Ashara had a sinking feeling he was right, although she knew without a doubt these musicians were truly dead. It was the mysterious circumstances she worried about, the cluster of deaths. She would have to confirm her suspicions later, though. She was so very, very tired now.

Liam noticed her heavy lids. “Do you want to crash here?”

“No, I’ve got to get home.”

Liam leaned close to her, the scent of sweet liqueur rising from his lips. His fingertips caressed her chin, and he kissed Ashara softly. He drew back slowly, his cornflower blue eyes probing hers. “Are you sure you want to go home?”

Ashara could hardly respond. She was so restless with the need to get to safety; she had to keep herself from snapping at him. “Thanks for the offer, Liam. But I’m not a groupie.”

“I know that.” He seemed stung by her words, despite her sheathing them in the softest voice she could manage.

“Listen, I really have to go.” Ashara rose from the stool, and, without a backward glance, she strode quickly out the front door, got into her car, turned the key and peeled out on the gravel driveway.

Ashara hadn’t cut things this close in years. She drove like a

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demon, cursing her hormones, annoyed at her tarrying enjoyment of the mortal musician's attentions. She could see a tinge of pink dawn on the horizon, and the evaporating blood in her constricting veins burned like fire.

As she drove, she saw a few lights coming on in the neighborhood homes. Regular people were just waking up. They would be shutting off their alarms, yawning and stretching, drinking their automatic drip coffee, reading their morning papers, and heading off for work. Such mundane little lives. But were they any more mundane than hers? Sometimes she was so bored she felt as though she could certainly die from it. But now, she was anything but bored—she felt an animal terror to preserve her endlessly mundane life, to keep herself from bursting into flames as the sun crept over the horizon, limning the jagged tips of the Hollywood Hills.

Finally, she made it home. Leaving her car in the driveway, top down, Ashara dashed inside her house and ran to her coffin.

Lovcraft was already inside, waiting for her.

CHAPTER 2

Yesterday

“Mrrraow,” Lovecraft’s raspy Siamese voice greeted Ashara as she lifted him up, got inside the casket, closed the lid, and slid the bolt home. With the mink-colored sable-point in her arms, Ashara succumbed to death.

* * *

Exactly twelve hours later, Ashara woke to the tickle of whiskers on her cheek. Lovecraft was awake and ready to be let out.

She wondered from time to time if other vampires had pets. She imagined they did, but since she never sought out others of her kind, she couldn’t know for sure. Her first vampire cat was named Eroica, after Ludwig’s Third Symphony. Eroica lived with her for nearly sixty-five years before he went his own way. When Lovecraft showed up on her doorstep in the fall of 1956, Ashara felt certain he was Eroica’s dark child and that Eroica had sent him to keep her company.

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She stroked the silken predator under his chin and he purred obligingly, but Ashara could feel his tense muscles, his need to hunt. She envied him. While he preferred rats and squirrels, Lovecraft could live off the blood of almost anything. Ashara, on the other hand, had to take human life, or her own life was barely sustained. She was slow, clumsy and forgetful without the proper nourishment.

“Okay, Lovey,” she crooned, sliding the bolt free and lifting the lid of the coffin. Her living room was enveloped in a shadowy twilight haze. The filmy white curtains shimmered in the gentle breeze brought by the open window.

With a purposeful meow, Lovecraft was up and out, leaving a claw snag in the curtain as he left. “Thanks a lot,” Ashara muttered, now sitting upright. “I just bought those.”

She yawned and stretched, thinking that after eating, it might be a good night to just stay home and watch the tube.

A sudden, shrill ringing sound nearly caused her to fall out of her bed. She got up and went to the phone, which was perched on the arm of the overstuffed sofa. She kept her coffin in the living room, disguised as a coffee table. Not that she had much company, but no one had anything but praise for her avant-garde decorative talents.

She picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Ash Konrad, where have you been?” The sound of his voice made her weak heart try to pound. The lazy sweetness of his tone made her draw in her breath. “I’ve been calling you for hours.”

“How did you get my number?” she asked.

Liam chuckled. “I pulled a few favors. You’re not mad, are you?”

“Mad-crazy, or mad-angry?” She didn’t wait for a response. “I’m neither. But I *am* on my way out. What can I do for you?”

“That is a loaded question,” he drawled. “Actually, I wanted to let you know you left your camera bag at my place. Why did you rush out in such a hurry?”

“Same reason I’m rushing out now. Can I call you back later?”

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He gave her his phone number, and she rang off. After eating, she decided, she would go and collect her camera bag. She wanted to develop the film from last night and see if her photos were as good as she hoped. Then she would drop them in the mail slot at Darkside's label, Brown Horse Music, and it would be time for bed again.

* * *

Sated on the blood of a seventy-two-year-old ex-prostitute, Ashara stood at Liam's door, peering through the etched, leaded glass that made up most of it. She heard nothing. She tried ringing the bell.

"Boo!" He came up behind her, sticking his pointing fingers into the twin crescents of her waist.

"Ahh!" she squealed. "You scared the heck out of me!"

"Heck?" he chuckled. "How cute." He opened the unlocked door and it swung inward. With a sweep of his arm, he said in an exaggerated Transylvanian accent, "Welcome to my home."

She stepped in, her cork heels pounding a gentle, thudding tattoo on his hardwood floor. She walked over to the bar, and picked up her camera bag. She did not sit down.

"Don't tell me you're leaving. Can't you stay for just a minute?" Liam smiled that boyish grin of his—the clean-shaven face added to the youthful expression. He had to know he was pretty hard to resist. He was wearing a billowy long-sleeved blouse, black with a cherry print on it, unbuttoned to his washboard belly. His faded blue jeans showed off his muscular thighs and small, tight butt to perfection. His shiny shoulder-length hair was freshly washed, and it smelled faintly of lemon rind.

Ashara found herself attracted to him once again...last night wasn't a fluke. She hadn't felt this way in decades, but she would try to fight it. The last time she had loved a mortal and confided in him, he had panicked and left her. Before that, her lover had died in what seemed like just a few moments to her—it was actually thirty years.

"Squeeze me and I cry tears as red as my flesh," whispered Liam,

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his lips very close to her ear, “but my heart is made of stone. What am I?” He drew back and smiled at her, crossing his sculpted arms. “You can’t leave ’til you can answer that.”

She yawned and rolled her eyes. “A cherry.” She pointed to the clusters of fruit depicted on his shirt. “Come on Liam, you’ll have to do better than that to keep *this* girl interested.”

“How about you come to our show on Friday night? We’re playing the Troubadour.”

Ashara had to admit she was curious about Darkside’s music. She wondered what kind of songs Liam had composed—you could learn so much about a man by listening to his music. Ludwig’s symphonic compositions had been as wild and passionate as he was. Big Joe’s jazz tunes had been like him, joyous, yet subtly complex. What would this rock-and-roll man have to tell her with his melodies? Would his guitar be dark and mysterious like Robbie Krieger’s; frenzied like Neil Young’s; passionate like Jimmy Page’s; or would it be sweet like Duane Allman’s?

Yes, she was curious.

* * *

She thought about him on her drive home, even considering turning back once or twice. Obviously chastened by her groupie comment, Liam hadn’t tried to kiss her again, but Ashara could feel his desire for her. And she felt a yearning for him that both puzzled and excited her. There was no want for his blood; she felt just like a mortal woman and it was strange to her. Her thoughts turned to her first love.

The problem was, Zariaz had loved him, too. Ludwig was a sensuous, lusty man with many paramours, but something kept him away from her twin sister despite Zar’s persistence. She had even tried to trick Ludwig into believing she was Ashara one night, but it didn’t work. There was a cruelty in Zar’s eyes that could not be missed.

Although they were twins, the sisters were always at odds. Even as infants—Zariaz was the first to walk, and when Ashara tried it a few

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days later, Zar pushed her down. That pretty much set the tone for their lives from then on.

Although they were mulatto, the wealth and status of Ashara and Zariaz's father garnered them access to most, if not all, of the places to be in Viennese society. They learned to ride horses, to read books, to play music, to dance, and to live life to the fullest. Erik doted on his beautiful little girls, and he made sure they wanted for nothing. When Zariaz admired a magnificent black Friesian stallion in the town square, it was presented to her two weeks later on her fifteenth birthday. When Ashara shed tears of joy at a Beethoven performance, her father paid the composer a king's ransom to teach his sixteen-year-old daughter to play the piano.

At first, their relationship was difficult. Ashara was young and, although she loved music deeply, her moods were mercurial; she had little patience for sitting at the piano and playing scales for hours on end. Ludwig's ability to hear had all but disappeared and he was easily irritated and often became frustrated with her.

Exactly twenty years her senior, Ludwig seemed old and mean to Ashara...until she turned nineteen. After three years of regular instruction and after three years of maturation, Ashara was one of Ludwig's best students. He said she played with an ardent power he could feel resonating up through the floorboards, and he was proud of her.

The pride turned to love. Ludwig quite surprised Ashara one summer day with his declaration and ardent demonstration. Although she knew of Ludwig's roguish reputation—everyone did—she was flattered. No man had ever spoken to her so passionately or touched her like Ludwig did. His hands, honed to perfection in every way, played her body like a musical instrument. She in turn fell in love with him. They tried to keep their affair secret, but Zariaz soon knew.

Agas later, when Ashara thought back on the last year of her mortal life, she wondered if Zar had truly loved Ludwig or he was only

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something she wanted because Ashara had him.

Zariaz suffered from a darkness of the soul. Although she was beautiful, intelligent, and a truly gifted horsewoman, she was never satisfied with any of it. Her self-loathing seemed to emanate from her, and others picked up on it. She had few friends, and the young men only flocked to her for her considerable physical charms.

Ashara remembered her last night as a mortal woman like it was only yesterday. She was getting dressed and ready to go home after spending a wonderful evening with Ludwig.

He stopped her and held her hands in his. He looked her in the eyes. “Be careful of Zariaz,” he whispered.

Ashara laughed off his warning. “What are you talking about? She’s my sister.”

“Yes, and she knows you better than anyone. She shares your flesh, your blood, and even your mind.” Ashara had told Ludwig about the odd, almost psychic connection they had shared since birth. “But not your soul. You are sweetness and light, my *lieblich*. Her soul is like mine...dark and stormy...waiting for inevitable death, to see what greets us on the other side.” He held up a hand to halt her protest. He knew her love had blinded her to his flaws, and for that he was thankful but not oblivious. “She is evil.”

Ashara came to wish she had listened to her lover’s warning, but realized in the end that her fate was inevitable. It happened on the night of her twenty-first birthday.

Zariaz had disappeared early that morning, leaving Ashara to spend the day at home with their parents. Erik gave her a gold necklace with a split heart dangling from it. Another chain, with the other half of the heart, was for Zariaz. It lay in a still-wrapped gift box on the pianoforte.

“Where has your sister gone?” he lamented. It had never been easy for Erik to get away from his first family to spend time with his second one. Their brief times together were precious. More so, since Marileta

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had taken ill and it seemed her time was nigh. She had spent most of the day reclining on the sofa, and had gone to bed a few minutes earlier. Ashara was terrified at the prospect of losing her mother, but she kept pushing the dread away, blaming her mother's malaise on the unusually hot summer.

Perhaps her sister suffered from the same. "She said she wasn't feeling well, Father. She got up and left the house before dawn, saying she was going to ride up into the hills and get some fresh air."

Erik shook his head. "I love her, but I have never been able to understand her." His eyes filled with unshed tears when he looked at his daughter. "You're my treasure, Ashara. Please take care of your mother, and your sister."

"I don't need taking care of!" Zariaz breezed into the room, smelling of pungent pine and seemingly floating on the sticky warmth of the night air. She smiled, and threw her arms around Erik. "Greetings, Father."

"Happy birthday," he said, reaching for her gaily wrapped gift.

Zar loved it, and put the half-heart necklace on right away. She hugged Ashara fiercely and whispered, "We share everything, Shar. Even our heart. And our blood."

Ashara pulled away from the smothering arms, chilled by her sister's odd choice of words. Later she would realize it was a very carefully chosen phrase, indeed.

The rest of the evening passed happily. Erik, Ashara, and Zariaz ate pastry and drank coffee, reminiscing on past birthdays. Erik kept saying her couldn't believe his little girls were all grown up.

It was hard to believe. Ashara wondered to herself what they would do with their lives. She didn't suppose their illegitimacy would have too much of an effect on them while Father was still alive, but she did think they should marry soon. She knew in her heart that Ludwig would never marry her...word was, he carried a torch for someone else who was married. And besides, he was too old for her. She wanted to

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raise a family. And what of Zariaz? Ashara could never picture her married to anyone. She was a freer spirit than any of her horses!

Of course, all of these thoughts stayed contained within Ashara's head. Outwardly, she laughed and chatted gaily, skipping down memory lane to birthday numbers six, seven, and twelve.

After their father went home, Zariaz and Ashara sat at the pianoforte playing a meandering duet and talking. "I'm worried about Mother," Ashara confided. "She sleeps almost all day long."

"I think it's a voodoo curse," Zariaz said with a slight, feline smile.

"Don't even speak of such things in jest!" Ashara gasped.

"You can't deny our heritage," Zariaz went on. "You love our life of privileged Roman Catholicism, don't you?"

"Where do you think that Danube River goes? Do you think it circles our perfect little world like a whirlpool? No. It flows into the English Channel, through the North Atlantic and into the Caribbean Sea. The sea that kisses the beaches of our motherland: Jamaica."

Jamaica. The word sounded so foreign, so exotic. And scary. It was a world away, as far as Ashara was concerned.

Marileta rarely spoke of her birthplace, and she had never explained how she came to be in Port Au Prince, Haiti, where she had met Erik. Why had Erik, a gentleman of noble breeding, been so far from the civilized world? All they ever told the girls was that a spell of love had been cast upon them, and they had sailed to France together, where they had spent nearly a year together before Erik returned home to his family in Austria. But by that year's end, Marileta was carrying the twins. She followed Erik to Vienna, and there they had lived ever since. He with his family, she with the girls.

"Did you know our mother was a mambo?" Zariaz asked, raising one thin brow and tilting her chin challengingly.

"A what?" Ashara asked, stopping her tune.

Zariaz played on. "That's a voodoo priestess."

"You're lying!" Ashara rose from the bench, struggling with her

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long petticoat and skirt. She recovered and leaned on the pianoforte for support. "Don't say such things about Mother. Especially when she lies in bed, ill. She might hear you."

"Oh, yes. She listens for me," said Zariaz, also rising. "She fears me."

"Why?" Ashara whispered, wide-eyed.

Zariaz's smile answered her question.

Ashara just barely caught a glimpse of the wicked fangs before they were in her neck. She felt an odd rapture, then a disconcerting swoon to weakness. She had to lie down. Her sister laid her gently upon the hardwood floor. The parlour piano was a giant monolith in her eyes—its glossy black wood had turned to stone. Her slowing heart felt as hard as granite, too. She cared about nothing...not even her own life.

"I've made some new friends," said Zariaz, kneeling at Ashara's side. She chuckled. "They want to meet you." Ashara felt her sister's hand at the back of her neck and behind her knees. With an easy strength, she lifted her twin and made her way up the stairs. They were going to Mother's room.

Ashara's vision was dimming, but she saw Marileta lying on the bed, her throat slashed open. Beside her, sitting cross-legged on the mattress, was a pale-skinned, dark-haired man dressed all in black.

"What have you done?" Zariaz asked, a note of thin panic rising in her voice.

"I finished her for you," the man replied, licking his lips. "She sustained you for a few days, but she couldn't last forever. You will have to learn to hunt, my child."

Zariaz didn't reply. She stepped forward and extended her arms, as if presenting Ashara as a sacrifice.

The man rose and took the limp body into his arms. "Get the poppet," he commanded.

Zariaz reached into her bodice and produced a small, crudely made cloth doll. She held it uncertainly.

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Ashara was only dimly aware of what was happening, but she felt another presence in the room. Another man.

This man was dressed in a green velvet frock coat, breeches and riding boots. His skin was nearly coal-black, and his hands were huge. Ashara was sure he was going to strangle the remaining life from her when he reached for her neck. She almost wished he would.

But instead, he dipped one finger into the blood that had pooled in the hollow of her throat. He painted an X across the doll's heart. Without a word, he took the doll from Zariaz and crushed it in his left hand. He nodded at his two companions, and the three of them began to drink from Ashara. The man in black still cradled her, and he was at her breast. The dark-skinned man and her sister each had a wrist at their mouths. Ashara slipped away.

She jolted back to life with a scream of pain. She felt liquid fire shooting through her veins as the three vampires spewed her blood back into her. Her contaminated, venom-drenched blood.

* * *

The photographs were magical. Ashara was more than pleased.

She always felt a little amazement when she developed her photos—the world kept reinventing itself, while she stayed the same. At least physically. While she did feel that she had a little trouble keeping up with the kaleidoscope changes the world had undergone in just the past few decades, she welcomed them. They helped make her feel more alive. She eagerly drank in all new technology available. She was among the first to have a telephone in the 1800s; she was the pioneer female in her community to buy a car and drive it; she had a television set in the 1940s and later, a hi-fi stereo and an answering machine.

Once the photos were developed and set, she took them to her dining room (now there was a useless room for a vampire's home!) and spread them out on the massive baroque table. She turned the overhead chandelier lights on and checked them all out. Normally she would

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print a contact sheet and then choose which photos to blow up from there, but she had a feeling all of them would be good. There were over a hundred photos, some in color and some in black and white.

The black and whites had a noir quality that Ashara liked, but the color ones, with their muted midnight blues and silvery moonlight accents were the real money shots.

Ashara could see one in particular as a perfect album cover: Tera, Buck and Joel were standing in the foreground, slightly out of focus, their arms crossed and their expressions closed. They stood in three opposite directions, slightly apart, forming the points of a pyramid. Behind them, Liam was reclining on the high, gothic ledge, his shining blonde hair draped over the edge. He was lying on his back, but his head was tilted and he was looking at the camera with a devil-may-care grin and a mischievous glint in his eyes. The winged back and forked tail of a gargoyle were visible on the far left side of the frame, and the nearly full moon that silvered Liam's hair hung in the upper right corner like a watchful lover.

Liam was a born star; that was for sure. Ashara almost felt like a giddy groupie at the thought of watching him perform. The Troubadour was one of her favourite places. That, and Pandora's Box. The "Troub" was fun because it was so small and funky, like a dark little cave. The stage was just slightly larger than a first-class postage stamp, and you could either get right up close to the band, or you could survey the concert from the balcony above.

It was getting late—or early, as the case was. Ashara gathered up twenty of the photos, marking her favorite with a grease pencil, and stuck them in a manila envelope. She drove to Brown Horse Music's corporate office, stuck the pictures through the mail slot, and was back home just before dawn.

As usual, Lovecraft was waiting for her. He was curled up in a perfect circle on the satin pillow of their casket bed, resting his chin on the tip of his sable tail. She stroked his rabbit-soft fur and gently moved

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him aside. He purred softly and made room for his mistress.

* * *

The news of Morrison's unexpected, mysterious death was everywhere—on the radio, on television, in the papers and the weekly magazines. Ashara was curled up on her sofa, reading the feature in *Rolling Stone* when she heard of another death coming from the news broadcast on TV.

“Louis ‘Satchmo’ Armstrong is dead tonight at the age of seventy. Singer of such beloved songs as ‘Mack the Knife’ and ‘What a Wonderful World’...” Ashara gave her full attention to the reporter. “Just three days after Doors’ singer Jim Morrison perished, this is quite a blow to the music world...”

Quite a blow, indeed. Yes, Satchmo was a ripe old age, but was he ready to go? Or was he another link in the chain of Zariaz’s “thousand-musician” curse? Ashara hated to think it was possible, and hated even more to think that her sister had indeed come back to life, but she had to face it.

Just off the top of her head, she counted five incredibly talented American musicians’ deaths within less than twelve months—first Alan Wilson of Canned Heat, a supposed suicide on September 3, 1970. Then Jimi Hendrix died less than two weeks later. Janis Joplin followed her peers into death less than a month after that. Things were quiet for awhile, but now Morrison was gone and just a few days later, Louis Armstrong.

The timing was too much like the three clusters of deaths that occurred in Europe amongst classical musicians in the late 1800s. Zariaz had proudly claimed she was architect of a curse that would give her ultimate, infinite power.

Apparently, her tailspin into evil as a mortal was precipitated by Ludwig’s refusal of her love. She vowed to get revenge. She did, by killing what he loved most: Ashara. But that was not enough. Unable to bring herself to harm Ludwig, Zariaz let him live and descend into

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madness and silent misery in his final years. One thousand musicians had to be sacrificed for the one Zariaz could never have. Their deaths would fulfill the curse. She would drink in their talent, one and all, until she could play the Song that would make the collective soul hers. In nuggets over time, the curse was fed.

Whenever Zariaz fortified herself on the blood of a musician, she took a piece of the person—a lock of hair, a fingernail, an eyelash—and added it to her poppet. Ashara shuddered when she recalled how Zariaz had told her the details of the killings, how she bit the musicians in the back of the neck. She drank of their blood and their brain fluid, sucking in their talent. She was careful to leave her bite above the hairline, where it would be missed by the morticians. But that was in the 1800s...wouldn't modern-day autopsies be more thorough?

Ashara could hardly believe her own wild thoughts. She knew she had left Zariaz dead, deep in the jungles of Jamaica, years ago. She just *knew* it.

She turned the TV off and continued flipping through *Rolling Stone*. She couldn't concentrate. She picked up another rock-and-roll weekly, *The Guitar Pick*. She took the brown shipping wrap off and gasped when she saw the cover shot.

It was a stunning photo of Liam, standing in a field of golden California poppies. He had red, white and blue flowers in his hair and the sun reflected off its strands, turning it a molten coppery gold. His blue eyes were like star sapphires, and there was that wicked, sexy grin of his—he seemed to be looking right at her.

"The British Are Coming!" the text by his photo proclaimed. In smaller print it said, "Randy rockers tell all about the groupie scene and life on the road." In yet smaller print underneath that, it concluded, "Pictured: Liam Archer, lead singer and guitarist of the soon-to-be hot group, Darkside. First world tour starts in August."

A thought shot through Ashara's mind that she might be assigned to photograph the tour. But the tour was only a few weeks away and

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things like that were planned months in advance.

As if on cue, the phone rang and it was Liam.

"I was just looking at your ugly mug on the cover of *The Guitar Pick*," Ashara said with a smile.

"Poor you," Liam returned with mock lament. "I hope I didn't crack the lens of your camera the other night. By the bye, how did those photos come out? Our business manager was saying they've got the cover shot for our album—he said it was perfect. Thank the gods, 'cause the album comes out in late August."

"The cover shot? Wow, that's news to me," Ashara replied. Then she realized she hadn't checked her answering machine in a couple of nights. She glanced over at the reel-to-reel machine and saw the red message flag.

"So, are you still coming to our show tomorrow night?"

"Me and my Haselblad."

"Is that your Swedish boyfriend?"

Was he fishing to see if she was attached? "Very funny," she giggled. "Although I do love my camera."

"If I told you I loved your camera, too, would you flash me?" Liam had the guts to not only say such a corny thing, but he even laughed at his own silly attempt at humor.

Ashara laughed also, and said, "Only if you promise to give me a good roll. Of film, that is."

"I like you, Ash," Liam said, suddenly serious. "I really do. I want to get to know you better."

She was quiet for just a moment. She watched smoke billowing from the nearby chimneys while she thought. Red flags popped up all over her brain. *Don't get involved with a mortal. It can only end in tragedy, sorrow or death.* But she'd been alone so long. Where was the harm in a little fun? She was attracted to him, and he could just be a summertime fling. But Ashara had never been one for flings...it was love or nothing. She pushed those old memories aside and decided to

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live in the here and now. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Maybe we can go for a cocktail after the show, okay?”

“Okay,” Liam agreed. “Here’s something for you to ponder until we meet again—I am the dusky child of a white father, a wingless bird, flying even to the clouds of heaven. I give birth to tears of mourning in pupils that meet me, even though there is no cause for grief, and at once on my birth I am dissolved into air. What am I?”

That’s me, Ashara thought. But she knew it was a standard riddle with a simple answer. Only she didn’t have an answer yet.

It seemed she didn’t have the answers to much of anything anymore.

CHAPTER 3

Stairway to Heaven

Even though Darkside's album wasn't out yet, one of their singles was getting some FM radio play and enough people knew about them to pack the tiny Troubadour to capacity.

Ashara decided to watch the show from the balcony. She had not spoken to Liam since their telephone conversation. The stage was still empty, so she scanned the crowd below. She enjoyed people-watching, and she got a kick out of the fashions and trends.

Her favorite era had probably been the sleek, deco elegance of the 1920s and '30s, but she enjoyed the funky denim and patchwork of the 1960s and (so far) '70s. She liked the long, wild hair that was in style for both men and women, and the form-fitting but comfortable clothing. She hoped corsets wouldn't come back into style anytime soon...the entire nineteenth century had been an absolute pain for her.

Not that it could have hurt her permanently—nothing could—but

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she was often shocked at the fatal things women did just to make themselves look better. She remembered the times when face powder was made from poisonous lead, and of course how corsets rearranged the innards so badly that scores of women died. Men killed each other in the name of God; women killed themselves in the name of beauty.

She smelled the sweet, pungent odor of marijuana in the air and heard the giggles of young girls wafting up from the ground floor. The lights went down, and the band walked onstage. Ashara cheered and clapped, leaning over the rail.

Liam spotted her immediately and gave her a wink and a nod. He picked up his guitar, and Tera got her bass. Joel slipped into place, and Buck got behind the drums. He started the set off with a hard-driving mini drum solo and immediately had the undivided attention of everyone in the club.

Then the bass kicked in, immediately followed by the keyboards. Liam joined in a split second later with a perfectly timed, sustained blues wail and a heavy-metal lick on his birdseye maple Gibson.

The rich, russet highlights from the lacquered wood reflected the stage lights as a mirror would—it made the guitar appear to be ablaze in flames. Liam Archer was a real golden boy with his long, wavy hair, his natural-beige guitar, his tanned, bare chest and his tight, fringed buckskin pants. He wore high, platform boots of creamy lizard skin, and although somewhat gaudy, his Navajo-style jewelry and peacock-feathered belt were right in line with the rock star motif.

Ashara could see Liam gracing many more magazine covers in the near future. Although he was incredibly good looking, it wasn't in a dicey or dangerous way, like Jim Morrison had been, or David Bowie. And his sexuality wasn't cutesy like Paul McCartney, not pretty like T. Rex's Marc Bolan. He reminded her a little bit of James Dean with some Robert Plant thrown in, but he really was an entity unto himself. She could not easily compare him to anyone else, and that excited her.

Ashara reached for her camera. She'd opted to bring her more

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portable Nikon and left the Haselblad at home. She took a few quick shots, zeroing in on Liam's contorted face. He put everything into his song, wailing the heavy blues like his heart was breaking.

Darkside was damn good. Ashara had seen all the top bands live and had even traveled with many of them, photographing and chronicling their tours. With this one song, the first of the set, Ashara's trained musical ear could tell they were going places. Their second and third songs convinced her that Darkside could even be one of the *greats*. Of course, a lot of things other than talent sustained a band, such as drive, timing and good connections. They were with a solid label, though, and that counted for a lot. Ashara knew the band would have the right promotion and they were already getting some airplay.

The audience was really into them, and that was a good sign. This was a sophisticated crowd. Ashara noticed that the men seemed to like the group just as much as the women did, which would be good for the band's future concert ticket sales—sometimes jealous boyfriends could ruin a fledgling band.

Darkside's radio single came next—a light-building-into-heavy rock ballad called “Butterfly Kiss”—then a Buddy Holly cover and a Muddy Waters medley. With only one album's worth of material to their credit, they had no choice but to do several covers. They played for well over an hour, and Ashara took many rolls of film. The band performed incredibly well together, and she hoped she caught their magical chemistry on film. When Tera sang backup she shared Liam's mic and they looked like cosmic lovers with their beautiful faces so close they were cheek to cheek. Ashara felt a little stab of jealousy, then chuckled to herself.

“What's the smile for, Mona Lisa?”

It was the young man standing beside her. Ashara had felt him inching closer and closer, but had pretty much ignored him while she snapped her photos. She was used to being hit on and normally she couldn't be bothered with it, but her little jealous streak made her feel

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flirty. She smiled and laughed, bantering with the guy and hoping Liam was watching.

She knew she looked good. She was wearing a long, clinging black gown, backless with a scooped neckline and rhinestoned spaghetti straps. Her throat was bare, but long icicle earrings brushed her collarbones. On her feet she wore simple spike heels, and her toe and fingernails were painted a deep, royal-blue-tinted black. She'd teased her cinnamon tresses, so her hair framed her face like a silky lion's mane.

The music stopped. "Thank you. Before we go," she heard Liam saying into his mic, "Here's one more sweet song."

The band launched into a rip-roaring cover of "Brown Sugar," and Ashara lost all of her professionalism. The camera forgotten, she danced and sang along with the fans, tossing her hair and shaking her small fist in the air. She thought Liam was *much* sexier than Mick Jagger as he pranced across the stage, pouting and preening.

The song ended, and the band left the stage. The house lights came up, signaling that there would not be an encore. The young man beside Ashara started to make another move when one of the roadies came to collect her. "Liam would like to see you backstage," he said. Ashara shrugged and smiled at her young would-be suitor, then followed the roadie downstairs.

Liam was sitting on a plush chair drinking a cold Pellegrino when Ashara walked in. He'd thrown on a tee-shirt but still wore his stage pants and boots. He was surrounded by groupies, band-aids, flunkies, hangers-on and who knew what other kinds of freaks. Ashara was impressed, but not surprised. The entourage would surely triple by the time the album came out and the band was on the road.

Liam smiled at the sight of her and rose. He cut through the crowd, took her by the arm, and practically pulled her out a side door.

"Whew!" he sighed, once they were outside. "It's sheer claustrophobia in there!" Then he stopped, took a breath, and smiled at

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her. “Hi,” he said sweetly.

“Hi,” she replied. “Smoke.”

“Huh?”

“Smoke. It’s the answer to your riddle.”

“Ah, so it is. Clever girl.” He grinned and gave her a peck on the corner of her mouth. “I’ll have to think of a harder one for you.”

They walked to her Mustang, and Ashara asked him where he’d like to go for their nightcap.

He didn’t really have a place in mind, so they drove around the main drags for a bit, the top of the Mustang down. They ended up at the Cat & Fiddle, a little bar tucked away on Sunset Boulevard a bit away from the popular Strip.

It was warm and dark inside, like a private cave. Liam and Ashara found a tiny round table near the bar.

A scantily clad waitress came to take their order almost immediately. “Hi,” she chirped, looking only at Liam. “I’m Portia. What can I get for you?”

“Good evening, Portia. That’s a beautiful name. I’ll have an anisette and a cup of coffee,” he replied, smiling up at her.

“Great voice,” the buxom waitress gushed. “Has anyone ever told you that you sound just like Kris Kristofferson? An English Kris Kristofferson.”

“Really?” Liam flashed his flawless teeth. “I’m flattered. I’m a singer, too.”

“Really?” Portia echoed. “Wow.” She didn’t seem to notice the visual daggers Ashara was plunging into her. In fact, she didn’t seem to notice the other woman at all.

Liam was doing a pretty good job of ignoring Ashara also. “Yeah. Hey, we’re playing at the Troubadour for the next two nights—Darkside. You ought to come and see us.” He bestowed his devil-may-care grin on her, and a blush came to the blonde’s pretty, peachy cheeks.

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“Sure. I’ll do that. I’ll get your liqueur and coffee.”

“Hello-oh,” Ashara snapped as the waitress turned. “I’d like a drink, too.”

“Oh, gosh. So sorry,” Portia giggled.

Sure you’re sorry, you brainless bimbo, Ashara thought. Then she smiled inwardly. Was she jealous? How silly. For the second time in one evening. She hadn’t felt such emotions in decades. “I’ll have a sambuca.”

When the waitress was out of earshot, Ashara turned to Liam. “You were flirting with her. You dog!” she chuckled, trying to lighten up.

Liam just shrugged and smiled, his golden hair glistening in the dim candlelight. His eyes were upon her, and Ashara could feel the electricity of his attraction to her. Maybe he’d been *trying* to make her jealous.

God, he was rampantly sexy. He didn’t have to do anything but sit there, and Ashara was completely smitten. She wondered what she was getting herself into.

Their drinks arrived, and they talked about the local music and club scene for awhile, then her job.

“You’re really very talented,” Liam told her. “I saw the album’s cover shot this afternoon. It’s brilliant. Rather surreal and romantic. And a bit disturbing.”

“Disturbing, how?”

Liam took a sip of his coffee before answering. “Well, it sort of depicts me as apart from the rest of the band. Kind of an outsider.” He paused. “And it’s totally accurate. You knew us for ten minutes, and you managed to capture our souls.”

“But after having seen you guys perform tonight, I don’t agree that you’re an outsider. I mean, you’re definitely the star” —Liam rolled his eyes— “for lack of a better word. But you are all so in synch, it’s amazing. There were no mistakes; there was no toe-stepping. It was perfection, but without effort. Or at least, an effort not visible to us in

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the audience.”

“Thank you,” Liam said, looking genuinely pleased. “I take that as a real compliment, considering your background in music. I’ve got to tell you, though, I’m a little worried about going out on the road. You should come with us.”

It was very tempting, indeed. Hiding her true identity was not terribly difficult in the world of rock music—they were all night people, and most concerts were scheduled for the evening. She didn’t have any real ties, and she could do it as a freelancer. Tempting. But she could not find an answer, so she changed the subject. “I really like your song “Butterfly Kiss.” It starts off so soft and gentle, then builds into this amazing...what would you call it?”

“A climax,” he said with a salacious smirk and the twist of a nonexistent mustache.

“Well, yeah. But I mean it’s hard and bluesy, with a sort of Arabic or Middle-Eastern thread running through it. Who wrote it?”

“I did,” Liam told her, not without a touch of pride. “Many, many moons ago.”

“Oh, really?” Ashara smiled and raised one eyebrow. “What were you, twelve?”

“Hey, I was a child prodigy,” Liam chuckled. “Do you know what a butterfly kiss is?”

“No. What is it?”

“I’ll have to show you,” Liam said softly, bringing his chair nearer to hers.

She could feel his body heat, and the ends of his hair brushing her shoulder as he leaned in very, very close.

“Now, close your eyes,” he whispered. “Don’t move.”

Ashara felt a soft tickling on her cheek. It was Liam’s eyelashes gently brushing her skin. Even though the butterfly kiss was only on her face, she felt rippling tingles down to her toes. The sensation ceased. She opened her eyes.

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Liam's face was still very close. "Let's get out of here," he said huskily.

She didn't need to be told twice.

* * *

"I really loved that guitar you were playing tonight," Ashara said, not sure how to break the ice. Things had suddenly become a little awkward.

Liam was opening the windows in his living room. It had been an overly warm night and, although the chill of dawn would be coming soon, the house was stuffy. "Mmm. Me, too. It's not easy to find them in natural wood grains, especially the birdseye maple. Let me show you my pride and joy though. My custom-made baby." He indicated the cluster of furniture. "Have a seat. I'll be right back."

She chose a satin-covered ottoman, stretching her long, bare legs out in front of her, angling them just so. She knew she had nice legs, and she wanted Liam to come back and find her looking irresistible. She ran her fingers through her untamed hair. It had been so long since she'd been intimate with anyone; she wasn't quite sure what she should do. Though these were wild and free days and certainly there was no stigma associated with casual sex, she half-wondered if she shouldn't hold off tonight. It was getting very late, and she wanted her to take her time with Liam, to show him she was special.

After what seemed like endless moments, Liam emerged from the hallway, changed from his stage clothes into a pair of faded jeans. His feet and his torso were bare. His hair was damp, and Ashara figured he must have popped into the shower before getting the guitar. He smelled faintly of baby powder and fresh lemon.

He took a seat on the sofa across from her and began to strum the instrument with his bare fingers. "This honey has pure gold hardware," he said. "An ebony fretboard, twenty-four frets, Seymour Duncan pickups, a purple heart whammy bar, and it's made from the holy grail of tone woods...Korina. This is the finest, most resonant guitar I have

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ever played.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said. The wood grain’s gold complemented his tanned skin and light hair. She watched him quietly as he played a nameless tune. Then she began to recognize a song emerging.

Liam sang a few bars, “I wanna live with a cinnamon girl, I could be happy the rest of my life with a cinnamon girl...” and looked intensely at her as he nearly whispered the lyrics. While Ashara liked the soulful Neil Young song, she’d never thought of it as *sexy*. Until now.

Liam stopped strumming. “Do you play?”

“No,” Ashara replied. “I’d like to learn someday. I did once play piano, and the flute.”

Liam rose from the sofa and handed Ashara the guitar. She cradled it in her arms, and plucked aimlessly at the strings. Liam came around behind her and knelt. She was still seated low, on the ottoman. His arms encircled her, and he put his large, callused hands over her small, smooth ones. “This is A,” he said, choosing a chord. His voice was deep, but feather soft. “D and F.” His mouth was now against her earlobe, and she could feel the tickle of his chest hairs against her bared back.

They played the chords together, and she remembered back to long ago when Ludwig’s hands were over hers, showing her how to coax music from the piano. But she only thought of it for a fleeting moment. *That was then; this is now.*

Liam took his hands off of hers, and she felt a sizzling sensation running across the buds of her nipples. Working his way up, he ran his index fingers up and down the rhinestone straps of her gown, teasing her. The warmth of his skin was almost electric against hers. Ashara gasped softly and let the guitar slide gently to the ground.

He kissed her neck then, biting and sucking gently. Ashara’s faltering heart beat valiantly, rallying for what she knew was in store. She closed her eyes and threw her head back, offering her throat to him.

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His lips, tongue and teeth were all over it, while his hands were pressed urgently against her small, firm breasts. Still on his knees, he hugged her body tight against him, and she could feel his need. She reached back and stroked him through his tight Levi's.

He moaned and pulled away. Liam reached behind her knees and lifted her into his embrace, standing. Now cradled in his arms, facing him, Ashara kissed Liam deeply. She felt herself swooning.

Swooning into her inescapable sleep. *No. Not now!* "What time is it?" she whispered as he started carrying her toward what she assumed was his boudoir. They were at the bottom of a spiral stairway.

"Time for you and me to make beautiful music together." He smiled, lightly drumming the tip of her nose with his forefinger.

Ashara felt her body shutting down. Panic flooded through her veins. She absolutely had to get back to her coffin. If the sun's rays touched her, she would combust from within and perish. A dark coat closet would do in a pinch, but she couldn't very well "die" at Liam's place. She didn't think he'd understand this early in their relationship; and she didn't think he'd buy a story about her having a closet fetish. Damn, the night had gone by so quickly! She glanced out one of the open windows, and could just see the silver of dawn creeping in to ruin her perfect moment.

"It's...uh..." she stammered. Narcolepsy? Nah...she couldn't explain. "Let's just say I've got a Cinderella complex." She forced a laugh as she extricated herself from his embrace and stepped down onto the hardwood floor.

Unable to look at him, she turned and sprinted toward the front door. She jumped into her car without bothering to open the door and sped away, her screeching tires sending peals into the lightening sky.

Ashara caught a glimpse of Liam standing in the front doorway arch, watching the her red taillights as they disappeared. She saw him shaking his head, but could have sworn there was a bemused smile on his lips.

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* * *

Damn, damn, damn, Ashara's inner voice screamed over and over. She hadn't bothered to put the Mustang's top up, and she didn't have time to stop and do it now. Her skin was smoldering by the time she got inside her house. This was the second time within a week she'd cut things so close, and before this she hadn't taken a chance with her life in ages. Was she really *that* sex-starved?

No. She could have any man she wanted. Only, it was Liam she wanted. How could she possibly explain herself to him? Maybe he would just think she was an eccentric artistic type. Maybe her kisses had been enough to make him want her more, despite her strange behavior. Maybe, despite her protestations of sobriety, he would think she was on drugs after all. Maybe, maybe. She promised herself that she would call him to apologize somehow, and if he accepted, she would set their next date for early evening.

But like Scarlett O'Hara, she would have to think about it tomorrow. Her movements were becoming so slow and leaden she could barely find the resolve to raise the lid of her resting place.

She didn't see Lovecraft anywhere, and more disturbing still was the envelope with her name handwritten across it. Who had been inside her home? She thought she recognized the script, but her mind was so slow. So tired. Very, very tired. Her last conscious thought was that of relief at hearing the coffin's lid slamming shut above her.

* * *

Ashara came back to life with an unpleasant jolt. She slid the inner lock free and threw the hinged top open. She sat up and looked around, every muscle poised for battle. There was no danger.

All was quiet.

It was past dusk, and Lovecraft was curled up on the couch. She saw some leaves and spider webs clinging to his satiny coat—he'd obviously spent the day burrowed underground. He did that sometimes. The Siamese awoke at the sound of his mistress's abrupt movements,

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but only deigned to partially open one blue eye. He purred softly and went back to his catnap.

Ashara felt for the envelope. It was crumpled beside her pillow. Now that she was alert, she recognized the handwriting instantly: Zariaz was not only alive, but she had found her twin's lair.

A shudder of fear ran through Ashara. She seriously doubted the letter was a note of absolution for the attempt on Zariaz's life. That was pretty unforgivable, even for an immortal. But they *weren't* immortal. Ashara knew that. She'd heard of other vampires dying, and she had thought for sure Zariaz was completely deceased until she saw the magazine the other night. Zar had been sentenced to death for her crimes in 1912 and was duly executed by the Dark Council.

Did she know Ashara had a hand in that? Of course. How could she not know? There was a psychic connection between them, and Zariaz had always been much better at honing her mind skills than Ashara. Zar could even do some limited telekinesis. Ashara hoped her mind wasn't being read. Since thinking her sister gone, she had lost what little telepathic ability she'd once had.

She stared at the unopened envelope, and went back to all the feelings she had denied over the years—she *had* felt her sister's presence in her mind, but she dismissed it as a guilty conscience. She hadn't wanted Zariaz to die, but there was no other way. The Council had found her guilty of exposing their kind to extreme danger with her reckless killings, and that was that.

But it looked like Zariaz's voodoo was stronger than the Dark Council's final judgment. *Was* it voodoo? For a very long time, Ashara believed that was what had made her a vampire. What with the empowered poppet, and the evil creatures of the night that had seduced her twin and taken both their lives.

Over the years, she became less and less sure of her origins. She truly didn't know what magic made a vampire. She'd heard a few theories, but all she really knew was this: she died, then lived again

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night after night, and she had to have human blood to sustain her. She stayed forever young in her physicality, while mentally she might as well have been Methuselah. Her hair and fingernails grew like a living person, although it seemed to take twice as long as normal. After all, she was only truly alive for twelve hours at a time. But then why didn't she age at all? It made no sense, but then, it was magic and it didn't have to.

She rose from her bed, envelope in hand, and went to the open window. She shut and locked it, then smiled to herself. *How very mortal of me. As if a closed window could stop her.*

She sat on the couch next to Lovecraft, and with trembling hands, she opened the letter.

The perfume-scented stationery was beautiful. There were flowers hand-drawn in colored inks along the top and bottom borders. The flowers were belladonna and lilies...poison and death.

"My Darling Shar," the short letter began in Zar's distinctive hand. "I'll bet you didn't think you'd be hearing from me again. Did you miss me? I missed you. In fact, you were all I thought about while I recuperated. It was an excruciating convalescence, but I'm feeling so much better now.

"Do you still love music? I do. In fact, I've met a couple of your fancy musician friends...they thought I was you, but no matter. They don't think at all, anymore.

"I saw you at the club tonight wearing your pretty black dress, taking your pictures. Looks like you've been doing all right. Shall we meet there tomorrow?" Then she signed the letter with a flourish, *Hoping to see you—Your Loving Sister, Zar.*

Ashara's heart thudded dully in her chest. Zariaz was back, and she was gloating about her continuation of the curse that had gotten her condemned in the first place. The woman was insane. She had to be...there was no other way for Ashara to reconcile her sister's evil.

Then she thought of Liam Archer. Liam, who was not only a

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talented musician, but was a man she could possibly grow to love. If he lived that long.

What could she do? She decided she would accept Zar's invitation to the Troubadour. Darkside was playing, and Liam could be in danger. At the very least, she had to keep Zar from impersonating her.

She got up and went to her bedroom. She flicked on the lights and opened the closet. What did one wear to a showdown?

CHAPTER 4

Midnight Rider

Ashara glanced at her bare arms as she drove down Santa Monica Boulevard. They were only faintly corrugated from that morning's brush with the sun. No one but she would even notice.

She checked her eyes in the rearview mirror. They were heavily made up, but tastefully so. She wore dark gold eye shadow on her lids, with just a hint of glitter at the brow ridge, and lots of eye kohl with slightly upswept Cleopatra lines at each corner. It went well with her peacock-feather choker, her bronze art-deco patterned halter top and her skintight, funky, rhinestone-studded blue jeans.

She pulled in, using a side street, and parked in the alley behind the club. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself for whatever she might encounter.

There was a small crowd hanging out in front, and a few people lined up at the box office. Ashara could hear music coming from the

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Troub's open door; Darkside wasn't on yet. It was fairly early, and the boulevard was jammed with cruisers wending their way to the Sunset Strip and Hollywood Boulevard.

She went to the box office and tried to pay admission but, as was the case more often than not, as a pretty girl she got in free. She scanned the sidewalk and alcove for her sister, but all she sensed were mortals.

Ashara entered the dark, smoky club and made her way up to the balcony. She had a panoramic view of everything from there. She spotted a few acquaintances below, and that damnable waitress from the Cat & Fiddle. The bimbo was up front, shaking her stuff for the band onstage.

Where was Zariaz? Ashara did not feel her sister's presence at all—not physically or psychically. Although she didn't feel anything, she knew she couldn't entirely trust that. She had let her sixth sense wither away and she felt as helpless as any mortal. She shivered, despite the body heat and warm smoke that practically suffocated her.

She would be the first to admit that Zariaz scared her. Ashara had become strong over the years, yet at her core was still the sweet, fragile girl full of goodness. Even though she had to kill in order to live, she tried never to hurt anyone innocent or healthy. Even though she was a predator, she still sometimes jumped at her own shadow. She definitely didn't want to fight, but when she was backed into a corner—like now, and as she had been in 1912—she could be a formidable opponent.

The fact that Zariaz was even alive amazed her; that she had come back to fulfill her curse terrified her; and that she had impersonated Ashara infuriated her. Ashara was a jumble of raw emotions. It seemed the mortals sensed something wrong with her and they gave her a wide berth, avoiding her gaze. Ashara took a deep breath and unclenched her grip from the railing—her fingernails left eight deep crescents in the wood.

She turned her attention to the band onstage. What was their

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name...? Then she remembered: they were the too-little, too-late flower-power psychedelic jam band out of Japan, Teriyaki Migraine. She tried to listen, but they were beyond trifling. She kept her vigil.

Teriyaki Migraine finally finished, the house music came on for awhile, then Darkside took the stage. They took it as if they owned it. Mesmerized, Ashara almost forgot Zariaz as she watched. *Almost*.

They played the same set as the previous night, but this time they closed with “Cinnamon Girl.” Ashara felt as though Liam was singing right to her, but she didn’t know if he could actually see her. She had not told him she would be there tonight.

The minute the band left the stage, Ashara practically ran down the stairs and made her way to the side door by the stage. A beautiful young thing like herself had no problem gaining access to the backstage area and dressing rooms, but if she’d had to, she could have used her press credentials.

It didn’t take long to find Liam—all she had to do was follow the trail of bare backs, tight butts, long legs, and blonde hair. Groupies. Right up front was the Cat & Fiddle cocktail waitress making her simpering play, but as soon as Liam’s eye caught Ashara’s he got up and went to her.

“How’s my Sleeping Beauty?” he said, giving her a perfunctory peck on the cheek.

“I’m wide awake now. Liam, I’m so sorry. I—” Ashara could feel the jealousy of the other women in the tiny room as if it were something tangible, but that was secondary. Her only concern was for Liam. Concern that he might be angry with her, and concern that Zariaz might be lying in wait for him.

He held up a hand. “No need to apologize, ducky. I understand.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I think you need to stay away from those funny cigarettes,” he grinned, ts-k-ts-k.

Ashara started to protest, then realized that was a pretty good

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excuse.

Liam continued. "Posing nude, smoking weed, staying out 'til all hours...I *like* you!"

Ashara laughed. "Hey, I'm your go-to girl when it comes to the glamorous life of rock-n-roll." They walked off, distancing themselves a bit from the crowd. "But seriously," she went on. "That wasn't me in the magazine."

"Don't tell me: you have a twin sister."

Ashara looked up into Liam's dark blue eyes. He seemed so sweet. She couldn't bear to think of him in danger. She would have to find some way to explain Zariaz, and she would have to go on tour with the band for at least awhile, until she knew what Zar was up to.

"I'll tell you *everything*," she replied. "Let's go to your place and rap. My car's out back."

"I won't be needing a ride tonight," Liam said. "I've got my bike."

Ashara drove her candy-apple red convertible fast, but Liam kept right alongside on his wicked black chopper. Once again, Ashara wondered how he could afford the luxury...most, if not all, budding rock musicians she knew were flat broke. He had the petite hilltop mansion, fully furnished with antiques, the guitar collection, and the Harley. Perhaps he was British royalty or some spoiled rich kid, only toying with music. No, that couldn't be—he was far too talented to be toying.

She remembered one time when she had to do an album cover for one of those trust-fund kids who thought he could buy his way into the hippie culture with simpering music and expensive designer headbands. It was 1965, and it was one of her first big assignments. She was trying to make a good impression, but ended up bursting out laughing at him when she realized that inside an hour he'd flashed the peace sign twelve times, and said "man" (while trying valiantly to cover his upper crust Bostonian accent) thirty-four times. He demanded that she leave, and of course his LP tanked, but her photos of him had made him a teen

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heartthrob...for about two months.

When they got to Liam's house, they sat side by side at the bar and the first thing Ashara did was unburden her mind. "Forgive my bluntness, but how can you afford all this stuff? Darkside's a new group and I know you haven't been on the scene long—I checked."

"You did?" he seemed taken aback, in an amused way. "I'm flattered that you think enough of me to do actual research."

"So...are you the heir to a fortune, or what?"

"Or what. I actually made my money in the stock market. I got a hot tip," he said, suggestively. Ashara nearly fell off her barstool at that tone and the promise it held. She glanced at the Frank Lloyd Wright-style clock on the wall. It was only 2:00 A.M. She could take her time tonight...that is, if she could relax and enjoy.

"That's lucky. Did you always want to be a musician?"

"Not always. But once I put my mind on something, it practically becomes an obsession. Back home in England there are plenty of guitar players, so that's why I decided to come here."

Ashara could have reminded him of all the U.K. rockers living in Laurel Canyon but didn't bother. Instead, she asked another question. "How did you hook up with the band?"

"I wish I could tell you some fascinating, profound story about kismet and all that rubbish, but the honest truth is, I put an ad in the paper and held auditions."

Ashara sighed. "Yeah, that is pretty unromantic. I suggest you work on that story a little when it comes time for the interviews. You know, once your tour starts you'll have rock-n-writers from *Creem*, *Rock Scene*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Guitar Pick*...you name it...all over you for the cover story. Maybe even *under* the covers," she laughed. "I understand *Rock Scene* has some pretty foxy ladies on their payroll."

"What about you? Have you given any thought to my proposition?" Liam leaned closer to her, putting his hand on her knee. He certainly wasn't shy.

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“Which one?” she asked.

“On the road.” He paused. “*And* under the covers.”

“Let’s address the latter, then we’ll see about the former.” She’d talked herself on and off the tour a half-dozen times since walking through his front door.

“Is that journalist pillow talk? I love it...” Liam cradled her face in his hands, and, leaning forward, he kissed her ever so softly.

For Ashara it was kind of like being broadsided by a Mack truck. Well, maybe a bit nicer than that. When he tentatively tickled her tongue with his, she responded with a passion that seemed to take him by surprise. She could feel his barstool teetering, but she didn’t care, as she curled her denim-clad legs around his.

She embraced him, pulling him closer still. His warmth felt so good in her arms; even though there were similarities, it was nothing like feeding. She fed because she needed to; she was doing this because she wanted to. Ashara’s senses were naturally honed to predator sharpness—she could feel Liam’s heart beating, and she could hear the blood it pumped. Her hand trailed down his side and to his crotch, and she discovered that his blood was going other places, too. She moaned with longing as she tickle-teased him with her fingernail tips.

“Oh, baby,” Liam whispered, “I want you so much.”

He slid off the barstool and stood before her, sliding her body forward and pressing her pelvis to his. He kissed her hard, his tongue darting in time with his hips. The friction of their jeans rubbing against each other quickly heated them to a fever pitch.

Ashara could hardly breathe. She had to take off some of her clothes. As if reading her mind, Liam’s hands found the bow at her back and slid the ribbons free. He stepped back and let the halter top fall to the floor. His gaze fell to her breasts, and his look of unbridled desire spoke volumes.

He bent forward and took one of her nipples in his mouth. Gently holding it with his teeth, his tongue flicked across the tip, sending

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Ashara into ecstasy's stratosphere. Every pulse-point in her body was throbbing with longing. She buried her hands in Liam's long, silky mane and mussed it between her fingers. He kissed her breast all over, then moved to the other one. Ashara could hardly take it anymore.

She heard the lub-dub of his heart pounding harder and harder. *Clip-clop. Clip-clop.* Wait. That wasn't heartbeats—it was *hoofbeats*.

Zariaz.

"What was that?" Ashara gasped, pulling back.

Liam was still lost in the moment. "What?"

"Don't you hear that? A horse."

"Huh?" He exhaled and listened. "Oh, yeah. The neighborhood kids ride across my property sometimes."

"In the middle of the night?"

"Sure. What difference does it make? Come here, baby," Liam said as he pulled her to him.

Ashara pulled away. Zariaz's weakness was horses, and she always had at least one prized steed. She'd know Ashara would remember that, and she had the sense of drama to do something just like this: make her presence known, but with as much spooky subtlety as possible. Whether it was her or not, she had wedged herself into Ashara's thoughts and the romance was ruined.

"Don't tell me," Liam sighed. "You're feeling very sleepy."

"No," Ashara said apologetically. "I want you, Liam. I want you more than I've wanted any man in"—she almost said decades, but caught herself—"in a long time. But it has to be right. I hope you understand." Against her will, her voice broke and her eyes teared up. She was feeling terrified, frustrated and sad all at once. She didn't want to scare Liam off, but she was always one to wear her heart on her sleeve and after a century and spare change, it didn't look like she was going to be able to switch gears now.

Liam considered her for a long moment. She couldn't tell what he was thinking. Then he reached out and wiped a tear from her cheek. "I

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can't say I understand," he admitted. "But I want to. I want to know you. I want to you to trust me enough someday to tell me what's wrong." He bent down and picked her top up off the wood floor.

She sighed with relief. "Thank you, Liam. Believe me, it's heavy. I wouldn't be acting like this if it wasn't. You don't know me very well yet, but I'm not a game-player. What you see is what you get." She hoped that someday she would even be able to tell him her innermost secret...she would have to wait and see. She put her top back on, and Liam tied it in a bow behind her.

Then Liam excused himself, ostensibly to change into something more comfortable, but when he was gone longer than a few moments, Ashara had a feeling he was doing something else to make *himself* more comfortable. "Poor Li," she chuckled softly to herself as she waited at the bar. She poured herself an anisette, breathed in the sweet licorice aroma, and listened intently for more hoofbeats.

Liam came back, wearing a red silk Japanese robe. "Hope you don't mind," he said. "Those tight jeans tend to cut off one's circulation."

"I know," Ashara unbuttoned hers for emphasis, even though she had no belly to speak of. "I poured you a drink. Here." She held the tiny cut-crystal liqueur glass out to him and kicked off her shoes.

He took his seat next to her, and, as if to show there were no hard feelings, he gave her a peck on the cheek and stroked her arm before taking the glass. "Sexy shoes," he commented. "But not as sexy as your little feet."

He took a sip of his drink and that, mingled with his breath, was like an intoxicant to Ashara. She took a deep inhale through her nose. "Can I tell you something?"

"You can tell me anything, Ash. Please."

"Well, first of all, I prefer Ashara—Ash is my professional name."

"Ashara," he repeated with elaborate articulation. He gave her another of his long, silent gazes. His pupils narrowed ever so slightly. "Ashara. It's gorgeous—it suits you. Who named you?"

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“My mother. She was from Jamaica.”

“And Konrad—was your father Germanic, or is that your married name?”

“No. I’ve never been married. My father was a strapping blonde German guy, with icy blue eyes and pale skin.” She smiled, his beloved face so clear in her memory. “My mom was small, with hazel eyes and dark skin.”

“They sure made a beautiful baby.” Liam gently twisted one of her ringlets. “Your hair is like cinnamon.” His finger trailed her jawline. “Your skin is like café au lait.” His touch moved to her breasts. “Your nipples are like chocolate candy kisses.” He put his hand back in his lap. “Okay, that’s it. I’m hungry!”

Ashara giggled softly. “Let’s see...you could have a fattening latte with chocolate and cinnamon sprinkled in...” She couldn’t resist teasing a bit. “And a nice, sweet, juicy cherry on top.”

Liam was right there with her. “I’ve got the whipped cream, baby.”

They laughed easily with each other, then Ashara turned the conversation back to where she’d tried to head it before.

“I really do have a twin sister,” she said. “She posed for that magazine, not me. I know it sounds pat, but it’s true.

“For one thing, I’m a very talented photographer. I could’ve set up my tripod and autotimer, and done a damn sight better.” She grinned at him to show she was kidding, then continued. “She did that photo layout as a statement to me. You see, we don’t get along. We’ve been estranged for ages. I’d rather not go into detail right now, but suffice to say, she’s not normal. She wants me to know she’s back in my life and it’s not for a happy family reunion. She wants to hurt me. She wants to hurt people I care about. She’s done it before.

“I don’t want to lay a trip on you, and I understand if you don’t want to see me again after tonight—but you could be in danger.”

Liam chuckled. “Hmmm. Sounds kind of exciting, like Peter Gunn or James Bond. Surrounded by femme fatales.”

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“Liam, I’m not kidding around. I’m serious.”

“Okay, okay,” he said. “I believe you. And I meant what I said about wanting to get to know you better. There’s safety in numbers. Come on tour with me.”

She wouldn’t give herself time to change her mind. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Liam repeated incredulously. “Wow. That’s great!” He gave her a quick hug. “I want you to be Darkside’s official photographer.”

“Thanks. I’m really flattered.”

“Hey, guess what? I got a mock-up of the album cover today.” Liam got up and went into the foyer. He came back with a large manila envelope, which he opened on top of the bar. He slid the proof out for Ashara to see. “It’s brilliant, isn’t it?”

She was impressed. It was same photo she herself would have chosen, and the designer had done a very nice, understated job on the text. The word “Darkside” was in a gothic font, in a blue-gray marble tone, and was worked into the ledge that Liam reclined upon as if it were engraved there. On the back cover was a stock photo of one of the Notre Dame gargoyles, and the songs were listed in order against the gray sky, using the same stylized font.

“Very impressive,” she said, sliding it back into the protective envelope. “I’d buy it.”

“I hope you will,” Liam winked.

She winked back. “No free copy for your cinnamon girl?”

“So, you knew that finale was for you, huh?”

“Of course. How could I forget my first guitar lesson?”

“I won’t either. In fact, I’m going to close every show with ‘Cinnamon Girl.’ Just for you.”

Ashara wasn’t sure how to respond. Her heart swelled, and she was afraid she really would fall in love with Liam. She could feel it coming on already. Way too soon. Silly. She smiled at him, then changed the subject. “So, when exactly does the tour begin?”

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They chatted about that for awhile, and then it was time for Ashara to go. Liam saw her to the door.

“Be careful,” he said earnestly.

“Don’t worry, I will,” she assured him.

“I know this may seem like an obvious question, but have you called the police about your sister?”

“Of course,” Ashara lied. She knew what they would say, though, if she had notified them. “They said it’s a family spat and they can’t do anything until some crime is actually committed. She hasn’t really *done* anything, Liam. I’m sure she’s just trying to spook me.”

“That’s not what you said earlier. You implied she’s...unbalanced. You don’t know what she’s going to do.”

The genuine concern in his eyes warmed Ashara from head to toe. She said nothing; she just lingered on the porch.

Liam crossed his arms. “I’ll bet you’re expecting a goodnight kiss. Well, hard cheese. You’re not getting one.”

Ashara scoffed indignantly. “You can’t leave me high and dry! How about one of your easy riddles?”

“Easy? Easy!” Liam returned. “Okay, baby. You asked for it.” He thought for a moment, then smiled smugly. “I run over fields and woods all day, under the bed at night I sit not alone. With my long tongue hanging out, waiting for a bone. What am I?”

“A bone, you say?” Ashara shook her head and tsk-tsked. “Promises, promises.”

“Hey!” Liam called out as she turned and strode to her car. “You’re the tease, not me.”

Ashara paused and glanced back, hoping he didn’t mean that.

He was smiling. He winked at her, his open eye sparkling with mirth.

“I’ll make it worth your wait,” she promised and got into her car without another backward glance. Before pulling away she called, “It’s a shoe. Too easy!”

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* * *

Ashara got home early for a change—she didn't see even a glimmer of dawn as she pulled into her driveway. All was quiet. She didn't feel any impression of Zariaz at all. That actually unnerved her; she'd rather have a sense of where the enemy was.

How sad, she thought. The enemy. My own flesh and blood.

She locked the car and went inside. Lovecraft was dozing on the couch, and the casket was empty. No love letters tonight. Everything looked fine.

Ashara downed a couple of aspirin for the tension headache she'd developed, then disrobed and took a hot shower. She couldn't help listening for clip-clops over the sound of running water, nor could she keep visions of the famous *Psycho* film scene from invading her brain.

Not that stab wounds could kill her. But they would sure hurt, and they would certainly disable her for awhile.

That was how the Dark Council ensnared Zariaz. Ashara had been the lure. She had delivered her sister into the hands of doom...she'd tried to tell herself for decades now that it had been the right thing to do. Zariaz was a murderer of the innocent; she killed with a recklessness that could put all of their kind in terrible peril; she ended the lives of those who created beauty, only to feed her own miserable, self-serving curse. She had to be stopped. There was no other way.

Ashara's blood ran cold as the hot water drenched her skin. She remembered with terrible clarity the volume of Zariaz's screams as the rapiers plunged into her. But no savior answered her cries in the dark, all-enveloping jungle. She fell to the ground weak, almost lifeless. Looking at her twin's shadow-cut face, Ashara saw what she herself might look like in death. She'd run back into the jungle before the final blow, but she would never forget it.

And the guilt would never leave her.

She stepped from the shower and turned the water off. Despite the smooth, sweet clean of her skin, she felt dirty.

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Ashara deserved Zariaz's hatred. She hadn't when they were mortals—she never understood why her twin despised her so, why she had damned her for all eternity—but now she felt she *did* deserve Zar's wrath.

Even so, she didn't want to suffer for it. She wanted to live, to keep her happiness, and maybe even find love. Was that asking so much? Her life had been lonely for so many years. She didn't even have any friends. She had acquaintances and business associates, and she did go to parties and the movies, but there was no one to share her life with. Or better said, to share her time with.

Ashara sighed. She felt the irresistible lure of sleep coming on. She towel-dried her hair and headed for her coffin. The lid was open, and Lovecraft hopped inside just before she did. Before Ashara closed up, the cat growled and his muscles tensed like compressed spring coils.

"What is it, Lovey?" Ashara whispered. She heard nothing, sensed nothing.

The Siamese half-rose and glared toward the front door. He hissed and tried to get up. But he was too tired. Ashara strained to hear...and was finally rewarded with a faint scuffling sound. She hoped it was only a raccoon looking for her garbage cans. There were lots of wild, nocturnal animals in the Hollywood Hills and they had quite a nightlife.

Then she saw the doorknob start to turn. The door was, of course, locked. But Ashara knew that was only a temporary stopgap to someone who really wanted to get in. She yawned. Her eyelids felt like anvils.

If it was Zar, shouldn't she be just as tired? Dawn was coming, and it was coming fast.

Ashara knew from experience it was not possible to stay conscious much longer. All she could do was shut the coffin lid and bolt herself and Lovecraft inside, and hope for the best.

Her last conscious thought was a nightmarish, cartoonish vision of a cross between Norman Bates and Professor Van Helsing driving a stake

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into her heart as he cursed her soul to eternal damnation.

CHAPTER 5

Sunshine of Your Love

The morning Ashara had seen her doorknob twisting, she later woke to a pile of horse manure on her porch. There had been no further “statements” from Zariaz of late, but Ashara knew she wasn’t being let off that easily. Zar was either somewhere mustering reinforcements or she was quietly watching and waiting. No matter what, Ashara was uneasy.

Although they kept in touch over the phone, Ashara and Liam had not seen each other in several days. He had nonstop rehearsals, and Ashara was preparing for her time away. Lovecraft would stay home; Ashara set up a temporary sanctuary for him in the bedroom closet, since he was not strong enough to work the lid and the bolt on their coffin. He had a cat door to get in and out of the house, but Ashara knew he’d probably spend most of his days ensconced in the earth. He really was an outdoor cat at heart, but he loved his mistress dearly, so

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he stayed in with her most of the time.

Two evenings before it was time to go, Ashara thought maybe she should tell the neighbors she was going off on assignment and ask if they could they keep an eye on her place. Then she realized she didn't really know any of her neighbors even though she'd lived in the same house since the 1940s. It was getting easier and easier to escape detection. People were much more transient these days, and those who stayed in one place tended to keep to themselves. Nobody brought home-baked pies to new neighbors anymore; nobody gave a damn who she was or what she did.

Ashara did take care to change cars every few years, and to have her house repainted once or twice a decade. If there were people in sight when it was time for her to go out and feed, she would quickly get into her car and drive away with the top up. No matter how desperate things might become she never, ever took her meals at home. The longer she lived, the easier it became.

Easier in some ways, harder in others.

She was a prisoner of her thirst, and sometimes she felt as though she had been sentenced to life in a cell made of skin. She was not a solitary creature by design, but she'd had to become one by necessity. Her friendships and love affairs were so sadly brief...after ten or fifteen years, people she was close to began to notice that she did not age, that she was never seen in the light of day.

So what was she doing letting herself think about Liam as not just an affair, but as a love affair? How long could it last? Was her heart up to its inevitable ending?

I should be so lucky, she thought. Zariaz and the curse were never far from her thoughts. Her mind flitted from option to option. She could just take off with Lovecraft and leave all the complications behind; she could seek the Dark Council and try to finish Zariaz altogether; she could warn the music community about the murderer in her midst; she could... It was pointless. She didn't know what to do. Even though she

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was an immortal, sometimes she felt all too human.

* * *

Liam wanted Ashara to ride on the tour bus with them, but she told him she'd fly from city to city and make her own hotel reservations. She told him she was claustrophobic, because she knew she could never find enough protection from the sunlight in the bus no matter how well she hid herself...and how would she explain that, anyway?

The tour was going to start in Phoenix, then go through a few cities in Texas, hit Tampa, a few clubs in New York City, St. Paul, Seattle, then San Francisco and L.A. Even if she wasn't a vampire, the thought of a bus ride with all those people for a solid eight weeks wasn't very appealing to Ashara.

She felt sorry for Tera, but figured the bassist was probably used to the company of men by now—and if she weren't, she'd get acclimated pretty quickly. Ashara had followed enough bands on tour to know that the road was no place for a girly girl. Judging from what little she'd seen of Tera, she was anything but.

Ashara admired the bassist; it had been a long while since she'd felt any sort of kinship with another female, but she did think that in another lifetime perhaps they could have been friends. The two had not spoken much, but there was an interesting independence and a fierce intelligence that bubbled below the sulky surface of the dark, frail-looking girl.

Ashara took a night flight to Phoenix and was settled in at the hotel by the time the band arrived. She stopped off to feed at the red-light district, then met Darkside at the club for their sound check.

They were playing at a very trendy nightclub, Cattle Call, for four nights in a row. Despite the western décor and the fried rattlesnake appetizers, the club was all rock-n-roll at heart. Some of the coolest artists had played there—from The Byrds to Jefferson Airplane—and it was quite a coup for a new group like Darkside to kick off its maiden tour within those hallowed walls.

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Ashara took dozens of photos that first evening during the sound check, exploiting the funky cowboy set-up to its fullest. There was a mechanical bull onstage and she got the band members to give it whirl, but they did draw the line at wearing ten-gallons and bandanas.

When it came time for the actual performance, Ashara was right up front getting stunning, dramatic close-ups despite the jostle of the crowd. Sometimes at concerts—particularly at the larger stadiums—she thought she might have an inkling of what it felt like to be a front-line war photographer.

Darkside was well-practiced, and they were comfortable in front of the audience thanks to their club experience in L.A. If anything, the Phoenix crowd was more enthusiastic, and Liam played to them in kind. He was like a dervish onstage, whirling, dancing and strutting his stuff. Buck bashed away at the back, Joel pounded his keyboard with expert enthusiasm, and the quiet, enigmatic Tera had all the men in the audience entranced.

“Butterfly Kiss” was getting lots of local airplay, so of course that was a major crowd pleaser. As promised, Liam closed the show with “Cinnamon Girl.” Ashara was close to the lip of the elevated stage, and Liam got on bended knee as he sang the verses right to her.

“I wanna live with a cinnamon girl, I could be happy the rest of my life with a cinnamon girl. Ten silver saxes, a bass with a bow. The singer relaxes and waits between shows for his cinnamon girl...”

The changing of the word “drummer” for “singer” was not lost on Ashara. She decided that tonight would be the night. She had missed him terribly in their nights apart, and her body ached for him. She would let nothing come between them this time.

After the show, Ashara went backstage. The dressing room was tiny, but attention had been paid to coziness, and there was plenty of food and booze to keep the band and their entourage happy. Tera was in another room changing when Ashara entered, but the guys were hanging out, chatting with the club’s manager and some of the local

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deejays. Ashara sat on an overstuffed loveseat and got her cameras and equipment in order. After a few minutes, Liam joined her.

"You were amazing," she said, giving him a friendly peck on the cheek. "I've never seen you so hyped up. You're looking very fit, too, I might add."

"Ah, yes." Liam grinned. "I've been working out." He flexed his muscles and made a fist. "My body is a deadly weapon." Then he sighed and sagged. "It's killing me!"

"Hmm...okay. I hope you're not too tired to come see my lovely suite at the hotel."

"Suite? Shoot, all I've got is a shoebox facing the alley. I'm *there*." He smiled at her tenderly, and his eyes grew soft. "I missed you, Ashara."

"You did?" she blurted. That sounded rather desperate. But maybe she *was* desperate. The days apart, even though they were just blips in time, had been hard on her. She hadn't thought he might miss her also. After all, they really didn't know each other all that well when it came right down to it. "I missed you, too." She tugged gently at one of his golden ringlets. "I want to make up for lost time...let's get out of here."

Tera walked in before he could reply.

"Great show, Liam" Tera said, perching on the arm of the small sofa next to him. "Let's hope we can do it like that for three more nights." The small, waifish brunette had washed off all her makeup and changed into jeans and a tank top. She looked like a fresh-faced girl of fifteen at the most.

Liam put his hand on her knee. "I'm sure we can."

Ashara felt a bit of jealousy creeping in, threatening to spoil her lovey-dovey mood. Despite her hope of a female friend in Tera, she still wasn't sure about those two. "Liam," she prompted, not liking the edge to her voice, "are you ready to go?"

They took a cab to the hotel and Liam leaned against Ashara in the backseat, his head resting on her narrow shoulder. "Have you heard

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anything more from your sister?" he asked. "I've been worried about you."

"Thanks, Li," she said, stroking his hair. "But she's stayed away. I'm not sure what to make of that, but I am grateful." She really didn't want to talk about Zariaz right now.

"I looked at that centerfold again," Liam went on. "Now that I know you, I can easily tell it's not you. There's a certain hardness to her expression, nothing like yours."

That comforted Ashara. She hoped that Zariaz would never be able to trick him. But perhaps it was best to warn him anyway. "She's fooled others in the past, pretending to be me. I hope you'll be careful."

"Ashara, you're scaring me." He sat up and looked into her eyes. "Are you sure she isn't dangerous? Are you sure you don't want to try calling the police again?"

"I'm sure I don't want to talk about her anymore. At least not tonight. I want tonight to be ours and ours alone. Please." She leaned forward and kissed his lips ever so softly.

He sighed. "Okay. But remember, I'm here for you."

The cab pulled to a stop in front of the hotel lobby. Ashara paid the driver, and she and Liam walked hand in hand past the front desk, to the golden mirrored elevator. As if awaiting them, the doors opened wide before them when they approached.

"Your chariot, milady," Liam said, ushering her in first with a grand sweep of his arm.

She gave him a regal bow and stepped inside. He joined her, and as soon as the doors closed, they began a fervent kiss. They had their arms wrapped around each other, and Ashara had one leg twined around him. It took them a moment to realize they weren't going anywhere.

"What floor?" Liam asked, chuckling softly.

Ashara pressed the button, then leaned back against the mirrored wall. "You know, they have cameras in here."

"No!" Liam guffawed.

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“Yes,” Ashara insisted. “I heard about it on a news show on TV.”

An impish glint crept into Liam’s baby blues. “Well, how about a little show for that lonely security guard?” He began to unzip his jeans.

Ashara stayed his hand. “Liam, no! Do you want to get us kicked out of here?”

“You’re blushing, baby. Who would’ve known you were an old fuddy-duddy?” He chuckled her under the chin and she turned away, giggling.

“I’m *not* a fuddy-duddy,” she protested. “I’ll prove it to you.” She stepped toward him with mock menace. The bell dinged and the elevator doors opened. “To be continued,” she promised.

She took his hand and led him to her room. She unlocked the door, and they stepped inside.

“Whew!” Liam whistled through his front teeth. “Much nicer than my shoebox.”

“I got it with us in mind,” Ashara said, walking into the small living room. Beyond that was a bar, then a large, sunken room with plush carpet, a round bed and a wall of closets. The décor was southwestern chic, but her open suitcases, clothes scattered in disarray, and a framed photo of Lovecraft on the bureau lent some feel of homeliness.

“Is this your pussy?” Liam asked.

“Liam!” Ashara admonished, blushing anew.

He indicated the photo. “What? That’s what we call cats in England.” His countenance was all innocence. He crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. “You have such a dirty mind. You’re a bad, bad girl.”

She sat on the bed, knees apart. She kicked off her shoes and slowly began to hike up her long peasant skirt. “Come here.”

Liam, arms still crossed, shook his head. “Hmm. I think you’re a bad influence on me. Besides, I stink. I need to take a bath after all that sweating onstage.” He looked around, then located the bathroom door. He stepped inside, flipping on the lights. “Wow! A Jacuzzi. I think I’m

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in the wrong line of work. How much does photography pay?"

"Hey, I told you...I splurged just for us, just for tonight. This is not the norm."

"Trying to seduce me with this fancy room, are you? Then once you've had your way with me, it's back to shoeboxes facing alleys?"

She shrugged. "Take your bath, but hurry." Not only did she want to be with him, she knew she only had a few hours of life left tonight. It would be hard telling him to leave before morning, but she would have to.

Liam went into the bathroom, coyly shutting the door behind him. Ashara heard the water running. She lay back on the bed and shut her eyes. She stayed like that for a few moments, then she sensed something. She turned her head and opened her eyes—she saw the message light blinking on her phone. Who knew she was here? Could it be a message from Zar?

She decided to ignore it. And she decided not to let Liam have his bath in peace.

Ashara got up and walked to the door. She tested the crystal knob and found it unlocked. She opened the door and stepped in. The lights were off. The glow from the bedroom lamps lent a certain twilight quality to the bathroom.

Liam was in the recessed Jacuzzi, soaking in bubbles up to his chin. "What took you so long?"

Ashara stepped toward the bath. "Is it hot?" she asked, taking her watch off. She set it on the sink, and started to unbutton her blouse.

Suddenly, she was soaked. Liam had taken her wrist and pulled her into the water with him. "Liam!" she shrieked. "My clothes!"

"Oh, yes. We'll have to get rid of those." He tugged at her waterlogged skirt and she wriggled out of it. They both finished unbuttoning her blouse and she cast it aside.

His naked body was soft and slippery against hers. She slithered in beside him and he put his arms around her neck. Pressing his wet lips

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to hers, he kissed Ashara gently, tonguing ever so slightly. She stroked the length of his torso and teased his inner thighs with her fingernail tips, causing him to squirm with ticklish delight.

Like a magnet to metal, Liam's body turned and angled toward Ashara's and she could feel his hardness poking against her belly, probing lower. She got her leg over his hip and pulled him closer, guiding him inside.

The Jacuzzi was terribly uncomfortable—it was like trying to make love on a slab of granite. Such a soft, tender act necessitated a soft, tender place. As if of one mind, they rose and stepped out of the tub. The sight of Liam in his excited state, blond tendrils of hair dark and wet against his forehead, his muscular chest heaving, almost made Ashara's fangs extend. Even though sex and feeding were two different things, both had a certain sensuality and if a vampire wasn't careful, the lines could easily blur.

She made her mouth busy with other things as she knelt before him on the carpeted floor of the bedroom suite, digging her nails into his hips.

He gripped her hair and moaned with ecstasy. He gasped, "Ashara, please stop—I can't take it. I want to be inside you." He guided her to her feet, and they kissed, fondled and fumbled their way to the tightly-made bed.

Ashara fell on her back and Liam mounted her at once, his face buried in the crook of her neck. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and let her pent-up passion for him take over. It had been so very long since she'd even wanted to make love; she felt as though she couldn't possibly get enough of him. She pushed hard, as if she were trying to enter *him*.

They climaxed in quick succession, and Ashara felt dizzy with delight. Spent, Liam rolled onto his back, spread-eagled and panting. They lay together without saying anything for several minutes.

Then Ashara stole a glance at the clock on the nightstand. She was

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only good for about another hour and a half. “Shall we finish that bath?”

“Mmmm.” Liam nodded lazily, his eyes half-closed. “I’m all sweaty again.”

Ashara got up and padded naked into the bathroom. She picked her soaked clothes up off the floor and put them into the sink. She let the tub drain some, then filled it with more hot water. Adding some cinnamon-scented oil she’d brought from home, she slipped in and called for Liam.

The lights were still off in the bathroom, and when he appeared in the doorway he was in silhouette—he looked like a more gifted statue of David. He walked inside, then stepped into the water. They sat face to face, and washed each other’s hair. Liam made shampoo horns on her, and Ashara practiced her butterfly kiss on him. They talked about trivial things and made each other laugh.

They found that they were both reading the same book, Thomas Tryon’s *The Other*. It was a huge bestseller, and countless people were reading it, but they thought it was pretty cool they’d both chosen the same book...until the subject matter struck them.

“Sorry,” Liam said. “Evil twin. Hmmm...”

The Other told the story of the Perry twins, Niles and Holland, thirteen years old, identical twins born on either side of midnight. Thus they had not only different birthdays, but also different astrological signs. They were as different as day from night, one friendly, sunny and outgoing, and the other deep, dark and diabolically evil. In the novel their father was dead, their mother was imprisoned within her own creeping madness, and their grandmother, blessed and cursed with the Sight, was unable to stop the horror about to engulf the whole family.

Though there were more differences than similarities, Ashara wondered who had influenced the author. Or who Tryon *really* was. She knew she was being totally and completely paranoid, so she pushed the thoughts from her mind and enjoyed being cradled in Liam’s arms.

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But she decided she wasn't going to finish reading the book.

Too soon, it was time for Liam to go. Ashara was feeling the big sleep coming on, and all she needed was to slip underwater and give poor Liam the scare of his young life. She stood, oily water sluicing off her taut, slender body. "Sorry to say it, but it's time for you to go. I need my beauty sleep."

She expected him to argue about staying with her, but he didn't. She wasn't sure whether to be relieved or insulted. He dressed and combed his hair, while she put on a long, silky robe.

As they stood in the open doorway, he cupped her chin in one hand. "Goodnight, sweet princess," he paraphrased. "May angels wing you to your rest." Liam kissed her lips and gave her one of his winks.

How sweet, she thought, as she watched him walk down the hall. But then her weak heart rallied against her breastbone...wasn't that a permanent goodbye in some Shakespeare play? She never had much liked the Bard, but she couldn't help but be familiar with his words. It seemed they were everywhere.

A permanent goodbye. Her mind raced to the memory of the message light on her phone.

"Be sure and lock that door behind me," Liam said.

"Roger," she nodded once.

"You fancy a good rogering, baby? I just gave you one!"

She laughed, then shut the door and locked it, after making sure the Do Not Disturb sign was in place. Ashara walked to the phone. She looked at it. Did Liam know something...?

God, you're paranoid; first the book, now this, she chided herself. It just seemed odd that Liam came into her life right when Zariaz returned. Was he one of hers? She shook her head. *I'm awful. I don't deserve him.* Her body suddenly tingled with afterglow. *Yes, I do.*

The phone. She picked it up and someone at the front desk answered. "This is Ash Konrad in Room 1116. Do I have a message?"

Papers shuffled in the background. "Yes, you do," said the pleasant,

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professional female voice. “Your sister called to let you know she’s running late, but she’s on her way.”

Ashara muttered a thank you, then replaced the receiver.

Her blood was giving her a predawn warning as it began to itch and burn in her veins. Ashara drew the heavy curtains closed, then pulled the blanket and bedspread off the round mattress. She dragged the bedding to the walk-in closet and stepped inside, closing the door behind her. She curled up on the floor and covered herself.

As she drifted off, she didn’t think of Zariaz or of Liam—she remembered the time she had tried to cheat the sun, years and years before, by moving north. The Land of Midnight Sun—the North American version, anyway.

During the summer months, Alaskans enjoyed extended daylight hours everywhere. The farther north a person traveled, the greater the difference, she’d heard. In Anchorage, the sun set as late as 10:30 p.m. In Barrow, the northernmost town in Alaska, the sun didn’t set for 84 days. Of course, the flip side of that was darkness for two straight months in the wintertime...not that it mattered to Ashara. Although the brightness did indeed spiral around the clock without end in Barrow, Ashara found herself still tied to her cruel twelve-hour cycle of life and death and unable to stand the sun’s light in any case.

Not only that, Alaska in the 1800s was duller than a muleskinner’s knife at the end of the season. She’d learned a lot about mules and prospectors, actually. Much more than she cared to. The wilds were beautiful, but there was something about living in a bustling city that fed her soul and kept her going.

However, she wasn’t going anywhere now. Ashara hugged the blanket to herself and felt her blood slow and thicken, standing still in her veins, weighting her down and taking her into the sleep.

* * *

Ashara found the tour fun and easy. She’d traveled as the official photographer with bands before, but she’d never been in love with the

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lead singer before. It was beyond wonderful. Every night that she awoke, she felt truly reborn—fresh and new. Almost alive for real.

Finding meals was easier on the road. She had no worries about over-hunting in one area, and since she wasn't going to be staying around, she barely bothered to cover her tracks. Except, of course, she always disguised the bite wounds; she did not want the Dark Council after her.

The Dark Council was older than God. If there was a God—she wasn't really sure of their take on that. It wasn't like they put out a newsletter. Generally, vampires didn't hear from the Dark Council unless they were in trouble. The main thing that could get a vampire in trouble was drawing attention to the *Homo Noctrus* race. Unlike mortals, vampires were not interested in taking over the world. They wanted a quiet, peaceful existence. Relatively speaking, there weren't very many vampires and if word got out the Dark Council knew that mortals, who were actually more bloodthirsty than any vampire could ever be, would hunt them down and kill them one by one if that's what it took. Ashara didn't want to incur their wrath, but more than that, killing indiscriminately wasn't her style. She was happy to help do what she could to cleanse the world of evil and feed herself at the same time.

Dallas and Fort Worth were a veritable buffet of bad guys. She gorged herself every evening, then headed to the clubs. Darkside was selling out every show, and "Butterfly Kiss" was number three on the Hot 100. There was little doubt it would reach number one and stay there for a long time. The album was in the Top 20 and Liam, who was now doubling as the band's manager, was already in negotiations for a stadium tour in the spring of 1972.

"I love Texas," Ashara sighed, resting in Liam's arms backstage.

"You know, they say everything is bigger in Texas." Liam guided her hand to the fly of his jeans. "Everything."

"Ha!" she scoffed. She put her hand back in her own lap and asked,

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“Have you been here before?” Even though they’d spent every night together for over two weeks, she still didn’t know an awful lot about him. She knew the things he liked and she was learning his sense of humor and his moods, but she often had to ask him questions in order to learn about his past. Of course, she was pretty tight-lipped herself.

“I’ve been here a time or two,” Liam replied. “But I’d rather live in L.A. or London...this is just a glorified cow town, if you ask me.” He suddenly slapped at his arm. “And the mosquitoes. I hate bloodsuckers!”

Ashara suppressed a chuckle and chose to ignore his last statement. “L.A. or London. That’s quite a contrast. Don’t you think New York is a bit more on par with London?”

“Yeah, but the contrast is what I like. How did you come to live in L.A.?” he asked.

“As I told you, I was born in Vienna. Once my photography started getting noticed, the ‘land of opportunity’ seemed like the next logical step, so here I am. I’ve done a lot of traveling, but I do like So-Cal the best. Have you heard Joni Mitchell’s new album? I absolutely love that song, ‘California.’”

“Yeah—I’ve got it. Blue. She’s great, isn’t she?”

The subject changed to safer topics; they chatted for another several minutes then headed to a diner with Buck, Joel and Tera.

Early in the tour, Ashara learned that Joel and Tera were married and that she had absolutely nothing to worry about in the way of competition from the willowy bassist. She was asked to keep mum on the subject because it was hoped that Tera would emerge as a sex symbol—and if any of the shots Ashara had taken of her were made into posters and mass-produced, it could easily happen. Tera didn’t necessarily dress sexy, nor was she openly inviting, and she didn’t jiggle...but there was a dark, sensual mystery to her that commanded attention. The fact that she was an extremely talented musician only added to the awe factor with her male following.

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Ashara hoped they wouldn't stay in the diner too long. Although she enjoyed socializing with the band, she wanted Liam all to herself. Their nights together didn't always involve sex, but each moment was like orgasmic bliss nonetheless. Every second spent with him put her into such a euphoric high, she'd been tempted more than once to invite him to sleep beside her in the day. She could probably cover herself well enough in the bed, but she could not risk him waking up and finding her dead.

If things went well after the tour, she decided she would tell him the truth. Telling a mortal the truth had always made things end badly, but then again so did not telling them. She felt she owed him honesty—but later.

The all-night diner was nearly empty, but the eyes upon them when they entered felt like legions. Love the wide open spaces of Texas as she might, Ashara was reminded all too quickly that it wasn't L.A., New York or London every time she traveled with a rock band. The truck-driving clientele and the waitresses, with names like Flo or Bobby-Jo, were never happy to see hair longer than collar length, skin darker than a suntan, or funky clothes festooned with feathers, rhinestones and peace patches.

She thought back to the time she was in a diner very much like this one with a band called Leather Stud. A couple of the members of Stud had flirted with stints in the Hell's Angels, and they didn't take kindly to sideways glances or looks down noses. To show just how unkindly they felt about it, they ended up punching the cook in the eye and breaking the noses of two customers. Later that evening, after bailing him out of the county jail, Ashara drank the drummer dry and headed back to California. The rest of the group rotted behind bars for a few days, and she never heard from them again. She later heard they lost their appetite for touring and went back to the biker fold.

Darkside was given a booth in the back corner and served coffee with a snarl.

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“Hey, I’ve got a tip for her,” Joel said when the waitress left. “She’ll catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want flies,” Tera pointed out. “What do you want, honey?”

Everyone decided what they’d order but as was the case more often than not, the waitress never came back. They were too tired to cause a ruckus, so the bus stopped at a 7-Eleven on the way to the hotel and everyone except Ashara got their fill of caloric snacks.

“Grub’s up!” Liam proclaimed as he bit into a Twinkie. He offered another one to Ashara, but she shook her head. “Don’t you ever eat?” he asked.

“Got to keep this girlish figure,” Ashara replied. Actually, she had picked at some hors d’oeuvres backstage earlier in the evening, but it was too late now. The food would never digest in time.

“Women,” he muttered.

“Men!” she and Tera said in unison, then cracked up laughing.

It was the little, happy moments like that that made Ashara worry. How long could the good times last?

She looked at the young, expectant faces that surrounded her. One day, before they knew it, they would be old. Their skin would wrinkle and loosen, their muscles would ache, and their bones would creak. Ashara had seen it happen to friends and acquaintances hundreds of times over. They knew how long the good times would last, how fleeting youth could be, and she envied them that.

When they got to the hotel, they went their separate ways. Even Ashara and Liam. It was nearly dawn and she begged off, saying she was too pooped to pop.

She had the elevator to herself and simply enjoyed her time alone. She leaned against the back mirror, closed her eyes and felt the smooth, slow ascent take her higher and higher. When the ride stopped, she stepped from the car reluctantly, half considering taking another.

When she got inside her room, her gaze went, as it always did now,

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to the light on her phone.

She didn't bother to pick it up, because she already knew whom the message was from, and what it said.

I'm on my way, Shar. Don't wait up.

CHAPTER 6

Piece of my Heart

“Oh, my God. Can you believe it?” Liam practically threw the newspaper in Ashara’s face as soon as she walked into the dressing room.

“What?” she asked, taking the wadded front page. The headline read, “Music Star Duane Allman Dies.” She scanned the article quickly, learning that the twenty-four-year-old Southern rocker had been killed in a motorcycle accident. Her first thought was of the curse.

It didn’t sound like Zariaz’s *modus operandi*, but then Zar was nothing if not unpredictable.

It was late October now, fully three months since Zar had written her the initial note and left it in her casket. It had been three months of heaven and hell. Ashara was deeply, blissfully in love, yet she was living in constant fear. Things had been quiet lately but now there was this.

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“It’s been bad year for musicians,” Liam sighed.

The band recounted all the losses their community had suffered in the past twelve months, and talk turned to the waste of talent. They wondered if Duane had been under the influence when he crashed and speculated on what he could have been taking. Everything from angel dust to Jack Daniels was proposed.

Darkside was a hard-rocking band, but they weren’t hard partiers. They partook of the usual botanical and chemical fare to some degree, but it was all in moderation compared to most of the other musicians Ashara had toured with. She remembered the time Grace Slick, high on who knows what, stripped naked onstage. And when Keith Moon passed out in mid-beat and knocked his entire drum kit all across the stage. She would never forget the time when all four members of Led Zeppelin, blitzed out of their minds, rode their Harleys at full throttle down the hallways of the Chateau Marmot, then took to redecorating their hotel rooms with broken-off bedposts. Just the boys, letting off some steam and revving their engines.

That used to be a funny memory, but now that Duane Allman, whom she had never met, was killed on his bike, she didn’t care to think on it. And what about Liam? He had brought his Harley on the tour...Ashara shuddered at the thought.

The tour was going so well it had been extended by several dates. They stayed in Florida and New York much longer than they had anticipated, so Ashara flew home once to check and see that she still had a home.

Everything was in order. Lovecraft was there and thrilled to see her. Ashara felt guilty for leaving him alone for so long. Even though he was a vampire cat, he was still a cat—she didn’t understand why people thought cats weren’t affectionate or loyal. Siamese cats, especially, were bred for friendliness.

She stayed home for a few days. She developed all her contact sheets and made up several prints. She sent dozens out to the magazine

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editors she worked with and promised that articles would follow. She flew back on October 28, meeting up with the band in San Francisco.

* * *

She had only been away less than a week, but Liam seemed different. He was happy to see her, but Ashara sensed something was amiss. Could it just be upset over Duane Allman's death? Or was it road fever? Could Zariaz have done something and fooled him into thinking it was Ashara?

"Halloween's coming up," Tera said, shaking Ashara from her reverie. "Are you going to dress up?"

Ashara had forgotten. She had not celebrated any holidays in ages, and she did miss them. But when there was no one to spend them with, they were pretty pointless. "I don't know," she replied. "You?"

"I'm going to be Vampira," Tera said with a mock hiss and a baring of her nonexistent fangs.

Joel came up behind his wife and hugged her, burying his face in the crook of her neck. "I want to bite your neck!"

It was just innocent horseplay, but the sight made Ashara's fangs tingle. She had not yet fed that evening, and she was famished. She'd gotten a late start and would have to find a meal during the show.

"I think I'll go as Adam," Buck piped up.

There was a collective groan from everyone. "Puh-lease!"

"How about The Invisible Man instead, or a mummy, or a knight in shining armor?" Joel teased.

"Well, I guess my body isn't exactly a temple," Buck muttered. Then he grinned and grabbed a mayonnaise-laden poor boy from the sandwich tray.

Liam was still pacing the small room, shaking his head. Tera caught Ashara's worried gaze and shrugged her shoulders.

"Are you playing here again tomorrow?" Ashara asked. Anything to keep benign conversation going.

"We're here through the thirty-first, then it's home to L.A.," Tera

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replied. "I can hardly wait to get there. I had no idea touring was so draining. It's not the playing that's so tough, it's the traveling, and the downtime in between."

Ashara nodded. "I know. I've made the trip a few times myself."

The two women chatted until it was time for Darkside to go onstage. Liam was the last one out the door, and for a moment Ashara thought he was going to leave without acknowledging her. Then he stopped and turned. "I missed you," he said, before heading for the stage.

Ashara left the dressing room and headed down the corridor that led to the exit. The back door opened to the alley. She scanned the darkness, and her nostrils wrinkled at the pungent odor emanating from the overflowing dumpsters nearby. Her senses were heightened when she was hunting, and it was rarely a good thing. Still, modern times were much cleaner than past ones. Not only was there plumbing and refuse pick-up now, but most people actually bathed and brushed their teeth on a regular basis. The older generation complained about smelly hippies, but they really had no idea what things used to be like.

No one was in the alley. She stuck a piece of paper in the door lock so she could slip back inside later, and let it shut quietly behind her. She was so hungry; she hoped she would find someone soon.

She stepped onto the damp, steaming asphalt. Her high heeled boots made steed-like clicking sounds as she strode down the alley. She read the names of the businesses above the back doors. She quickly found what she was seeking: a strip joint. She should be able to find a tasty morsel here.

Ashara rapped on the door, hoping that someone could hear her...she didn't want to take a chance on going through the front and being remembered later. She wasn't quite sure what her plan of attack would be yet, or whom she would target.

Almost instantly, the door swung open. She stumbled back, narrowly avoiding getting hit.

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A young woman, obviously a dancer, stormed out. “Screw you!” she shouted at someone still inside the club.

A gruff male voice returned, “You’re fired. Don’t even think of showing your scrawny ass here again! Oh, wait—that was the problem in the first place!”

Ashara melted into the shadows as the door slammed shut. She watched the dancer walk quickly down the alley, arms crossed, muttering to herself.

Ashara cast her boots off and followed, keeping close to the wall of buildings. The dancer, her long black tresses flowing past her waist, moved gracefully—and Ashara trotted to keep up. She hesitated at the street, and Ashara reached out, ready to grab her by the hair and pull her back into the darkness with her.

Ashara was nearly starving, and while she couldn’t be sure the stripper was an evildoer, she would have to do. She couldn’t always hold to her principles when survival was at stake. “Just ask the Donner Party,” she’d say to herself in times like this. Her fingertips glanced off the silky curtain of hair as the girl unexpectedly stepped forward.

“Elaine! Hello!” the girl called out.

Another young woman stopped before her. Ashara couldn’t see her very clearly.

“Hey, Leilani. Are you going to the concert?”

“What concert?”

“Darkside. They’re really cool. They’re playing just over here at Luckies. Why don’t you come with me?”

“Why not? I just got fired anyway—my night is free!” Then she laughed and stepped into the light. The two women headed down the sidewalk, talking.

Ashara could taste the bitterness of her venom as she willed her fangs to retract. She turned and walked back down the alley. She would have to try the strip club again. She put her boots back on and headed for the back entrance. She knocked, then took a step back.

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The door swung open—hard—and one of the ugliest faces Ashara had ever seen was just inches from hers. “I told you...” the man said through clenched teeth before realizing that he was not speaking to the fired stripper. “Sorry,” he added with a leer. His breath reeked of stale beer, corn chips, and rampant tooth decay. “May I help you?”

Ashara smiled back and nodded. “I understand you have an opening.” She turned her head in the direction of the alley. “I saw her leaving.”

The bouncer looked Ashara up and down. It was obvious to her that he liked what he saw; she could see by the gleam of his eyes that her ankle boots, short-shorts and halter top were working for him. “Well, maybe I can get you in to see the manager. For a very small fee,” he added.

Ashara stepped forward, loath to touch him, but she did it anyway. His blood was just as red as anyone else’s. She put her fine, delicate hand on his chest. “Can’t we negotiate?”

The bulky man grinned, his misshapen lips twisting into a snarl. He had a shiner, and both eyes were terribly bloodshot. Even though he was fairly young, he’d obviously suffered a hard life—hard drinking, with the gin blossoms to prove it, and hard living, with the scars and tattoos to prove that, too. He wore a tacky, shiny faux-silk shirt open to his navel, tight black slacks, and cowboy boots with metal tips. Ashara caught the outline of brass knuckles in his front pants pocket. She hoped she would be able to get enough venom in him before he realized what was happening; he could prove to be too strong for her.

The man stepped back to let Ashara inside. “I’m Raymond.”

She really didn’t want to know their names. It was like knowing the pork chop you were eating was once called Petunia. “I’m Sandy,” she tittered, putting on her best bimbo grin.

She stepped in and quickly assessed her surroundings. They were in a small maintenance room with a hallway before them that led to what Ashara assumed was the ladies’ dressing room—she could hear women

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talking and laughing. She saw two other doors marked with restroom signs. There were no people actually within sight. “Do you have an office?” she asked.

He guffawed. “Yeah. Sure.” He spread his arms open wide. Body odor assailed Ashara’s nostrils. “Here it is!”

Ashara swallowed hard and steeled herself for the task at hand. She was practically starving and beginning to feel light-headed. She moved close to him, kissing his neck.

He wrapped his beefy arms around her and immediately began to grind his hips against hers. His fingers fumbled at her clothing. Ashara was sucking on his neck, hard. The bouncer didn’t even feel it as her fangs penetrated him. She shot her paralyzing venom into his jugular vein, straining to get it all in.

Raymond was still standing. She had no more poison, so she moved to another vein and began to drink—the poison would take effect soon enough.

He groaned, grabbing the back of her head and pulling her hair. “Oh yeah. Suck me, bitch.” He began to push her down, but Ashara would not be deterred. She locked into the vein and she was gulping the nectar—like a rotting peach, he was ugly on the outside but sweet and juicy on the inside.

Finally, Raymond began to swoon. Ashara could feel his knees buckling. She leaned forward, easing him down. “What are you doing...?” he sighed, half in euphoria, half in despair. There was no turning back now.

Ashara was on her knees, bent over the dying man. She felt his heart slow in synch with the quickening of hers. Finally, she was sated and he was spent. She wiped her mouth on his shirt, then rose, looking around. They were still alone.

Her glance darted around the implements in the room...there was a soldering iron, but it would take too long to heat up. Besides, she didn’t like to set fires if there was danger of others being injured. Then she

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noticed his car keys hanging half out of his pocket. She could drive him to pier and lose him and the car there, but she really did want to get back to Darkside's concert.

It looked like it would have to be the old standby. It wouldn't be too unbelievable that Raymond had died in a knife fight. She removed the stiletto from her back pocket and went to work.

* * *

Ashara heard "Butterfly Kiss" playing when she walked back into Luckies, using the back door. The show was nearly over, and she wouldn't have time to get her cameras together before it was too late. She'd take her pictures tomorrow.

She walked into the empty dressing room and checked her face and clothes in the mirror. She put some lipstick on, checking the crevices of her teeth for blood, then headed for the stage, where she could watch the show from the side. It was an interesting perspective—not good for photos, but very good for feasting her eyes on Liam's tight butt.

She found a spot behind an amplifier and nodded hello to the roadies and the privileged groupies. A passel of pretty girls waited, all hoping for a night—and maybe more—with a rock star. Little did they know, two out of the three guys in the band were spoken for. Ashara looked out into the audience, seeing what the band saw.

The crowd was an enthusiastic one, bobbing in time to the music. Some were dancing; others were singing along to the new radio hits. There was a predominance of women in the audience, as usual. Ashara immediately spotted the canned dancer and her friend in the front row.

The dancer was quite clearly flirting with Liam. And he was flirting back. That wasn't unusual—it was all part of the show—but Ashara sensed an earnestness coming from Liam that she hadn't seen before. She quickly dismissed it as her imagination; she'd been feeling edgy all night.

The show ended with "Cinnamon Girl," and Ashara cheered with gusto so that Liam would know she was there. He turned around and

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winked at her, once. Even though they'd made love many times, it was the little things like that that turned her on the most. That sexy wink, his silly, easy riddles, the way he cupped her face in his hands when he kissed her mouth.

She headed for the dressing room as she heard the song drawing to a close. She was there waiting when the band walked in, followed by a small entourage. Ashara could feel the heat coming off them, and she could hear their quickened breathing. All of them were slick with sweat, and as usual they headed for the showers straight away.

Ashara saw the dancer out of the corner of her eye. She was standing just outside the doorway, uncertain. Her friend was standing just behind her. "It's easy," the blonde said, "Just go up and say you enjoyed the show."

Buck was the first out, then Liam, then Tera and Joel, who'd shared a shower.

Liam sat next to Ashara on the small, cigarette-burn-pocked sofa. He'd changed into sandals, jeans, and a Steppenwolf tee-shirt. "Hey, baby," he said, kissing her forehead. "Where were you earlier?"

"I was starving. I went out to grab a quick bite."

"There's plenty of food here," Liam said, nodding toward the cold cuts, crackers and beer.

"Hardly a decent respite for a refined lady such as myself," Ashara said with mock hauteur.

"Why don't you chew on this?" Liam said. "I learned a new riddle. At night I come without being fetched, and by day I am lost without being stolen. What am I?"

Before Ashara could gather her thoughts, she heard a husky female voice say, "A star."

"Very good!" Liam said with a laugh as he looked up to address the riddle-cracker.

Ashara looked up, too. It was the dancer. She was prettier in the full light of the dressing room than Ashara had thought. She was obviously

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of Polynesian descent—she was tall and slender, with a regal bearing and long, flowing black hair that hung in gentle waves past her hips. Her dark eyes shone with obvious lust, and she gave Liam a sinful smile. Ashara could see that she had probably been a very good stripper—it wasn't just her lissome body, it was the way she could look at a man she didn't even know.

"Thank you," the young woman said. "Riddles are sort of a hobby of mine. And besides, you *are* a star." She thrust her right hand down to Liam, and he rose to take it. "I'm Leilani Kahala," she said, bowing her head.

"Hawaiian?" Liam asked.

The girl nodded. "But I live here now. I'm trying to break into professional dancing."

Ashara pounced on this one. "Oh, really? What kind?"

Leilani glanced down at Ashara briefly, but looked at Liam when she answered. "I'm a trained hula dancer, but there's not much call for that in California, I'm afraid. I'm hoping to get into some stage productions, but no luck yet. I was working as an exotic dancer across the way here, but I got fired tonight." She grimaced. "They wanted me to work topless, and I will *not* do that."

"I thought all that sort of dancing was nude," Ashara sniffed.

Leilani didn't reply. Instead she said to Liam, "Well, I'm sorry to intrude. I just came back to let you know how much I enjoyed the show. You guys were amazing."

"Thank you, Leilani," Liam replied. He was still holding her hand. "You ought to come back. We'll be here through Halloween."

"Great!" Leilani nodded. "Well, I really must be going." She disengaged her hand and stepped back. "Maybe I'll see you soon. And please, call me Lani." She cut her gaze down to Ashara. "'Bye,'" she said dismissively.

Ashara did not reply. She had come so close to killing that little flirt—if only she had, she thought darkly. Then she thought of all the

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groupies that would come and go, tempting Liam along the way as his fame grew. She would have to take out half the female population!

* * *

Later that night, Ashara and Liam lay naked and entwined on the covers of her hotel bed. Their physical coupling was as amazing as ever, but Ashara still felt a mental distance from him.

He was lying on his belly, and Ashara lay draped across his back, playing with his hair. "Is there anything wrong, Li?" she asked. "You've been so quiet tonight."

There was a long pause. Then he sighed. "It's not you, it's me." He took her hand in his. "This tour has been harder than I thought it would be. You've got to remember, I'm not only singing and playing guitar, I'm managing. And the others look up to me, as if I know what I'm doing...this is my first tour, too, y'know?"

"And then there's all this death. I mean, I never met any of those blokes, but it saddens me to think of the losses. It's like the Don McLean song, 'the day the music died,' and it makes me wonder what the future holds for our music. The naysayers are all going on about how it's divine judgment and all. It's poppycock! But it upsets me, still."

"What about me?" she asked, still nervously twisting his curls. "Do I make you happy?"

He rolled over, and Ashara was in his arms. He was hugging her so tightly it almost hurt. Although she told herself that actions did speak louder than words, she couldn't help but wonder why he didn't reply.

She stayed in his embrace for a time, then said the inevitable, "I'm afraid it's nearly morning and I'm going to turn into a pumpkin."

As usual, he left without argument. As usual, she hated to see him go.

It seemed odd to her that he always left without question. He never wanted to spend time with her during the day. Never even asked. In the past, mortal men always pressed on it until she either let them into her

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sanctum, or she left them. It made her think more and more that Liam had another woman, one that he spent his days with.

She was making the deception very, very easy for him. Too easy, of course, but she was powerless against the sun. Was there something—someone—else she was also powerless against?

CHAPTER 7

Season of the Witch

The sliver moon and the San Francisco fog made for a perfectly chilling All Hallows Eve. Revelers in costume were already out in force, roaming the steep sidewalks early in the night—and the parties would surely last 'til dawn. The owner of Luckies was holding an after-hours gala, and Darkside and Ashara were invited.

But first Ashara had to eat and find a costume. She hit the tenderloin district, looking for shady characters. She hated the garish neon glare and the graffiti, the sex-show and strip-club barkers, and the pathetic street people who huddled in nearly every doorway. But the district was a necessary evil—necessary and convenient for her, especially.

She was dressed in a long overcoat and a brimmed rain hat pulled low—several men asked her if she was supposed to be a flasher. How clever they thought they were. The last man to ask that was a pimp

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dressed as the Grim Reaper. It was the last question he ever asked.

“Maybe,” she replied, purring. Then Ashara leaned in close to him, nipping playfully at his neck. She danced slowly in circles around him, swaying so that her body never lost contact with his. She sashayed behind him, playing her fingernails up and down his chest. She brought her left hand up and before he knew what had happened, she had him a chokehold, forearm hard across his throat, and was dragging him backwards into the convenient alleyway.

Carrying the simple costume and plastic scythe under one arm, she strode quickly to Luckies, in hopes of being able see Liam before he took the stage. The club was already packed, and one of the opening acts was playing. Ashara greeted the club’s owner, Bob West, and the backstage personnel she’d gotten acquainted with, then headed for Darksides’ dressing room.

The first thing she saw did not please her one bit.

There was a one-woman hula show going on, and Liam was eating it up—he sat in a straight-backed chair, and Lani was gyrating just inches before his appreciative gaze. Although she wasn’t stripping, her dance was incredibly seductive. She wore a skimpy grass skirt, a tiny abalone-shell bikini top, and a colorful lei around her long, slender neck. She was showing Liam just how limber her hips were as they first swayed slowly from side to side, then shook fast forward and back. Her supplicant arms reached for him, and he was leaning forward ever so slightly.

Of course the dressing room was full of other people, but it was quite obvious to Ashara that Lani was performing for an audience of one.

Lani was speaking in mesmerizing tones. Her hands were in the air, wrists undulating. “I’m telling you a story with my motion. This means love. It’s the aloha spirit. The aloha spirit is the meeting of mind and heart within each person. It can be a beautiful thing between two people....”

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Then Liam saw Ashara standing in the doorway. His face flushed red and he grinned weakly, “Hello, Ashara!”

Not his usual “Hello, baby,” she noticed. “Hi, Li,” she replied icily. She nodded to the others in the room and stepped inside.

The dance stopped, and Leilani turned around, her arms crossed just under her barely covered chest.

Ashara walked over to the lockers and got her cameras and equipment out. She laid the gear on the table, alongside her filched Halloween costume.

Tera came over and picked the hooded black cloak up. “Isn’t this kind’a big for you?”

“It was the best I could do on short notice,” Ashara replied, trying to smile.

“I have an idea—why don’t you cut it off short and wear your black thigh-high boots? And you can wear my black patent-leather belt. You know how they always say sex and death are the two most belabored subjects in the world? Well, you could be a sexy Death!” Tera chuckled. “My Vampira costume is back at the hotel. Joel and I are going to change and we’ll head to the cathedral. Isn’t that a groovy place to have a Halloween party? I understand Bob West bought it cheap because...”

Ashara tuned the prattle out. She had never heard Tera talk so much. Tera was usually a woman of few words, but Ashara sensed a nervousness in her. Perhaps she was trying to cover for Liam, or to take Ashara’s mind off of him with her idle chatter.

When Ashara glanced back past the lockers, she saw that Liam and Lani had left the room. The band was going on in just a few minutes; she figured he had gone to change into his stage clothes.

But where was the little hula-whore? Ashara decided right then and there that she hated Leilani. Immature and foolishly mortal as it was, she did.

She took her usual post at the front of the stage and waited for the

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band to come on. The club was fuller than she had seen it in the past few nights. Most of the people were dressed up—at least, as far as she could tell. There were a lot of hippies and flower children, but it was hard to discern whether that was their daily wear or not. She decided she would take Tera's advice and have some fun with her own costume.

The last time she had dressed up for Halloween was in England, in the early nineteenth century. It was a wonderful costume ball hosted by Lord James Byron and his ladylove, Claire. Byron's friend, Dr. Polidori, had penned a horribly written and lurid vampire tale, *The Vampyre*, and so Byron's party invitations had challenged all invitees to bring along their favorite bloodsuckers. Most of the wits brought along their barristers, wives, or mistresses, but some did bring actual undead. Never a bold one, Ashara went along only pretending to be a vampire, but when she met the charming host, she could see that he knew—that he had met vampires before, and could glimpse the true soul behind her eyes.

That year, she was dressed as Marie Antoinette. "Ah, but even a beheading couldn't harm you, my queen," Byron had remarked to her. Byron himself was costumed as Julius Caesar. "*Et tu, Byron,*" she remembered saying. It was silly, but she'd just sated herself on the blood of an absinthe addict and was feeling the effects.

She could use some alcohol right about now, she thought.

She glanced around for Leilani but didn't see her.

Darkside took the stage in their usual dramatic fashion. No plodding onstage for them. First Buck slipped in behind his drum kit, his stealth belying his burly frame. Without anyone knowing he was there yet, he'd do a loud rim shot. Tera would then leap, gazelle-like, onto the stage and pick up her bass with a flourish. Then Joel would zip up to his place behind the keyboards and begin Liam's intro. Liam, the *piece du resistance*, was always the last—and the most flamboyant—band member to take the stage. All their entrances had been fine-tuned and stepped up along the course of tour; sometimes Liam cart-wheeled to

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the mic, sometimes he tumbled like a circus performer, and sometimes he just pranced on with a stallion's grace that commanded the gaze of everyone in the room. This night he sort of promenaded to center stage with a big, happy grin on his face.

What's he so happy for? Ashara wondered, then chided herself. She would not let any dark thoughts spoil her evening. The sheer talent of the band blew her away as she willed her mind to clear.

She snapped several photos in black and white, then in color. She wished they would have played in costume, but apparently Liam thought that costumes would somehow cheapen their music—even if only for one night. He took his songs and his band very seriously.

After the concert Ashara took a ride on the tour bus—now dubbed the Magic Bus in honor of The Who—with the band back to the hotel. Casting her hard feelings aside, she cuddled up with Liam.

"What are you wearing tonight, Li?" she asked.

"You," he replied.

She gave him a mock slap on the arm. "That's later. I mean for the party."

"Oh," he nodded. "The party."

"Well...?"

"I want to surprise you. In fact, I'll be meeting you there."

"You're not coming with us?" Ashara nodded in the direction of Tera, Joel and Buck. Her suspicious mind immediately wondered why he wanted to be without her that night, even for a short time. "Oh well, I'll see you there, then," she said with a nonchalance she didn't feel.

Liam and Buck headed for their rooms, while Ashara went to Tera and Joel's with them. Tera cut the bottom of Ashara's cape off short and jagged, then gave her the wide, patent-leather belt.

"That'll look much better. Why don't you nip into the bathroom and put it on?" Tera said, putting the scissors back into her mini traveling case.

Unlike most musicians on the road, Tera and Joel were extremely

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neat, organized and prepared. Ashara's gaze swept the room—like herself, they also put personal items, such as framed photos and books and records, around the room.

“No, that's okay. I can see how it looks now.”

Ashara put the cape on over her clothes and raised the hood. She stepped before the mirror and raising the phony scythe; she couldn't help but try an evil grimace on.

She certainly looked the part of cruel Death, she thought with dismay. What she wouldn't give to have lived a simple mortal life; to have never had to commit a single murder, let alone thousands; to have not seen her mother, father, and lover die at the hands—directly or indirectly, it didn't matter—of her own sister.

“You do look mighty grim,” Joel said, nodding. “You'd scare me.”

“Thanks a lot,” Ashara said flatly, hoping he wouldn't realize she'd taken him seriously. He didn't know. But perhaps he should, she decided.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, seemingly relaxing. She let her body sag slightly. Then suddenly, she sprang to life, eyes blazing, scythe raised high. Her fangs were a flash of white. She closed her mouth, knowing that on some level, they'd *seen*.

Both Joel and Tera squealed, the blood draining from their faces. Then they realized she was only kidding...yet, they exchanged dubious glances.

Ashara laughed, saying, “Yep. I'm pretty scary all right.”

“Don't do that, ever again!” Joel breathed, hand on his chest. Tera simply rolled her eyes at him with a wry half-grin.

“Okay. At least not until we get to the party. I'm going to go back to my room and take a quick nap, then I'll change and meet you guys here. Sound good?”

Tera and Joel nodded. They were smiling, but Ashara could tell that part of them was glad to have her go. She chuckled to herself; she shouldn't be so naughty.

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* * *

The party was in full swing by the time Ashara and three-quarters of Darkside arrived. It was an amazing spectacle. The high-ceilinged cathedral was rocking to its gothic rafters with loud music, and the pews were rearranged to allow for a dance floor of sorts. It was a catered affair, and all the waiters, waitresses and bartenders were dressed in uniform black body suits with a white skeletal design, front and back. Each intricate stained glass window was spotlighted, and the decorators had taken care to place elaborate spider webs in each corner. The pulpit was replaced with a giant tombstone, and a disc-spinning deejay was ensconced behind it.

The statues of Christ, Mary, and various angels were untouched...perhaps for fear of sacrilege. But if you were going to throw a pagan party in a hallowed cathedral, why not sin all the way?

Ashara was quite pleased with how her hastily grabbed costume had turned out. She wore the hood low so that her face was barely visible. Her short, ragged skirt, thigh-high platform boots and waist-cincher belt made her body the main attraction.

Tera looked equally hot in her skimpy Vampira dress, fishnet stockings, stiletto heels, and push-up bra.

"I'm going to have to keep an eye on you two sexy ladies tonight," Joel said. Then he popped his fake eyeball out and roared with laughter. It was the third time he'd done that already, and Ashara and Tera just looked at each other and sighed. Joel was a zombie, and he had a hundred bad puns and cheesy jokes to keep himself in stitches the whole night.

Buck had taken everyone's advice to the extreme and covered up—he was dressed in a fencing costume. His blunt sword had flowers stenciled on the blade along with the phrase, "Make Love, Not War."

Tera, Joel and Buck headed for the buffet and drink tables, leaving Ashara on her own.

Ashara scanned the room for Liam, but she had no idea what to

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look for. She did spot Leilani, still dressed in her barely-there hula costume. She appeared to be in a heated but quiet argument with someone. Ashara looked to the companion's face and saw her own.

Zariaz!

For several moments, Ashara was completely paralyzed. She had not laid eyes on Zariaz in fifty-nine mortal years, and even though for the past few months she had been half-expecting to see Zariaz around every corner, it was still a shock. Terror, anger, confusion, and yes, even sisterly love, wrestled within her. Zariaz was decked out in full mambo regalia, her hair wrapped in rags, her face powdered a chalky white. Judging from the centerfold photos, and now seeing her in person, it seemed she had suffered no lasting ill effects from her execution in 1912. *But it had been so bloody, so violent...how could she be whole again?*

Zariaz did not seem to notice Ashara. She was speaking to Leilani between clenched teeth. Ashara felt sure that Lani believed that she was speaking to *her*, Ashara.

Ashara felt a cold hand on her shoulder. She turned.

"Hey, are you having fun?" Tera looked concerned. "You haven't moved from the entrance. Want a hot apple cider? It's spiked. I'll get you one."

"No. No thanks," Ashara said. "I'll wait for Liam."

Tera moved off again. "I'll be on the dance floor," she called over her shoulder.

Ashara turned her attention back to Zariaz and Leilani.

But they were gone.

She walked through the crowd, scanning the dance floor and the buffet. They seemed to have vanished. *Maybe Zar is finishing what I started*, Ashara thought. She wouldn't miss the little hula-whore. Then again, she didn't want to be blamed for her death—and she knew that if Zar was witnessed arguing with a girl who'd been murdered, she, Ashara, would be the one identified as her killer.

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“We’re like the Ghost and the Darkness,” a voice whispered in her ear. The breath was crypt-cold...the lifeless breath of a vampire.

She turned and faced her twin. Zariaz was right—they *were* like the legendary man-eating lions of Tsavo, the pair of killers that terrorized the wilds of east Africa back in the late 1890s. One ghostly white, the other sooty black, their fangs red with blood. She and Zariaz used to hunt together back when they were new vampires, just learning.

Zar’s white-powered face was now inches from Ashara’s deeply shadowed, dark face. Zar’s eyes sparkled with madness in the catchlights.

Ashara’s shone with unshed tears.

“Aren’t you going to give your sister a hug?” Zar asked, pulling Ashara into her embrace. “Haven’t you missed me?”

Ashara pulled free and took a step back. She was speechless. One tear rolled down her cheek. She hated herself for showing her inner turmoil.

“I missed *you*,” Zariaz went on. Her voice was deeper than it had been, but her accent was still a disconcerting mixture of Austrian and Caribbean Island. “I’m sorry I haven’t kept in touch ’til now, but it’s not easy when you have no arms or hands to write with.”

Ashara would never forget how the Dark Council recounted to her how they had drawn and quartered Zariaz, and buried the body parts north, south, east and west in shallow graves. “How...?”

“If you’ve learned nothing else, you must know that we’re immortal.” Zar barked out a harsh laugh. “Or is that news to you?”

“But the sun...”

“Don’t you think I had friends? Talon followed your pathetic kangaroo court that night. When you left, he gathered me up and buried me deep in the earth until night came again. It took several months for my limbs to reconnect and mend, then years for the scars to heal. The broken heart still pains me...” Tears brimmed over her eyes, running ragged tracks down her powdered cheeks.

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Broken heart? Did she have a heart? Ashara's mind careened back in time to their childhood and how wicked Zariaz had been to her; she thought of how Zariaz had not only killed her, but everything she loved. Suddenly, she knew exactly how she felt. "Crocodile tears," she snapped, wiping her own away. "You were duly tried, then punished for your crimes."

"But I escaped with my life. They should have burned me, no?" Her tears were gone also, and the smug smile was back.

Ashara didn't reply. She wondered if Talon was still with Zariaz. Talon had been one of the unholy trinity that made Ashara a night creature in the first place. The other, the white man, left Austria shortly after the night of her mortal death, and Ashara never saw him again.

They should have burned Zar, she agreed with regret. It was horrible, but it was true. Obviously, Zariaz would stop at nothing to fulfill her curse. Ashara still didn't know if she believed the curse would work, but what if it did? What if Zariaz *could* learn to compose a song that would make the world fall at her feet?

"What do you want?" Ashara asked, point blank.

"You think I'm going to make it easy for you?" Zariaz chuckled softly. "I thought you knew me better than that, Shar." With a flounce of her full skirts, she turned and sauntered away.

Ashara watched her disappear into the crowd, then melt into the long-cast shadows.

Shaken, Ashara headed for the bar. She needed something...alcohol from someone else's bloodstream worked much quicker, but a stiff whiskey on its own wouldn't hurt. She knocked it back, then asked the Bozo bartender for another.

"Don't tell me I've driven you to drink," Liam said, startling her.

"Where have you been?" she snapped.

"Hey," he said, raising his hands in mock surrender.

"Sorry," she muttered. "It's been a long night."

He didn't press her for details, and she didn't volunteer them. She

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couldn't deal with it all right now. "Cute costume," she said.

Liam was dressed as Sir Walter Raleigh, complete with the Elizabethan collar and the plumed hat. His long hair complemented the look, and he'd even gone so far as to affix a mustache and goatee.

He bowed at her feet, and said with much drama, "Who in the dark and silent grave, when we have wandered all our ways, shuts up the story of our days? But from this earth, this grave, this dust, my God shall raise me up, I trust!"

"That sounds rather gloomy," Ashara commented.

He rose. "Well, you're the specter of Death. And that is what Raleigh wrote the night before Death took him."

"How do you know so much?"

"I'm just a font of useless information," he chuckled. He reached out and pushed her hood back from her face. "That's much better."

"So, your God has risen you up, and you are resurrected. That's cause for celebration. Let's dance." Ashara took him by his brocaded arm and led him into the crush.

They slow-danced to "Black Magic Woman." The tune was officially Fleetwood Mac's, but the sweet, surreal melody of Carlos Santana's guitar made it his own. It was a slow, sexy, spooky song, and it made Ashara want to cling to Liam, hard. "*Got your spell on me, baby...*"

They danced without speaking, but Ashara's thoughts screamed through her brain. If it weren't for Liam, she realized, she would be completely alone in the world. If Zariaz got him, she would have nothing to live for...but she couldn't die. After seeing Zar tonight, she wasn't even convinced that the sun could kill her. What if Liam died, and she tried to follow him? What if the sun only burned her horribly, but she still lived? Everything seemed so hopeless, so uncertain. She blinked back her tears, glad that they were dancing so close Liam couldn't see her face.

She felt the time was coming that she would have to tell him the

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truth. The complete truth not only about Zariaz, but also about herself. She wondered if he would still love her. Still? She didn't even know if he loved her now. She felt that he did, but they had not spoken of it.

"We're going home tomorrow," Liam said, breaking her reverie. The song had changed to something more upbeat, and they left the dance floor, hand in hand. His long lace cuff enveloped both their hands.

Ashara saw an empty set of chairs near a row of pews. "I'll bet you're looking forward to that."

"And you?" he asked, holding her chair out for her.

"Ah, playing the part of the chivalrous Sir Walter, I see." She smiled. "Yes, I am looking forward to getting back to L.A. There's no place like home."

"To coin a phrase," he said. "Of course, the tour still won't be over."

She nodded. "My articles should be coming out soon." Ashara welcomed the small talk, though her mind kept flitting to thoughts of Zar, Leilani, and death. "*Creem's* giving me the cover story in December."

"Good on you," Liam said with enthusiasm. He took a skull-shaped petit four from the roaming dessert tray and popped it into his mouth. "Things are happening fast, aren't they?"

She nodded.

"What time is your flight tomorrow?"

"Around 8:00 P.M.," she answered. "I need to double check my ticket. What time does the Magic Bus pull out?"

"That depends on the severity of everyone's hangovers. Not before noon, that's for sure." He took both her hands in his. "Shall we go back to the hotel and say goodbye to San Francisco good and proper?"

"I've always wanted to sleep with Sir Walter Raleigh." She winked. "I wish I'd known what you were going to dress as—I could have been The Virgin Queen."

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“You *are* kinky,” he laughed softly. “But I’ve always wondered what the Grim Reaper wears under that skirt.”

They stood, and headed for the door. Ashara looked back and caught a glimpse of Leilani across the room. The young woman saw them at the same moment, and started to come over. She had an angry look on her face, but she seemed confused, too, as if she wondered why Ashara had changed costumes.

“Let’s hurry,” Ashara said, practically pulling Liam out the front entrance.

“You really do have a thing for Elizabethan poets, don’t you?”

Several taxis waited outside. They got into one, and as it was pulling away, Liam looked back at the cathedral. Ashara followed his gaze and saw Leilani standing in the doorway, blowing a kiss at him.

CHAPTER 8

Dazed and Confused

Lovecraft's purr sounded like a cement-mixer as Ashara stroked his cheeks and gently ruffled the fur of his soft underbelly. It was nearly 1:00 A.M. on November the first, and Liam hadn't called her yet. It was just the first night back, but she had asked him to phone and let her know when everyone arrived safely.

She lay on her sofa, spooning with the cat and half-watching TV. There was an underlying tension—every nerve ending poised for some sign of Zariaz—but she felt so good to be back in the comfort of her home that she nearly dozed off.

She had a quiet week ahead of her. So did the band, and then they would be making the rounds between the Troubadour, the Whisky, and the White Room for three weeks. Come Thanksgiving, they'd be off until spring. Off the road, anyway. Liam had been writing songs and had studio time booked starting in January. Liam alluded that he had

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written a special song about Ashara, and that he was counting on it to be bigger than “Butterfly Kiss.”

She was glad she didn’t have to go out again—an ancient Hare Krishna at the airport had made the supreme sacrifice for her earlier in the evening—she looked forward to sleeping in her own satin-lined, padded coffin.

Johnny Carson was just wrapping it up when the phone rang. Ashara reached past Lovcraft and picked it up. “Hello? Liam?”

“Hi.”

It was Zariaz. “Looking for Liam, are you? I know where he is.” Then she hung up.

Ashara’s lovely, languid feeling of relaxation vanished. She depressed the button for a moment, then dialed Liam’s number. The phone rang and rang. Not many people had answering machines, but Ashara wished he were one of the few. At least she could have left a message, or seen if he would pick up at the sound of her voice.

That left her no choice but to take the short drive over to see if he was at home. If he was home, he could be in danger. Liam was the perfect victim for Zariaz; not only was he a talented musician, he was important to Ashara. If she knew Zariaz, she knew that Liam’s death would not be quick and merciful.

Ashara went into her bedroom and picked up the clothes she’d worn earlier that evening. They smelled faintly of the wilting daisies the Hare Krishna had pressed to her chest as she drew him to her. She looked around, found her car keys, and stepped outside.

Liam...

She went numb with fear for his life as she sped through the canyon, taking the hairpin turns with dangerous haste.

She drove more slowly up his long, winding driveway. She used caution and parked just out of sight from the house, then tiptoed around the hedges. There were lights on inside, and Liam’s bike was parked in the driveway. There was an old Ford Fairlane Ashara didn’t recognize

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parked behind it. She moved closer, headed for the nearest ground floor window. She stopped. She could hear Liam's voice. She couldn't tell what he was saying, as the windows were closed. She didn't think he sounded distressed.

She stepped closer still, peering through the filmy curtains. She saw Liam seated at his bar, along with someone else...definitely a woman.

Not Zariaz.

Then she heard a peal of laughter, and the woman squealed in girlish tones, "Liam, stop!"

Ashara instantly recognized the voice.

* * *

"Sorry I didn't call sooner," Liam said, his mouth obviously close to the receiver. Did he not want someone to hear him on the phone? "We just got in this morning, and I've been napping all day. I hope you weren't worried."

"Hey, no problem," Ashara returned, knowing he was lying. "I wasn't worried."

After she'd heard Lani's voice the night before, Ashara left Liam's place and drove around 'til dawn. Her mind swirled with a thousand conflicting thoughts. On the one hand, Liam had never committed to her, never said he loved her.

On the other hand, *she* was in love with *him* and as logical as she tried to be, her emotions weren't having any of it. She hurt inside. The sight of Liam alone with another woman late at night in his house was like a knife in the heart. She told herself she hadn't seen anything untoward going on...but then why would he lie about it?

"Do you fancy a get-together tonight?" he asked.

Ashara looked out the window. She had just woken up, and it was twilight. She was tempted to tell him she was busy, but she didn't feel like playing games. She did want to see him, and perhaps find out where she stood. She might even tell him the truth about herself. She'd cross that bridge if and when she came to it. And at the heart of it, she

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still felt very concerned for his safety. “Sure, we can get together tonight. Say, in two hours? Would you like to go out?”

“God, no,” he groaned. “Let’s just order some Chinese and stay in.” He paused. “Can I come over? I’ll bring the chow...mein.”

She gave him an obligatory chuckle. She wondered why he wanted to come to her place; that was very unusual. Did he have a certain houseguest he didn’t want her to know about? “Are you sure you can handle the dungeon?” she asked. “You’ve never been here before.”

“I’ll be your prisoner. A prisoner of love.”

Love? Was he just using a play on words, or was it a roundabout way of saying he loved her? She felt more confused than ever.

She gave him the address and then told him she didn’t want anything too spicy. She would have just enough time to consume her real meal before he arrived.

* * *

Liam showed up at eight o’clock on the dot. He brought food and flowers. It was chilly out, but he was dressed in his customary faded Landlubbers, tight tee-shirt and sandals.

“Nice place you have here,” he said, stepping inside and giving Ashara a peck on the cheek. “Ha! That sounds so trite, doesn’t it? But really, I like it.” He gaze hit the coffin, which was topped with a plant and a stack of photography and music magazines, then moved on to the framed prints on her walls. “I like that,” he said, indicating the Ansel Adams. “And those.” He nodded toward the pair of Richard Avedons.

“Have a seat,” Ashara said, indicating the sofa. “I’ll set the table.”

Liam didn’t sit. “I’ll help. Besides, I want the grand tour. I expect you keep the dirty pictures in your boudoir.”

She showed him around the rest of the house, feeling terribly self-conscious, wondering what he might be reading into her things. She had a very eclectic photography collection—everything from Weegee’s crime scene photos to Ansel Adams’s winter wonderlands—the only thing that tied them together was that all the photos were taken during

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the day. And her taste in books, what would he think?

Ashara herded Liam back into the dining room, where the bags of takeout were waiting for them. “Shall we have our Chinese on fine china?” she asked, opening her cherry-wood sideboard. She took two gold-rimmed white plates out and set them on the table. Then she got the linen placemats and silverware. “What would you like to drink?” she asked, heading for the kitchen while Liam set the table.

“I don’t suppose you have any good English ale?”

“Fresh out,” she replied, calling from the adjacent room. She opened her fridge, even though she knew what she had just bought—it was usually as bare as Mother Hubbard’s proverbial cupboard—“I’ve got German beer, soda, milk, and iced tea.”

“Let’s go with the iced tea. Can you imagine milk with Kung Pao chicken? Ugh!”

“Hey, I like milk,” Ashara said, coming back with two tall glasses of tea. She used to love milk, and tea, when she was mortal; even now, she treated herself to a cup of herbal with milk every once in a while. “But you’ve got a point. Not everything goes with milk. Or is that Coke? Oh, never mind.” She sat down and let Liam serve her small helpings from each little white carton. She would eat a little, for she had some time left before her digestive system quit working.

They both began their meals, saying little. Liam ate with typical male gusto, while Ashara picked at her food and pushed it around her plate, hoping that he wouldn’t notice how little she was actually consuming. As she watched him eat, she couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming desire to protect him, to keep him safe. The mortal act of eating made him seem especially vulnerable, somehow.

Noticing her scrutiny, Liam looked up. He smiled at her, then said, “I’m no sooner spoken than broken. What am I?”

“Silence,” she replied.

“What is it with women and riddles? You’re too smart!”

Women and riddles? Was Lani just as good as figuring them out?

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That hated voice echoed in her memory, “Riddles are sort of a hobby of mine...” *Riddle me this, bitch*, she thought acidly. Her brow furrowed sharply.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, leaning forward with concern.

“Cramp,” she said quickly. “I warned you not to get spicy food.” Why couldn’t she just come right out and ask him if he was seeing Leilani? As far as she was concerned, the certainty of misery was better than the misery of uncertainty. But something stopped her. Zariaz had complicated things enough, and it was just all too much to deal with.

“Bullshit,” he said, his blue eyes boring into hers. He moved his chair closer, and reached out for her hand. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

She felt she owed him at least part of the truth. “It’s Zariaz.”

He sighed. “Did you call the cops?”

She shook her head. “She hasn’t *done* anything. She threatened me at the Halloween party—”

“She was there?” he burst out. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to spoil your evening. Our evening...remember how lovely our farewell to the City by the Bay was?”

He smiled, and nodded. “What else?” he prompted.

“She called me last night.”

“And...?”

Should she tell him what she’d seen? But what *had* she seen? Nothing, in truth. “It was about you.”

“Me? How does she know about me?”

“She shadows me...my every move, she seems to know. She must have seen us together. If not earlier on the tour, then definitely in San Francisco. Liam, I think she may try to hurt you. You’ve got to be extremely careful.”

Even if Zariaz never laid a finger on Liam, she still had the power to injure beyond repair. Ashara remembered Ludwig’s slow, sad descent into madness. Even Ashara’s love, her immortal love, couldn’t save him. She remembered word for word the letters he wrote to her,

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even though they were no longer in her possession. Scholars had the letters, and they were still trying to figure out who the Immortal Beloved was. She had copies of them in published books, that was all.

One of her favorite letters began, “Though still in bed, my thoughts go out to you, my Immortal Beloved...joyfully, then sadly, waiting to learn whether or not fate will hear us—I can only live wholly with you or not at all.”

In the end, it had been not at all. Her mortal death had been torture for him...for a man with fragile emotions to begin with, it was too much to bear. He’d refused to join her in darkness, and she could never step into his lighted days, much as she wanted to. They were together for a little while after her transformation, but they were worlds apart.

And what about Liam? Her mind’s eye flashed on the beautiful photos of him sitting in the poppy fields, the sun shining off his golden hair. She could never, ever ask him to abandon the light forever. She would have to treasure what little time they had together.

How could she do that? She had to stop Zariaz somehow. She would have to enlist the help of the Dark Council again. She knew they had locations all over the world, and surely there had to be one in America. But where? It wasn’t like they sent out open-house flyers announcing each new fortress.

Liam had been quiet for a long time. Ashara’s thoughts wandered over a hundred years into the past, then back again, and still no reply. “Promise me,” she prompted.

“I can take care of myself,” he said evenly. “It’s you I’m worried about.”

Ashara was worried about herself, too. But at least she was immortal. Liam had no idea what he was up against. In a way it seemed unfair not to tell him, but even if she did, what could he do to protect himself? The poor thing would probably rush out and buy garlic and crosses. “I think we just need to be very alert and aware.”

“You know, it all makes sense now,” Liam said, rising and stacking

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their dishes one on top of the other. He went into the kitchen, and she followed him. “Leilani told me you threatened her—you remember Leilani Kahala, the Hawaiian dancer?”

Ashara nodded cautiously.

“Well, it had to be your sister.” He put the dishes in the sink and rinsed them. Then he headed back into the dining room to collect the leftovers.

It seemed to Ashara that he was purposely torturing her. Why didn’t he just get to the point? “Oh? You talked to her after the Halloween party?” He was caught like a rat in a trap.

He didn’t act like a rat, though. “Yeah,” he said lightly. “She’s staying at my place for awhile. She got fired from her job in SF and decided to come south. She had nowhere to go.”

Aw, the poor kid! Ashara didn’t voice her thoughts, but apparently her expression spoke volumes.

Liam looked surprised. “You don’t mind, do you?”

Ashara tried to remind herself of the era. Monogamy equaled monotony, and fidelity wasn’t such a big deal anymore. At least, not on the surface. Deep down, Ashara thought, it probably still was. But Liam was a young man, free and easy. It wasn’t like they were going to get married and have babies. “Hey, no problem,” Ashara said with feigned lightness.

Liam looked at her through narrowed eyes for a moment, as if trying to decide whether she was on the up and up. Then he apparently decided it was easier to believe that she was. “Anyway, she’s staying in one of my guest rooms until she finds a job. She’s out looking for work right now.”

Ashara smirked inwardly. Stripping jobs, no doubt.

He wandered into the hallway, looking at her pictures. There were just a few that were not photographs; one was a tricky drawing of a skull—or was it a woman sitting at her mirrored vanity?

Ashara came up beside him. “I love this,” she said. “It’s so true:

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‘All is vanity.’”

Liam took that as a cue for another one of his brainteasers. “Use me well and I am everybody. Scratch my back and I am nobody. What am I?”

“A mirror,” Ashara answered, laughing. “You’ve really got to be careful when and where you ask these riddles, my dear. You make them far too easy.”

He just shook his head. “One of these days I’ll stump you. You just wait.”

Suddenly he fell back against the wall, crashing into a framed picture, cracking the glass. “What the hell was that?” he sputtered, recovering his equilibrium. He was staring toward Ashara’s darkened bedroom.

She had seen the creamy streak come and go before registering what it was. “That’s my cat.” She began to head in Lovecraft’s direction. “Are you okay?” she called over her shoulder.

“Fine,” Liam replied. “But the picture.”

“Never mind that.” She stepped into the bedroom. “Lovecraft? Lovey? Here, kitty-kitty.”

Liam was right on her heels. “Is he always like that?”

“Never,” Ashara said, shaking her head. She could hear him growling and hissing from inside the dark closet. He’d run from something and hid. He was clearly terrified. Her mind went to the open window he liked to use. “Something must have chased him from outside.” She shivered. This was more than just another cat or a rabid raccoon. She could feel it.

“Best leave him alone,” Liam said, taking her by the arm. “He’s completely stressed. He could give you a nasty scratch if you try to pull him out of there.” As if seconding, Lovecraft yowled a warning from the inky hideaway. “Hardly seems like the sweet puss you had framed in your hotel rooms,” Liam chuckled.

Ashara headed toward the living room. She was going to shut the

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window and pray that it wasn't too late. "He really is very sweet. I hope he wasn't attacked by something. There are so many wild animals out at night." And vampires.

"He'll come out soon, and we'll have a look," Liam reassured her.

She leaned over the sofa to shut the window and offered Liam a seat. She settled in beside him, snuggling close. She couldn't help but wonder if Lani was back at his place, waiting for him.

"Interesting décor you've got here," Liam said, indicating the casket coffee table.

"I got that in Portugal a few years back" Ashara replied. That much was true, but it had been more than just a few years. It had been back in the late 1800s when she and Zariaz were living together.

Zariaz raised bullfighting horses, and Ashara painted portraits of them. Lusitanos, they were—beautiful, brave horses, living works of art. That was the time when she thought maybe she and her twin could love each other as sisters should.

"Portugal. Lovely country, that. Whereabouts?" Liam asked, leaning forward to inspect the carving on the wood.

"Évora," she replied.

"We used to live there," said Zariaz in cool, calculated tones, as if she'd been in the conversation all along.

Ashara's head snapped up, and Liam sprang to his feet.

Zariaz, dressed from head to toe in a black Victorian mourning dress, was standing in the hallway, having come from Ashara's bedroom. She was holding Lovecraft in an iron grip, stroking him hard with long, lacquered fingernails.

"We bought that coffin together," Zariaz went on.

Lovecraft bit into the soft flesh of her hand, and she let him drop roughly to the carpet. Her hand began to bleed profusely, but all she did was brush off the front of her lacy widow's weeds with her usual sang-froid. "Nasty cat hair." She stepped into the room.

Ashara was now standing, and Liam put his arm around her

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protectively. “You stay away from her,” he warned Zariaz.

Zariaz threw her head back and laughed gaily. “I would never dream of hurting my dear sister,” she said. “Whatever has she told you about me? I’d just like to tell you the story of that coffin, that’s all.”

Ashara’s heart pounded. Would Zariaz reveal to him that they were vampires? Of course, he’d never believe it—not until he felt the fangs in his neck.

“We got it in Évora, as Shar said. A local craftsman made it. Very talented artisan, wouldn’t you say? Look at the inlay work, and the little finial. You know what I like about it, though? The inside. It’s most unusual, Liam. Why don’t you have a look?”

He would see the sliding bolt, the years of wear on the satin inside.

Ashara gave him a small, almost imperceptible nudge, but Liam understood and reacted. They began to move toward the front door. Zariaz stood her ground, her arms crossed over her chest.

Liam reached for the doorknob. He saw it twisting and stepped back just in time as it swung inward. Ashara gasped and stifled a scream.

Talon stepped into the room and slammed the heavy wooden door shut behind him. His 6’3” frame was clad in black boots, black slacks and a black turtleneck sweater. He looked like a demonized beatnik. He had long, claw-like fingernails, carefully filed to points. His skin was the same rich, dark mocha, and his eyes were the same fiery, inky pits that Ashara remembered. That she could never forget. His face was the last face she had seen before she died and the first when she was reborn. She hated him. And she feared him. Ashara stood rooted to the spot, paralyzed.

Liam, too, was in shock. “Who are you?”

Talon did not say a word or even deign to acknowledge Liam’s presence. He nodded toward Ashara with a courtly smile, as if she’d just invited him inside for tea and crumpets, then walked over to Zariaz’s side. He noticed her bleeding hand and took it in one of his own. He raised it to his mouth and began to lick it slowly, sensually.

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He sucked her fingers clean, one by one.

Ashara noticed Liam looking on in bug-eyed, open-mouthed horror. Still, he stood his ground. Perhaps he was too frightened to move.

“Thank you, my love,” Zariaz purred to Talon when he finished. He bowed his head and took a respectful step away.

Strange, but it seemed to Ashara that her sister was somehow in command of the ancient and supremely powerful voodoo priest. According to her, he had saved her life after the Dark Council’s punishment; he had nursed her back to health. There was no doubt he loved her in his own twisted way, but he had always been the dominant one, and she was the one indebted to him.

Ashara remembered when they were new vampires, how strict he was in his teachings, how cruelly he delighted in their failures, and how he loved to force them to devour innocent victims.

There was one cold, snowy night she couldn’t erase from her memory. She, Zariaz, and Talon were on horseback, riding the highway roads in search of food. The wind was blowing so fiercely that Ashara was sure her face was being cut by the tiny, glasslike flakes of icy snow. The horses were skittish, and something just felt wrong.

“Why don’t we go to an inn, or a rooming house?” Zariaz had asked. Her eyelashes were white with frost, despite the hot tears that flowed down her cheeks.

“Quit whining!” Talon commanded, his voice stronger than the wind. He pulled his horse to a stop so hard, the animal had no choice but to rock back on its haunches and rear up. “I smell blood. Lots of it. Gypsies.”

Ashara knew now that there was no way to tell the race of the host by the smell of its blood—he’d probably been told there was a gypsy encampment off the main road—but then she believed him. So did her sister. “Gypsies?” Zariaz asked softly. “Why? Won’t they be armed?”

“Probably,” Talon chuckled. “But it’s great sport. You’ll see.”

They went on at a brisk trot, the storm concealing the sound of their

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horses' hoof beats as they rode into the quiet, sleeping camp. Ramshackle wagons and thin, furry ponies stood at a far end, while several prone bodies lay around a roaring fire, near a lean-to. The trio slowed, then stopped their horses. Talon dismounted, his heavy cape swirling about him. He motioned to the sisters to get off their horses and follow him into the camp.

There was no sentry. The three vampires walked boldly to the fire and warmed their hands. Before she knew exactly what was happening, she saw Talon pluck a little girl from her mother's arms by the hair. He held her aloft, and she woke screaming. Her mother sprang to her feet and a millisecond later, gypsies surrounded them. Talon sprang high in the air, crushing the girl to his chest, and took off running into the trees.

While the band of gypsies was still trying to figure out where he'd gone. Ashara and Zariaz pushed their way through the crowd and followed their master as best they could. They found him several minutes later, without the child.

"Where is she?" Zariaz hissed. "I'm starving!"

"I've just whet your appetite," Talon said evenly. "Hunt her, my tigress."

That is what they did...they tracked the pathetic child through the snowy forest, finding her quickly. She cried for her mother and begged for life, but her pleas were not granted. Zariaz lunged for her throat, just tearing into the sweet hotness of it, when Talon pulled her from her meal. "Let her go for a bit," he said, watching the shivering girl stumble away. "She will taste sweeter still."

Ashara could do nothing but watch the cruelty, silent and weak. Talon did some strange things; he insisted they not be found out for what they were, and yet he did things like this. Of course, he hadn't shown the gypsies his fangs, but the leap alone was to supernatural heights.

Ashara had never taken to the cat-and-mouse killings, but eventually Zariaz came around and grew to be his equal in brutality.

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But she never was his equal in other arenas...what had changed?

Zariaz spoke to Talon again, breaking Ashara's horrible reverie. "Why don't you open the coffin and show Liam?"

Obediently, the Haitian went to the coffin and swept the contents off the top. They crashed to the floor in jumbled disarray. He started to open the lid. His movements were slow and deliberate.

"Never mind," Zariaz said impatiently. "Step aside. I'll open it myself."

She stared at the closed coffin intently. Using the power of her mind alone, she opened the lid with a harsh flourish.

All four of them looked inside.

"Oh, my Lord!" Liam cried.

CHAPTER 9

Let It Bleed

Leilani Kahala lay inside the coffin, her blood saturating the creamy satin. A red stain had plumed out from under her head, and it resembled a perverted halo. The young woman was wearing panties, but that was all. Her arms were crossed over each other on her bare breasts in the classic pose of the corpse readied for viewing. Her eyes were closed, the lashes casting long shadows across her cheeks, and her full lips were slightly parted. She looked almost serene, until you noticed the gaping patch of flesh and severed veins ripped from her throat. Laid open, one could see the shiny pink at the back of her throat and fragments of splintered white bone.

All Ashara could feel was a terrible guilt. Earlier in the evening she sat just a few feet away from the ravaged corpse, thinking her a bitch. Hating her. She didn't hate Lani now, the poor creature. She was only human, after all. And look where it had gotten her. If only the girl had

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stayed in San Francisco!

They must have killed her while Liam was getting the food, then put her in the coffin while Ashara was out hunting. But how could Ashara not have smelled the blood when she returned? She supposed it was because she had just sated herself—her senses were only very acute when she was hungry. And she'd had a lot on her mind.

It was all trifling compared to this. The moment of truth was here. What would she do?

She didn't think she was powerful enough to take Zariaz down, let alone her *and* Talon. Liam couldn't help; his mortal body would be kindling in their hands. The only hope was to get away, then prepare. She had to get to the Dark Council somehow and have them take Liam into protective custody.

But that was hopeless. She was a nobody in the world of dark creatures. And Liam was a mortal, less than nobody. A snack. They didn't punish and execute Zariaz because of what she had done to the mortals—they did it because she had come dangerously close to exposing their kind. One mortal at a time wasn't a threat, but armies of them...that could be very different.

"Aren't you going to thank me?" Zariaz asked, turning to Ashara. "No more competition." She tsk-tsked, shaking her head slowly from side to side. "Such an ingrate." She stepped close to the coffin and gazed down at the dead beauty. "I saw how you looked at her back in San Francisco." She glanced at Liam. "*Both* of you."

"What business is it of—"

"Silence, Liam Archer!" Zariaz whirled and came within inches of the trembling couple. She grinned and, looking Liam dead in the eyes, extended her fangs. Her eyes flashed with unbridled lunacy, and she began to speak what Ashara could only guess was a voodoo curse in some sort of Haitian dialect.

Ashara could hear Talon in the background, laughing.

"Run, Liam, run!" she cried, giving him a shove toward the front

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door. He grabbed the knob and twisted, frantically pulling it open. He dashed out into the misty night.

Ashara spun after him, but she didn't make it. She felt Zar's long fingernails bite into her shoulder and hold her fast. Ashara struggled, but it only gave Zariaz better purchase. She got both shoulders, then pulled Ashara back against her. Her forearm went across Ashara's throat in a chokehold. Her breath was hot in Ashara's ear.

"Get him!" Zariaz shouted to Talon.

She tightened the pressure across Ashara's windpipe and Ashara could hear her own cartilage crackling. The pain was astounding. She choked for her breath, but it was lost.

As her vision vignettied and faded, Ashara was dimly aware of Talon sprinting through her gaping doorway, hot in the pursuit of his prey.

* * *

It was dark when Ashara awoke. More than dark—infinately black. She sat up, but she only got partway before she thumped her head. She lay back and felt around. She was inside a coffin. The feeling of wetness seeped into her awareness and she squirmed, feeling the blood that had wicked into her clothes and hair. She felt along the seam until she came to the bolt.

She was in her own coffin, marinating in Leilani's blood. The thought brought hunger pangs, and she was immediately disgusted by her nature. She hadn't felt that in a long time —shame, revulsion, self-loathing—she would probably never be a proud vampire who relished in her evil, but she had come to accept what she was, and that she could not change it.

She closed her eyes, even though it made no physical difference, and listened. At first, she heard nothing but a dull roar. Then she figured out the noise was coming from jet engines.

Something slithered across her foot, startling her. She gasped and recoiled, but she couldn't get away. She felt a sharp prick on her ankle.

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A hooked claw with a stiletto tip.

“Mrrraoow!” Lovecraft complained loudly.

“Oh, Lovey,” Ashara cried, her eyes suddenly filling and overflowing with tears. She patted her chest, and the cat came up and laid down on her. His soft fur and the rhythm of his purr flooded her with an odd joy. At least she wasn’t alone. He mewed again and pawed at the slide bolt. He was as hungry as she was.

The bolt moved easily, but the coffin lid did not. It was either nailed shut or underneath something very heavy. “Sorry, Lovey. We’re stuck in here.”

Her thoughts were like a ricocheting bullet, bouncing off the walls of her mind. Obviously, Zariaz and Talon had packed her and Lovecraft up with care, and they were being transported somewhere. Why hadn’t they just killed her? Even if she couldn’t really die completely, she knew they hadn’t even tried because although her head pounded with tension and throat hurt, she felt otherwise okay.

She prayed that Liam had gotten away. But even if he had, where could he possibly hide? He was as good as gone. Hot, salty tears burned her cheeks in a relentless stream. Lovecraft shifted forward, licking at them. The poor creature *was* starving.

The hours passed like small eternities for Ashara. The dull roar of the engines made her sleepy, but the burning pain in her constricting veins kept her from even temporary respite. She wished she had something sharp so that she could cut herself, and at least feed Lovecraft—he was too respectful of his mistress to help himself. He also had a better constitution and stronger will than she when it came to meals. Ashara often wondered if he was even older than she was. One thing she had learned from the few vampires she had known was that the longer you lived, the less blood you could live on. She wished she could make her fangs grow at will; they only extended when she was about to feed or kill.

She felt gravity shifting and realized the plane was making its

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descent. Lovecraft growled when the air pressure changed, and he dug in with his claws. Ashara stroked his back, trying to soothe him. Her own ears were popping and her headache intensified. Even though she flew all the time, she never could get used to it. There was still that Old World part of her that felt humans were never meant to fly through the heavens.

She heard the plane's landing gear coming down, then felt the bouncing skid off the tarmac, and finally the gliding on solid ground. The aircraft screeched as it slowed, then ground to a halt. They were here, wherever "here" was.

Ashara felt Lovecraft's head heavy on her chest, then listened to his breath become shallower and shallower until it finally stopped. She began to feel the infinite weight, too, and she let herself slip into death, not sure if she cared whether she ever woke up again or not.

* * *

Ashara was in a sitting position when she awoke. She had an awareness of being nude and clean. Her slightly damp hair smelled faintly of herbal shampoo. She was in a bed, propped up with a pile of cushions and plump pillows. Her head was at an odd angle, and her throat still hurt. Without opening her eyes, she righted herself and felt her neck. It was swollen, but not broken—or if it had been, it healed. She swallowed two or three times, forcing her parched gullet to work.

Finally, she opened her eyes. She knew right away where she was. It was her old room in Zar's Romanesque hacienda in Évora. Nothing had changed. Her wrought-iron bed perhaps had a new mattress, but it was the same ornate, curly-cued frame. Her large, unvarnished pine treasure chest sat at its foot, and the plush bearskin rug was still next to the bed. The fireplace was cold and empty, its stylized stone lion sentries posted at each end.

Above the fireplace was a huge portrait she had painted of her sister's favourite stallion, a wild-eyed bay named El Despejo. She and Zariaz, mirror images, stood on either side of him, each holding one

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rein. The year was 1902, and the twins were dressed accordingly, with their wild hair pulled back and pinned into prim buns. Ashara stared into her own face and searched her painted eyes. The eyes were sparkling with peace and contentment then, but it wouldn't last much longer. Just two years later, Zariaz would begin working her magical, musical curse again, and Ashara would have to leave. She could not stand by and watch the slaughter.

There was one new thing in the room: bars across the small window. Her gaze shifted to the heavy door of petrified wood, knowing without a doubt it was locked from the outside. She was now a prisoner in a room where she had once been happy.

She looked around for Lovecraft but didn't see him. Perhaps he got his own little dungeon, she thought, chuckling mirthlessly to herself.

The pain in her veins was nearly unbearable. She pulled the sheet back and looked at her sunken stomach and protruding rib and hipbones. The veins in her arms stood out like cords. It didn't take long for a young vampire to starve. She could never truly starve to death, but she could become so hideous, then so weak, that she could not find prey. She would be a suffering bag of bones until something came close enough, or someone fed her.

There was a knock at the door. "Hello, Shar. Are you decent?" Zariaz's singsong voice filtered through the thick door. It opened, creaking on its cast-iron hinges. She peered in.

Ashara strained forward, painfully. "Where is he?"

"Talon stayed back in California to take care of a little business." She stepped inside, noting Ashara's obvious fatigue. "Oh, you mean Liam." She shrugged. "I don't know."

She was holding Lovecraft in her arms, and Ashara was relieved. She knew that Zariaz would never hurt an animal. The Siamese meowed when he saw his mistress and struggled to free himself.

Zariaz let him go. "Did you ever wonder who made the first vampire cat?" she mused. She stepped into the room and shut the door

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behind her. “Too bad only predators can live as vampires...I would love to have a horse of the night! A real nightmare. Wouldn’t that be amazing? Could you imagine the size of the fangs?”

Ashara knew what Zar was doing. It was what she always did...cloud the conversation, then hit you with a lightning-bolt zapper. “Get to the point, Zar,” Ashara croaked, her parched throat betraying her by making her sound as feeble as she felt.

Zariaz took her time, strolling slowly to the bed, then sitting at the foot. “Okay, here it is. Our mortal and immortal blood binds you and I. We come from the same seed, the same womb. You are me, and I am you. Just think if we combined forces, how powerful we could become. I don’t want to sing my song alone, Ashara. The moment of supremacy should be heralded by a dark *duet*!”

Was she insane? Well, yes.

But what was she thinking? Ashara wondered. Surely Zariaz didn’t believe Ashara would even consider such a thing. Then she thought perhaps because they were twins, that Zariaz could not carry out her curse alone—perhaps every fiber of her being had to participate, or it wouldn’t work.

“I can’t do that. You know I can’t, and I won’t.”

Zariaz stood. She knelt to pick up Lovecraft, then crossed the room. When she got to the door, she said, “I’ll give you a few days to think about it.”

“Zar, I’m hungry,” Ashara said, trying to keep the desperation from her voice. She really wasn’t sure how long it had been since she’d fed.

Zariaz opened the door, set Lovecraft outside, and picked something up. It was a glass goblet in the chunky Spanish style. As she brought the cup to Ashara, Ashara’s nostrils took in the sharp, metallic scent of blood. The cup was full, and the blood was still warm—the room was chilly, and a faint steam rose from it. Unable to control herself, Ashara snatched at the goblet and drank it all down.

“Good?” Zariaz asked.

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Ashara nodded. But it wasn't nearly enough.

"Before you drank, did you take even a split second to think where it might have come from?" Zariaz took the goblet back and cradled it against her breast. Blood from the rim stained her bodice.

Ashara knew it wasn't animal blood—like the flesh of mammals, fish or fowl, blood from each species had its own unique flavor. What she had just drunk was definitely human. "What are you getting at?"

"Oh, nothing," Zariaz replied innocently. "It's just that it could have been your precious Liam's blood, for all you knew."

Ashara let a tear slip. "Is he still alive?"

Zariaz turned and headed for the door again. She twisted the knob, then looked back over her shoulder. "Don't worry. It was my blood." She disappeared into the hallway, and the door clicked shut. Ashara heard a bolt slide home and click into place.

Ashara suffered through the night, a million flights of fancy flitting through her mind. Was Liam dead? Was it possible Liam was here with her, a prisoner in a nearby room? If Liam was alive and in the house, why? There had to be a reason to let him live. Would Zariaz try to force her to make him a vampire along with she and Talon? There were so many possibilities, and none of them were good.

Although she was almost too weak to stand and walk, Ashara had to get out of the bed. She went to the door and tried it, already knowing what the result would be. Then she crossed the hardwood floor to the window. The bars were secure. She looked out but couldn't see much.

She could just make out the skeletal columns of the famous ruins of the Roman temple off in the distance. The walled city of Évora was a beautiful place, cloaked in ancient mystery. Ashara had missed the home where she lived for only a short time, but she had never returned until now.

Shivering with cold, she went to the armoire and found some of her old, dusty-smelling dresses and riding habits hanging. There were also two new robes. She put on a warm one and went back to bed. There

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were no books in the room, but she doubted reading could distract her. She turned off the bedside lamp and lay silent in the darkness.

Some time later, she began to feel the familiar grog coming on. Then she panicked, seeing the night sky from the window begin to silver with dawn. The sun would be shining through that window in no time. She scrambled from the bed and began to crawl toward the armoire—she could hide in there.

Then she heard an odd sound. It was a motor. So out of place in the ancient villa. She looked toward the window, where the sound was coming from, and saw electronic shutters coming down. They effectively sealed out all light, and were obviously on a timer.

She headed back for the bed but didn't make it that far. She died in mid-crawl.

* * *

Ashara felt a hand on her shoulder, shaking gently.

“Time to wake up, sleepy head,” said her mother.

Ashara sighed. She'd had the strangest dream.

She opened her eyes, and saw Zariaz kneeling beside her on the floor. It wasn't a dream at all. It was an everlasting nightmare.

“Wake up.”

Ashara sighed and tried to sit up. She was still feeling very heavy. She glanced up at the window and saw that the sun had just set. It was still early for her to wake.

She took stock of herself. Her throat had completely healed and her headache had calmed to a dull throb, but she was feeling hungrier than she ever had in her long life. Senses honed to rapiers, she smelled freshly spilt blood. She had to have it. Even a goblet would do. A thimbleful...anything!

Zariaz was helping her to her feet, staring worriedly into her face. “You're really not a morning person, are you?” She turned Ashara toward the mirror that was inset in the left door of the armoire.

Ashara gasped when she saw herself. Thankfully, the robe covered

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most of her, but her face, hands, and bare feet were horror enough. Her extremities were like twisted twigs covered with ashen skin, and her face was nearly skeletal. Her lips were drawn back into a nasty grimace, unable to cover her teeth, and her eyes were bugged and sunken at the same time. She felt like crying, but there was no moisture left within her body. “Zar...” she croaked.

Zariaz carefully walked her to the bed and helped her in. She put the covers over Ashara gently, lovingly, and tucked her in. “There, there. I’ll bring you a nice, hot meal.” She turned and headed for the slightly open door. Ashara’s mind leapt through the opening, wishing her body could act on the impulse.

Ashara’s eyes followed Zariaz’s form as she bent and picked something up. It was a basket. No...a bassinet. Ashara heard a baby fussing and cooing as it was lifted. Zariaz brought the basket close, and Ashara could see the baby had blood trickling from two small punctures in its throat.

“I couldn’t help but have a little sip,” Zar said. “The rest is for you.”

Ashara shook her head. She couldn’t. What could be more innocent and healthy than a newborn infant?

“Come on,” Zariaz cajoled. “Remember how when we were young, you and I used to love the fresh cream? So sweet, warm, and rich...this is better.”

Ashara closed her eyes and tried to shut out all her senses. “Where did you get it?”

“Her,” Zariaz corrected. “This may be the 1970s, but girl babies are still not wanted. I snatched her from so large a family, she won’t even be missed.” She lifted the tiny bundle from the basket and held her out toward Ashara. “Come on, you know you have to. Just a little drink to get your strength, then we’ll hunt together. Just like old times.”

Ashara turned away and pulled herself into a fetal curl. She buried her head under the covers, trying in vain to shut out the irresistible aroma.

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After a few long moments, Ashara heard a sharp cry, then sucking sounds. Silence, then a thud on the floor. Footsteps receding.

"You've got leftovers, then," Zariaz snapped, slamming the door.

* * *

When Ashara awoke the next night, the corpse of the poor baby was gone. Earlier, Ashara nearly retched drinking what Zariaz had left, but she knew she had to maintain her health if she was going to escape.

She got up and went to the mirror. She was still a shocking wraith, but she did feel somewhat stronger. She went to the window and looked out. The narrow streets were empty. She went back to the bed and waited. She wondered what Zariaz had in store for her tonight. She wondered how Lovecraft was. And she wondered most of all about Liam.

Everything seemed so hopeless. Zariaz was obviously happy. Perhaps giving in to the darkness was Ashara's only hope. She tried to imagine an endless life of killing for pleasure, of hoarding power, of dreams of decadence. She could let go of her foolish standards that made no difference anyway. She wouldn't have to worry about loneliness, love, or fulfillment. She could just be a creature. Life would be so much simpler.

Ashara heard two sets of footsteps on the hardwood hallway, approaching her room. The bolt slid away, and the doorknob turned.

Zariaz stepped inside, holding the hand of a man Ashara had never seen before. The pair stepped into the room.

The native was in his late 40s, and he was dressed in shabby, stained clothing. He looked dazed and frightened. Yet he followed Zariaz without resistance.

"I got this one from the proverbial wrong side of the tracks," Zar announced. "Isn't he more to your taste? I'm sorry about the baby; I'd forgotten about your little code of ethics."

"Sure you did," Ashara replied acidly.

"Come on, have a bite. I've already anesthetized him for you."

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Zariaz let go of the man's hand and moved his head aside to expose his tan throat. Ashara could see the twin punctures in his jugular vein.

The man began to babble in Portuguese. "Please don't hurt me," he said over and over. He stood rooted to the spot, otherwise motionless.

"Don't let his histrionics fool you," Zar said coolly. "He deserves to die. I saw him beating his wife." She paused and ran her tongue across her teeth. "She was a tasty morsel." She took the man's callused hand again and led him to the edge of the bed.

Ashara leaned forward, grasping at the man's soiled shirt, pulling herself to his neck. Then she felt Zar's hand on her chest, pushing her back into the pillows.

"Ah-ah-ah. First you have to promise you'll join forces with me. Then you can have him."

Join forces? It sounded like a line from a comic book. "Please," Ashara gasped. "Please don't make me. I can't promise that." Even though she had been considering the proposition just a few minutes before, when it came right down to it, she couldn't give in. Much as she felt she should make it up to Zar for what she had done with the Dark Council, she wouldn't give in. She cried out in agony as Zariaz pulled the man away for good, backing toward the door.

"I'll bring him back tomorrow."

Ashara wondered what else tomorrow would bring.

* * *

As she slipped in and out of consciousness, Ashara dreamed that Liam came to her. Crazily, she thought it was his ghost telling her not to worry and that he was fine.

"You'll be fine, too," he said softly.

God, how she loved his deep, sexy voice and his charming accent. She would miss him so much. It wasn't fair, Liam taken in the prime of his life. She began to hum "Butterfly Kiss" and remembering the first time he gave one to her. His eyelashes had felt so soft against her cheek. She could practically smell the sweet citrus scent of his

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shampoo. She hoped his death had been swift and merciful. She hoped he'd died in rapture.

Ashara was seized by a hunger spasm and she cried out, clutching at her belly.

"Hush..." the ghostly Liam of her imagination soothed her. "Quiet, baby." He stroked her hair, and she whimpered softly. "I'm going to turn the light on," he murmured.

Ashara sensed light from behind her closed eyelids. How had she managed to turn the light on? Wasn't she too far gone? Her eyelids fluttered open, narrow slits, unaccustomed to the light, and a hazy vision of her lover came to her.

"Liam..." she moaned. She missed him so much.

"Liam Archer." Zariaz's sharp voice cut right through the haze. "How nice of you to join us."

CHAPTER 10

Sympathy for the Devil

Ashara felt Liam's wrist pressing against her dry teeth. "Hurry," he said. "Drink from me."

"Don't bother," said Zariaz, stepping into the room. "She's far too weak."

Ashara struggled into consciousness. Was this *really* happening?

"Stay away from her!" Liam commanded, whirling to face Zariaz.

Zariaz kept coming. She was right next to the bed, standing head to head with Liam. Her eyes glittered with malice. "What are you going to do?"

Liam bared his fangs and hissed.

Ashara blinked. His *fangs*? What a crazy dream.

Zariaz gasped and took two quick steps back, but she quickly regained her composure. "I should have known." She exhaled, then crossed her arms. "Where is Talon?" she asked, her tone as cool and

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even as if she were asking him the time.

“He’s not your concern anymore,” Liam replied just as casually.

Zariaz stepped forward again. Her expression was coolly smug. “Okay. Have it your way.”

Liam relaxed, giving Zariaz the in she needed. She threw herself on him, clawing savagely at his face. He fell back across the bed, and Zariaz toppled with him.

Their combined weight on Ashara’s brittle, twig-like leg bones made her gasp and snap fully awake. She pulled her legs free and scrambled away, huddled against the headboard.

Zariaz was no match for Liam. He quickly twisted and turned, forcing her beneath him. He had her arms pinned, but she continued to struggle. The kicking of her legs shook the bed like a violent earthquake. Liam opened his mouth wide, his long white fangs dripping venom. He swooped in.

“No!” Ashara screamed. She flung herself at Liam with a force she never would have guessed she had. She pulled his head back by his hair and wrenched him aside with every last ounce of her strength.

It was just enough to let Zariaz slither out from under Liam’s weight and dash across the room. She made it to the safety of the open door and slammed it shut.

Liam flew after her, but he was too late. The bolt slid home, hard. He leaned against the door, panting.

Instantly, Ashara realized the gravity of her rash act. In saving her sister, she had doomed herself and Liam.

“Another fine mess you’ve gotten me into, Ollie,” Liam said finally, a wan smile spreading across his face.

Ashara was too sick and weak to see the humor, let alone respond. She just sagged.

Liam came to her and sat on the edge of her bed. He gathered Ashara’s frail body into his arms and kissed her grotesque face. His blue eyes gazed tenderly into her shrunken sockets. “Come on, my

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sweet. You *must* drink from me now.”

He raised his wrist to his mouth and bit into himself. The sharp, metallic aroma of fresh blood on the air immediately aroused Ashara. He gently lowered the seeping wound to her mouth, and she suckled greedily, like a nursing infant. At first, all she could feel was the flood of relief. Then her mind began to come back to her. She could feel her heart beating strong again.

It was an effort, but she stopped as soon as she felt better. She knew what would happen if she kept drinking until there was nothing left.

She looked up at Liam. All his color was gone, but he still looked all right. “Did I hurt you?” she whispered.

“You could never hurt me,” he answered, stroking her cheek.

She sat up, glancing at the shut and locked door. “Oh, Liam. I’m so sorry! What have I done?”

“Just complicated things a little,” he replied. “We’ll be okay. And don’t be sorry. She’s your sister. You only did what came naturally.”

But she hadn’t done that in 1912. Why save her now? “I was starving,” she sighed. “I couldn’t think straight. My mind was playing such tricks. I imagined you had fangs. Liam, I thought you were a vampire!”

“I am.”

“But...I’ve seen pictures of you out in the sun. It’s impossible.” She stood unsteadily, shaking her head in disbelief.

“I’m a Chosen One,” he explained. “We’re different from your kind.”

“How?”

“This isn’t the time or the place,” Liam replied patiently. He, too, got to his feet. “Are you familiar with this place?”

She nodded. “I used to live here. How did you find me?”

“Again with the questions,” Liam chided gently. “Now, tell me. How many ways out are there?”

“The door is bolted, and the window is barred.”

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“Not this room. I mean, out of the hacienda. Getting out of this room won’t be a problem, trust me.”

Ashara thought back. Her room was on the second floor... Then it hit her, what Liam said a minute ago. “Your kind is different from our kind? So you know Zariaz and I are vampires? How long have you known?”

“Shhh...the walls have ears,” he said quietly. He faced her, putting both hands on her shoulders, looking her right in the eye. “We’ll talk about it later. I promise. Now we need to get the hell out of here. I followed your sister in earlier and figured out which was your room by the lock. But I didn’t go sight-seeing.”

She nodded, and turned her thoughts back to the layout of the hacienda. Her room was on the second floor in the far west corner. Her art studio was next to it and it had a balcony, then there was a guest bedroom, and Zariaz’s bedroom. Below were a huge kitchen, a dining room, living room, den, servant’s room and bathroom. There was a basement and a wine cellar. The stables were across the yard. She really had no idea how he proposed to get out. There was no convenient dumbwaiter, no secret passage or anything like that. “I think the quickest way out is through the window. But those bars are solid. I’ve already checked.”

“I thought of that, but I don’t think you could handle the fall. You’re still very weak; you’ll need more nourishment before you’re back to your old self.”

“But the bars, anyway...”

“Not a problem. Your sister isn’t the only one who can move things with her mind.”

“Couldn’t you just slide the bolt open, then?”

“It’s not that simple. Can you do any telekinesis at all?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I never tried to learn. I’ve never really wanted to be what I am. I guess I’m still mortal at heart.”

“Mortals can do it, too,” Liam said. “Most of them just don’t

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believe they can. Anyway, for all intents and purposes, I'm on my own with this." He paused and closed his eyes, thinking. "I have to see the object I want to move, so the bolt is out." He opened his eyes and studied the door. "I could push the door with the force of my mind until the bolt breaks off, but I'm afraid the noise would alert Zariaz. You're my main concern right now. I just want to get you to safety, and we'll deal with her later. And she does need to be dealt with," he concluded grimly.

Ashara didn't respond to that. All she wanted now was to get out and away. Despite the infusion of Liam's blood, she still felt very weak. She knew she couldn't jump out the window without breaking her legs. She also knew that he was weakened from feeding her. Then she had an idea that was so obvious she nearly laughed out loud. "Why don't we tie the bed sheets together and climb down from the window? It's not that far to the ground." She immediately stripped the bed and began to knot the sheets.

"It's worth a try. Those bars look awfully strong though."

He walked to the window and stared at the bars. Nothing happened. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened and tried again. Ashara saw two of the bars quivering. "It's working!" she cried.

The bars stopped. Liam turned to her. "Baby, you've got to stay quiet. This isn't easy, and I need my full concentration." He opened the window, and his gaze went back to the bars. They quivered again, then began to pull away from each other, ever so slightly. Liam's body began to shake with the effort, but it was working. The bars pulled apart, leaving a small gap.

Making sure he was finished, Ashara spoke up. "I don't think we can fit through that."

"Oh ye of little faith." Liam stepped up to the window. He pointed at the sill and said, "The movement of the bars cracked the mortar." He reached through the open window, pushing the two loosened bars. They fell away and clattered loudly to the stone courtyard. "She *had* to have

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heard that. You go first. Hurry!”

Ashara brought the bundle of sheets and tied them across two intact bars. She turned and went out the window, facing the ivy-covered wall. She scuttled down quickly, and touched down with her bare feet. Liam was still inside. She motioned urgently for him to follow. He shook the bars that the sheet was tied to, showing her how they had loosened with her weight. He untied the knot and moved the sheet to two other bars. The time it took seemed like an eternity to Ashara. She felt so vulnerable out in the November night alone, wearing nothing but a robe.

Liam threw a leg over the windowsill and eased himself out and down. He was nearing the first floor when the bars gave way. Ashara watched helplessly as he fell. He landed flat on his back, hitting his head hard against the cobblestone. His eyes were open, but he wasn’t moving.

Ashara rushed to his side and knelt. His expression was completely blank. “Liam! Liam! Wake up,” she slapped at his cheeks. To her horror, she saw blood seeping from under his head. “Oh, Liam. No, no.”

His eyelids fluttered. “What happened?” he wheezed.

“You fell. Oh, God. It was my idea to go out the window. I’ll never forgive myself. You’ve cracked your head, Li.” Tears flooded her eyes. If only she had never met Liam. He would have been so much better off without her.

“Don’t cry.” He still wasn’t moving. “It’s okay. I can feel the mending. I’ll be fine; I just need to rest for a minute.”

Did they have a minute? Ashara glanced up at the open window, and her worst fear was confirmed: Zariaz was standing there, looking down at them. She had Lovecraft under one arm, and she was waving with the other. She had a smile on her face, as if she was seeing them off to a lovely voyage. It was surreal. Then she turned, and Ashara couldn’t see her anymore.

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“Liam, she’s coming! You have to get up now.”

Slowly he came to his senses and heaved himself up. He swayed, leaning against her for support. Her knees buckled, and she nearly gave way. “We’re quite a pair,” he chuckled. “This way. I have a motor bike just outside the gate.”

They ran as best they could, but their efforts were for naught, as Zariaz didn’t pursue them. Whatever she had in mind would come later, Ashara had no doubt. Her sister’s favorite game was that of surprise.

Liam hopped on the rented Ducati and made room for Ashara. She slipped in behind and held on. The powerful bike peeled out, and both weakened vampires nearly fell off. Righting himself, Liam kicked it into gear and drove like a demon. All Ashara could do was lay her cheek against his back and cling to him.

The whipping wind reminded her of the snowy midnight ride into the Gypsy camp. She often wondered what the girl’s family had made of her capture and disappearance. Did they know vampires were among them, or did they think it was merely a crime of hate and prejudice? Ashara had grown very interested in Romany culture after that, and without Talon and Zariaz knowing, she had become a benefactor to many destitute families through contributions to the church.

Liam seemed to know exactly where he was going. Évora was a small city, and before long he slowed the bike and brought it to a smooth halt. Ashara looked up. A massive, towering structure loomed before them, all but obliterating the starry night sky. She knew the building well.

“We can hide here, then tomorrow night we’ll have a hotel where we can get ourselves together and figure out what to do,” Liam said.

“Why here?” she asked.

“It’s fitting, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, if you’re really morbid.” She got off the Ducati, carefully stepping to the dirt on her cold bare feet. *Anywhere but here*, she thought. “Isn’t there anyone around? A guard, something?”

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“Not really,” Liam said vaguely. He, too, dismounted then walked the bike to the huge entrance. He looked up at the legend above. “Our bones are here,” he read aloud, translating the phrase into English, “We await yours.”

“They’ll never get ours,” Ashara said, somewhat wistfully.

“Well, our bones will rest here for a day,” Liam corrected her. “Have you ever been inside?”

“Many times,” she answered. “It used to be one of my favorite places to be when I was feeling melancholy or lonesome.” The memories it held for her were bittersweet.

Liam opened the unlocked door. “Seems like an odd choice. Now who’s morbid?”

“It was a way to really *feel* my sorrow,” she said *sotto voce*, following him inside. “For a long, long time I was numb. Any sort of emotion was welcome.”

Nothing had really changed in the sixty-nine years since her last visit. The Church of São Francisco was a curiously beautiful and ghoulish ossuary, where the bare bones of long-departed monks literally coated the walls. Set into the walls and columns of the seventeenth-century ossuary chapel with great care were thousands of human skulls, hands, feet, collarbones, ribs, pelvises, and thighbones, forming a macabre mosaic.

To Ashara, the decorative bones were a symbolic collision—challenging the usual view of death, which separated into seamless categories the living from the dead. Medieval Catholic eschatology made a carnival sideshow of the paradoxical nature of living and dying. For mortals, life and death truly were opposite sides of the same coin. They could not have one without the other.

The chapel had a dry, acrid smell. It was freezing cold inside, and the dim lantern lights, aided by icy drafts, cast long, eerie shadows to dance across the stone floor. Liam brought his motorcycle in and shut the door. “We’ll be safe here,” he said. “It’s closed to visitors

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tomorrow. We can spend the whole day.”

“What about the guard? Do they still have one?”

They crossed the main floor and headed for a smaller chamber. Hundreds of eyeless sockets watched them from every direction. “The guard is in here,” Liam told her. The small room was illuminated only by two candelabras.

An incredibly fat man in a rumpled brown uniform sat on the floor, his hands tied behind his back, his mouth gagged. His eyes bulged with terror when the pair of vampires entered the chamber, and he whimpered through his gag. Ashara guessed she probably still looked a fright, and she noticed that Liam had a rivulet of blood running from his hairline into his forehead. Ashara saw a spot of blood at the guard’s collar.

“Dinner for two,” Liam said, taking Ashara by the hand.

She was still famished. Her veins continued to ache, and she felt terribly weak. But she still couldn’t kill an innocent, or fairly young, victim. “I’m finicky,” she told Liam. “I only drink from evildoers.”

“You drank from me.”

She sighed. “I mean mortals. I could never kill an innocent person.”

“How do you know he’s innocent?”

“Well, he doesn’t have to be a serial killer. Even if he’s a little bit bad, like a drug-pusher or a swindler, I could do it.” She was definitely looking for excuses to replenish herself.

The guard seemed to understand what they were saying. Ashara knelt before him. “Do you speak English?” The man nodded, and she pulled his gag down.

Liam stepped in. “Let me handle this.” He knelt beside Ashara. He addressed the guard. “You remember me?” Again the frantic nod. Apparently, he remembered the yellow-haired demon’s bite very well. “You know what I can do. If you lie, I’ll kill you. You understand? *Mort!*”

“Liam,” Ashara chided. “You’re scaring him.”

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Liam ignored her. “I want you to confess your sins,” he commanded.

The corpulent guard sniveled and began to babble in Portuguese.

“He says he is a sinner,” Ashara translated. “He says he’s a bad man.”

“English!” Liam snapped.

“Okay, okay,” sobbed the guard. “I confess. I put a man in here.” He indicated a column of skulls stacked one on top of the other. “His bones...here.”

“You killed a man?” Ashara’s gaze swept across the main hall of the *cappelos de ossis*. How lucky could she be? Involuntarily, her fangs began to extend.

The guard shook his head, then began to sob. “No, but I help the killer. You let me live?”

She almost felt sorry for the poor creature. Almost. She leaned forward, and her robe slipped halfway off. The guard’s back was against the wall, but he still managed to push himself away. Panther-like, Ashara shifted to her hands and knees. She brought her lips to the guard’s throat, taking an innate, predatory delight in the pungent smell of sweat, fear, and already spilt blood. She let her fangs grow against his flesh, puncturing the man’s soft skin. He made a high, thin, keening wail and struggled briefly.

Ashara felt Liam’s silky hair brushing her bare shoulder and cut her glance over—he was feeding from the other side of the man’s neck. She closed her eyes and swallowed the sheer bliss.

Ashara drank and drank until she felt as though she would burst. The guard’s life slipped away, into the mouths and souls of the two vampires. He sagged and slid down, out of their grasp. Ashara sighed, finally sated.

Then she felt Liam’s mouth on hers, his lips and tongue slick and salty with hot blood. She took his head in both her hands and kissed him with a passion fueled by fear, relief, and boundless joy. She

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desperately needed to do something life-affirming, having come so close to death.

Ashara rose, bringing Liam up with her. Her long robe slipped away completely and she was naked in the house of the Lord. Her gaze swept the candlelit chamber, tinged amber by the small flames. A thousand monks' skulls seemed to leer and grin at her. It was a strange turn-on...she felt like an undead exhibitionist for the dead.

She pulled away and stepped back. Picking up a candelabra, she said huskily, "Let's find some privacy."

Liam glanced down at the drained guard, sloppily splayed out, then at all the grimacing skulls. "Good idea."

* * *

Freshly showered, Ashara stood in front of the mirror in the hotel room, searching her face. All she could see when she looked at herself was Zariaz.

Liam's reflection joined hers. "You look gorgeous," he said softly, stroking her damp hair.

It was true. She was fully restored. The nourishment and the night of love had done wonders for her—she looked like a dewy beauty of twenty-one, certainly not the tired, traumatized old bloodsucker of a hundred and eighty years that she was. She reached behind and felt the back of Liam's head. The fissure was completely closed and mended. "I'm glad you're healed, too."

There was a sharp rap at the door. Ashara tensed. Then she heard, "Bell service!" and relaxed again.

"My luggage is here," Liam said, going to the door. He opened it, and the bellhop gave him an odd, sideways glance. He had obviously heard about the guests' condition when they arrived an hour earlier. He handed Liam the bag and left without waiting for a tip.

Liam had rented the suite before heading for Portugal, but he hadn't checked in until this evening. The sight of the disheveled pair walking through the lobby, she still in her robe and bare feet, his hair caked with

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dried blood, raised more than a few eyebrows. As Liam signed in at the register, he made it known that he was a British rock musician—that seemed to explain everything to the clerks, but no doubt their tongues still wagged.

Liam took the long, overstuffed duffel bag to the foot of the bed and opened it. He pulled out a pair of Ashara's jeans and one of her tee-shirts.

"How did you know...?"

"I knew I would find you," he said simply. He handed the clothes to her, but she didn't put them on. The room was heated, and she felt fine wearing just the towel around her waist.

He got out some more clothes, his, and pulled on a pair of chinos. He left his nearly hairless chest bare, and for that Ashara was glad. She loved looking at his muscular arms and washboard stomach. She had always thought he must work out for hours every day, but now that she knew he was a vampire too, she knew his body was merely preserved in the condition it had been when he died.

She wondered when he did die. She turned to him. "Li, you promised you'd explain everything to me later. It's later now, isn't it?"

Liam was still unpacking. He held up two eight-track tapes. "Look, I brought Joni and Elton." He dug a little deeper and found the portable player.

"Liam..." she prompted.

He sat on the bed, and patted the spot next to him. She sat. "I'll tell you if you can answer this riddle," he said.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Okay."

"I am the beginning of eternity. The end of time and space. The beginning of every end, and the end of every place. What am I?"

"You mean aside from maddening?"

"Yes, aside from that," he grinned, giving her nose a playful tweak.

"Let's see...it has to be easy. You always give flagrant hints without meaning to." She thought for a long moment. "Where are we?"

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Évora Hotel! You're the letter E."

"You're a genius," he muttered. Then he looked deeply into her eyes. "That's just one of the reasons I love you."

"You...love...me?" Ashara sighed. "Oh, Liam. I..." She stopped, catching the mischievous glint in his azure eyes. "Oh, no. You're not going to throw me off the track that easily. Explain everything. *Now*."

CHAPTER 11

Behind Blue Eyes

Liam sighed and lay back on the bed. Ashara joined him, her hands laced behind her head. Liam reached over and traced a circle around her nearest nipple with his finger. It rose to meet his touch. “I love the way your body responds to me,” he said softly.

She brushed his hand gently away. “Liam. The explanation.”

“Okay, okay. I promise. Just let me ease into it. This isn’t so simple for me.”

She could tell he wasn’t joking around now. “All right. Why don’t you start by telling me when you knew I was a vampire.”

He sat up and reached for the eight-tracks. He set the player on the nightstand and inserted Elton John’s *Tumbleweed Connection* tape. “I love this,” he said, lying back down. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I think I knew that first night, when you were photographing me. I felt an instant kinship with you, which is

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something I don't often feel with mortals. I knew for sure when I could never get you to stay the whole night," he chuckled.

"You're not used to women running out on you."

"No," he said, without any conceit. "I knew what you were, but I was waiting for you to tell me."

"Why didn't you just tell me first?" Ashara asked.

"I'm much older than you, Ashara. I've spent centuries on this endless carousel of life; I knew that in order for it to work out between us, you had to come to me."

"I almost told you that night...the night...Liam, I'm so sorry about Leilani. Did she mean anything to you?"

"No," he said. "She was a sexy girl, and I am still a man. I'll admit she was enticing, but in case you're wondering, I didn't sleep with her."

"Would you have?"

"We'll never know now." He sighed, and stroked her hair absently. "I'll admit, I was afraid of my feelings for you. I might have tried to see if they were real through her, but I don't think I could have gone through with it. She was just a kid."

"I know. I feel so responsible for her death." She didn't mention the fact that she had nearly killed Lani herself in San Francisco.

"It's not your fault," he reassured her. "You have no control over your sister's actions."

"Don't remind me," she said dryly. "Liam, do you think she knows where we are?"

"Probably. Why does she hate you so much? Is she just a loon, or what?"

Ashara told Liam about their childhood in nineteenth-century Vienna, about her sister's jealousy over Ludwig, about her death and rebirth, and finally, about the curse and Zariaz's punishment by the Dark Council. "Can we go to them?" she asked. "The Dark Council?"

Liam closed his eyes, squeezed them shut and then opened them to look at her. "The Dark Council is nothing more than a cult. They feed

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your kind a whitewashed history. Do you know where vampires really come from?"

She shook her head. It wasn't like there was a Vampire University, or a Dracula 101 home course. She'd heard things over the years but could never be sure of the source. Zariaz told her it all started with voodoo—they were some sort of *uber*-zombies. One of her rare vampire friends had told her he believed they were a separate humanoid species, and all it took was the exchange of blood to set their unique genetic code into motion. That was why, he said, so many did not survive the bite.

"I'll tell you," Liam said, rolling over so he could look her in the face. "I am a first-generation vampire. I am nearly 2,000 years old. Jesus Christ himself gave me this immortal blood. Or Christus, as we called him."

Ashara propped herself up and stared at him, wide-eyed. "You mean that whole resurrection story is true?" She had never put much stock in the Bible, not even when she was a mortal. She'd given to the church to help others, and she loved doing the whole Catholic symbolism thing, but she'd never fully believed in it.

"When Christus left the cave, he knew he had been given a second life, but he was afraid that Pilate would capture him again and take that life even more violently than he had the first. He gave his magical blood willingly, to keep his spirit living on in others."

"Are you an apostle?" she asked. "And how did the blood affect you?"

"No, I'm not an apostle. Though the blood was given to two of them. There were six of us originals, but only four, including myself, remain, as far as I know."

"So...you're not English?"

"Sure I am—I'm Celtic...I think I was born around the time Christus was; I was about ten years younger than he. I know I was born in the British Isles... My memory fades in and out before the first

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millennium. But I have lived in London for about three hundred years, off and on. More on than off. I have several homes in England. Therefore, I am English."

"My gosh," Ashara exhaled. She was lying beside a...what had he called himself? A Chosen One. So old. So powerful. It was mind-boggling.

"As for how his blood affected me, if you think you've been having some heavenly sex, you're wrong!" He laughed.

"I beg to differ," she returned with a smile.

"What I mean is, Christ was just a man. His blood was charmed, but his blood alone did not make any of us become like him. We still had our own hearts and minds, but we were immortal. That was the only real change."

"Is Christ still here?" She looked around, as though he might pop out of the wardrobe.

"I'm sworn to secrecy," Liam replied with an impish smile. "Now, let me explain why I can stand the sunshine and you cannot. I am a Chosen One. I am not cursed...*you* are."

"Cursed? That sounds peachy. But I'm dying to know why—well, not really *dying*, but you know what I mean. I envy you so. I can't tell you how much I have missed the sun's warmth. I still dream about it, still long for it. You know how it is, wanting something you can't have. Human nature."

Elton sang sad songs in the background while the wind blew fiercely outside their window. "I know," Liam said softly. "I saw the pictures in your house." All in sunlight. He took a long, deep breath. It seemed difficult for him to speak of these things. "Shortly after we became immortal—years, perhaps decades—Roman sentries captured, then tortured, the six of us. They robbed us of our sacred blood. They got their precious immortality, but they were doomed to steal blood for all eternity and to walk forever in the darkness."

"Then why do *you* have to drink blood?" Ashara asked. It was all

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very confusing to her. “You aren’t cursed, you said.”

“The Romans fouled our blood with their own when they tortured us. They had no idea what they were doing; they had all kinds of weird transfusion contraptions hooked up. Then they went out and made hundreds of other immortals, most of whom have since burned or shriveled away to nothing because they were only half-made. It was a pathetic spectacle, to say the least. I myself hastened some of them to a permanent death. It was...the humane thing to do.” He stopped speaking for a moment. “But there is no need to fill your head with these sad old tales.” He cleared his throat, and seemingly cleared his mind of the unpleasant memories.

“As it is, I don’t have to feed as often as the substandard vampires—no offense—and I don’t necessarily like the sun, but I can walk in it if need be. I’m really almost completely human, except for a few quirks.”

“More than a few,” Ashara grinned. She could hardly assimilate all that she was hearing. After nearly two hundred years of walking the earth, she was learning where she really came from, learning that there were other kinds of vampires in the world, and so much more. She was full of questions. “What about Lovecraft? How does an animal become a vampire?” She had a fleeting memory of Lovey in Ashara’s arms at the window. She had to get him back.

Liam shook his head. “To be completely truthful, I’m not sure how that works. As you know, some mortal species subsist on blood—mosquitoes, leeches, vampire bats—perhaps it’s some kind of supernatural evolution, sparked by the cursed blood. I really don’t know.”

“What about Talon? Did I hear right that he’s not with Zariaz?”

“I have him,” Liam said matter-of-factly.

“What? How?” Talon was the most powerful vampire Ashara had ever encountered. Obviously, Liam was more powerful still. “I can’t tell you how I felt, watching him go after you, out the door. I thought

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for sure he'd kill you."

"Imagine how I felt, leaving you behind. But I couldn't let on that I was a vampire. I knew I'd be coming back for you. I didn't know I'd have to leave the country, but hey, it was time for a vacation anyway!" He smiled and gave her a gentle chuck under the chin. "I took Talon by surprise, and when I had hold of him and looked into his eyes, I saw that he was heavily drugged. Your dear sister had him convinced that he was a zombie, under her command. It was easy enough for me to overpower him. Getting him home wasn't so easy."

"He's at your house?"

Liam nodded.

"Why didn't you just kill him?" Ashara asked, already knowing full well that was much easier said than done.

"I could have burned him and scattered him to the four winds, I suppose, but I didn't have an incinerator handy. I must have left it my other coat. Anyway, he might come in useful someday."

"So...?" She was on pins and needles now.

"So, he's in a steel-reinforced coffin, which is chained shut, in my basement in California. He won't be getting out of there, and nothing's getting in. He's been a bad boy, so he's been sent to bed without supper. Forever. Or at least until I decide I want to let him out."

Ashara had no love for Talon, but she couldn't help but feel sorry for him, sealed away in a box, starving to death for how long? She didn't want to think about it. "Liam," she said, "Thank you so much for coming here. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't rescued me."

"You'll get my bill in the mail," he said, laughing.

"Burn Down the Mission," a beautiful, melancholy song, began to play in the background, and Liam turned serious. He sat up and took Ashara's hands in his. "Ashara, I came back for you because I didn't know if I could live without you. If anything in this world could kill me, I think it would be the prospect of life without you."

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She couldn't help it. She began to cry, tears flowing down her cheeks. This was the most tearful year she'd ever spent, she thought.

"Hmm," Liam said. "Not quite the reaction I was hoping for."

Ashara hugged him tight, burying her face in the crook of his neck. "Liam, I love you," she sobbed quietly. "It's been so hard because I thought you were a mortal and I didn't know how I was going to handle it. And now all this..."

"I know, I know," he crooned, stroking her hair. "Let it out, baby. It's okay."

Ashara unburdened herself, taking comfort in Liam's strong embrace. Even though their love was out in the open, and even though it had turned out better than she could ever have dreamed, she still had Zariaz to worry about, and Zariaz still had Lovecraft. Ashara really had no idea what to do next.

Liam seemed to be reading her mind. "Don't worry. I know what to do." He kissed her then, and they made love.

The previous night's coupling had been fevered and almost desperate. Tonight, they took their time. Liam stripped the bed of its covers, then he stripped himself. He laid Ashara down on her back on the fresh sheets and began kissing her hair. He worked his way down to her eyelids, her cheeks, her lips, and the crook of her neck.

He sucked the ticklish part of her neck, just below her ear, then teased her with his teeth. He sunk his fangs in slowly, causing her to shiver with delight as he kneaded her breasts and wrapped his legs around hers. He tongued the punctures, then French kissed her, moaning with ecstasy as they shared her sweet essence. Liam moved down to her breasts, sucking and kissing them, then down her belly, making her quiver with the tickles.

He moved to the floor, and kneeling, he spread her legs and tongued her so softly and so gently, she couldn't stand it. She begged him to take her, but his only response was to move down her inner thigh, to her knees and her feet. Once he had explored every inch of her with his

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mouth, from head to toe, he pulled her down to the floor with him.

* * *

The following evening, Liam and Ashara rode the Ducati back to the hacienda. Ashara was afraid, but Liam convinced her that a balls-out, face to face confrontation was the only way to go. There were two of them and only one of Zariaz.

“But once we have her, then what?” Ashara asked.

“I’ll drain her, then we’ll take her home. She can join her friend in my basement.”

He made it all sound so simple. But he didn’t know Zariaz like Ashara did. Zariaz may have been a “substandard” vampire and she may have been a baby compared to Liam, but her advantage was insanity. She was crazy, totally unpredictable, and completely ruthless.

Ashara looked up at the three-story whitewashed villa, its red-tiled roof looking nearly black against the dark sky. A long, wrap-around balcony encircled the exterior of the third floor...perfect for sunbathing. It was a pretty, pleasant-looking home. One would never guess at the atrocities that had taken place within so recently.

Liam maneuvered the bike right up to the front entrance. He stopped, cut the engine and parked it carefully. They dismounted and stepped up onto the porch. There was no outside light; the house was dark, and the door was ajar. There was a creepy vibe hanging around the entrance, and Ashara felt more than a little nervous. Liam didn’t seem to have any trepidation; he shoved the door all the way open and stepped boldly inside.

Ashara shadowed him, looking about in every direction. She felt the wall for a light switch and found one. The chandelier in the foyer was dim, but it did the job. They stood still, listening. There was nothing.

They ventured farther inside. The décor hadn’t been changed since Ashara lived there in the early 1900s. Horse portraits and pedigrees hung on the walls, the floor was scarred bare wood, and the furniture was rustic and spare. Thick dust covered everything, and it was obvious

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that no one had lived here in some time.

The immense, ornately tiled staircase lay before them. Liam gave her a look and Ashara nodded. They ascended the darkened stairway cautiously.

When they reached the upper hallway, they still saw no one and heard nothing except for the gentle but persistent wind blowing through Ashara's open window. The bolt lock had been undone, and the door swayed back and forth in the breeze. The open bolt kept it from staying shut.

Ashara turned the hall light on, but it offered little illumination. Obviously, the lamps had not been upgraded since the '20s, though it was equally obvious that Zariaz kept the electric bill paid. It was all very strange...why keep up a place, if you weren't going to live in it?

Then Ashara heard a baby crying. *Not another baby!* She flushed inwardly with shame, remembering how she had sucked on the poor little corpse. She had been so very desperate. "Do you hear that?" she whispered to Liam.

He nodded and put his fingers to his lips. He listened for a bit longer and determined that the sound was coming from the far end of the hallway. The very last room. He stepped in that direction, and Ashara followed. The closer they got, the less it sounded like a baby. It was more of a faint animal wail. An animal in distress.

"Lovecraft!" Ashara cried and sprinted forward. She shot down the hall carelessly, running toward Zariaz's old room. Liam followed cautiously.

The door was closed but not locked. Ashara flung it open, thinking only at the last moment that it might be a trap.

CHAPTER 12

Voodoo Chile

Lovecraft was on the mattress, secured to the bedpost with a crude collar and leash. He was gaunt with starvation but otherwise unharmed. Ashara gathered him up into her arms and held him close. He tried valiantly to purr, but he was too weak.

Zariaz was not in the bedroom or anywhere in the house. Liam checked each room one by one, while Ashara waited with Lovecraft.

When Liam came back several minutes later, he was holding two large rats by their long, hairless tails. They were alive, but stunned. “I caught these in the basement,” he said, holding them out to Ashara. She blanched, and he laughed. “Some fearsome creature of the night you are.”

Lovecraft smelled the food and roused. He got unsteadily to his feet, and Liam held one rat out to him. The feline drained it, then had the other. He filled out before their eyes and fully regained his strength

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and beauty.

Ashara unbuckled his collar, then noticed the piece of paper rolled up and taped to the inside. It was tiny, but Zariaz's penmanship was unmistakable. The message said simply, "Tit for tat."

"What does that mean?" Ashara asked.

"It means she's getting even," Liam said grimly. "And I think I know what for. I wonder how much of a head start she's gotten? We'd better fly home tonight. I can charter us a plane."

Being a smart, wealthy vampire with bank accounts all over the world clearly had its privileges.

* * *

It was nearly dawn when Ashara, Lovecraft and Liam arrived at his home in Laurel Canyon. He unlocked his front door, and without stopping to do anything, Liam made a beeline for the basement. Ashara was hot on his heels.

Behind the wine cellar was a small, hidden room with a steel door. "The padlock is still on," Liam said, muttering to himself. "That's a good sign." He worked the combination and the lock fell free. He opened the hasp and turned the doorknob.

At first, Ashara couldn't see anything but a black pit. Then Liam stepped inside and pulled the slim chain, which attached to a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

"Dammit," he cursed.

Inside the room was...nothing.

"This is where I had the steel coffin," he said flatly. He saw the newspaper lying on the floor and glimpsing the headlines, he sighed. "I knew it. "

Ashara stepped inside and picked it up. "Local Rock Group Missing!" screamed the headline. "Let's go back upstairs," she said gently.

Lovecraft had already made himself at home on the sofa, and Liam and Ashara sat on either side of him. Ashara read the article aloud.

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“The four members of the L.A. rock group Darkside are reportedly missing. Members of Darkside recently finished their first North American tour, buoyed by their current #2 single, ‘Butterfly Kiss.’ Lead singer and guitarist, Liam Archer, disappeared on Sunday night. The other three members of the band, Buck Fergusen, Joel Morales, and Tera Anderson, went missing sometime yesterday morning.

“They were reported missing by the booking manager of a local rock music club, who wishes to remain anonymous. The band was supposed to perform at the club on Monday and Tuesday nights. The instruments were taken to the club by courier, and when the band didn’t materialize, a search of their belongings was conducted. Inside the guitar case, a strange, handwritten note was found. So far, it is the only clue investigators have to go on.” Ashara paused, then looked at Liam. “It’s a riddle,” she said. She held the paper up to show him the picture of the note. “That’s her handwriting.”

Liam took the paper and read the riddle aloud. “I can run but never walk. I have a mouth but never talk. I have a head but never weep. I have a bed but never sleep. What am I?” He looked at Ashara.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Let me think.” She was beginning to feel woozy, and her muscles were turning to lead. She would have no choice but to sleep, and soon. “Liam, I’m getting tired. Where can I spend the day?”

“It’s not terribly cozy, but how about the basement? It’s totally protected from the sun.”

Ashara didn’t like the idea of being down there where Talon and Zariaz had been, not to mention the probability of creepy-crawlies, but she didn’t feel she had much choice. She gathered Lovecraft, who was already dead to the world, into her arms and headed down. Liam followed with a blanket and some pillows.

“You promise you won’t leave me?” Ashara asked.

Liam didn’t reply. He simply spread out the blankets and got her tucked in with two soft pillows behind her head. The last thing she

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remembered thinking was, “Promise me...”

* * *

Liam was sitting beside her when she awoke twelve hours later. “My God, I thought you’d never wake up,” he greeted her.

“Good morning to you, too,” she replied, yawning.

“Lovecraft is up and out,” Liam said, helping Ashara to her feet. Then she noticed a man, bound and gagged, slumped against the wine rack. “You’re dining in tonight. We have to save time.”

Ashara got her feet. “What? No breakfast in bed?” She walked over and knelt beside the unconscious man. “Where did he come from?” she asked.

“He worked for a local loan shark,” Liam replied, already referring to the man in past tense. “He was the enforcer—his specialty was breaking kneecaps, so don’t worry—he’s kosher.”

Ashara drank her fill, then followed Liam up the stairs and into the living room. “Any news?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I’m really worried. They’re all mortals, you know.”

Ashara nodded. She’d gathered as much. She went through the duffel bag and found her comb and some fresh clothes. She didn’t say much, but she’d been thinking about the riddle ever since she woke up. *I can run but never walk.* A motor? I have a mouth but never talk. A bottle? I have a head but never weep. Lettuce? I have a bed but never sleep. A flower? None of the possible answers added up to anything.

Liam looked haggard and tired. He was sitting at the bar, staring into a glass of clear liqueur. Ashara suspected he hadn’t slept since they left Portugal. His skin was sallow, and even his beautiful hair hung limp and stringy. She felt so guilty for having drug Liam into her twisted life, and poor Tera, Joel, and Buck...where were they? Someplace running, with a mouth, a head and a bed. They might as well be in purgatory.

“So, what are we going to do?” she asked finally.

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"The only thing I can think of is brainstorming. You know your sister better than anyone."

"I don't know about that," Ashara replied. "But there is something I have to tell you—you know how twins oftentimes share a psychic connection?" Liam nodded. "Well, she does and I don't. I sort of used to, but I've been out of practice for many years. I'm afraid she may have picked up on my thoughts somehow, and that's how she was able to get Talon back." She felt her throat tightening. "I feel so awful. This is all my fault!"

"No, it's not," Liam insisted quietly. "It's her fault and you will not accept any of the blame. Now. Is there any way you can mask your thoughts from her?"

"I never tried," Ashara admitted.

"Have you tried to read her mind lately?"

"No."

"I think you should. But first, let's talk about this riddle. Have you come up with anything at all?"

"It's not like one of yours, Li. This one just came out of left field. No hints."

Ashara sat on the sofa, and Liam joined her. She told him her guesses on the riddle, but he agreed that none of it added up. He asked her about places Zariaz might go, things she might do. He asked her about voodoo, which she had only touched lightly upon when she told him her history the other night.

"Voodoo cults worship a high god called Bon Dieu, the dead, twins, and spirits called Ioa," she explained. "I believe Talon singled us out as mortals, because we were twins. It's very powerful magic."

"Can you think of any connection with the key words in the riddle and with voodoo?" Liam asked. "That's a subject I know nothing about. Even with two thousand years to learn, I don't know everything."

Ashara shook her head. She kept hearing a tune in her mind, but she

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couldn't quite grasp it. The more she tried to pinpoint it, the more elusive it became. She told Liam about it.

"Maybe she's trying to communicate with you," he said hopefully. "Can you hum it?"

She tried hard, but couldn't bring the sound forth. "I think it will come to me if I just let it be." She sighed. "What did you do today?"

"Well, first of all, I went down to Missing Persons and showed them that I'm alive and well." He chuckled without amusement. "Well, at least. Then I explained to them that the band had gone on a little unscheduled vacation. That should keep them at bay for awhile. Then I had to call their families, to tell them the same." Ashara could see from his expression that he really didn't know if Tera, Joel, and Buck were still even alive. "Then I went to the bookstore and bought every book of riddles I could find. All two of them."

"Nothing, I take it," she said of what the books revealed. "I have a feeling that they're okay," she said, speaking of his band mates. "If they were dead, she would have left their bodies in that room. She took them for a reason."

"It's strange she didn't kill them though," Liam commented. "I mean, that would be three more musicians toward her curse."

"I don't know," Ashara said. "I can't figure it out." She leaned against Liam and at last began to hum the tune that was in her head. "Do you know that?" she asked.

He hummed along with her. "Almost...what in blazes is it?"

Ashara closed her eyes and said, "Quiet. I think I'm getting it." She was silent for what seemed like a long while. Then her eyes snapped open. "I've got it! 'Blue Danube.'"

"Of course!" Liam exclaimed, then began humming it himself. "That's an old chestnut. What made you think of that?"

"It's got to have something to do with the riddle. Do you think it's really possible for Zariaz to communicate with me like that? I used to just pick up brief images."

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Liam shrugged. “Anything’s possible, baby. And she has been working on the powers of her mind. Think: What does ‘Blue Danube’ mean to you?”

“I don’t know...waltzing?”

Liam ran the riddle over in his mind again. He couldn’t connect any kind of dancing with the clues. “I don’t think so.” He paused. “Why would your sister give us clues anyway? Do you think we can take them seriously? And how did she know I like riddles?” He ran his hands through his hair and blew his breath out.

“I think she’s enjoying the game. She loves to tease, and I do believe she wants us to chase her.” Then, suddenly, she recalled one of the last things Zariaz had ever said her when Ashara was still a mortal girl. “Where do you think that Danube River goes? Do you think it circles our perfect little world like a whirlpool? No. It flows into the English Channel, through the North Atlantic and into the Caribbean Sea. The sea that kisses the beaches of our motherland, Jamaica.”

“It’s a river,” Ashara announced. “I can run but never walk. I have a mouth but never talk. I have a head but never weep. I have a bed but never sleep. A river!”

“Yes!” Liam exclaimed, nodding. “Of course. It’s so obvious. I think I’m getting punchy.”

“It could mean she’s gone home to Austria, to the shores of the Danube River. Or it could mean she’s gone to Jamaica.” Ashara recounted what Zariaz had said to her just shortly before killing her. “But how in the world would she transport three people so quickly?”

“I guess she could, if they got on the plane of their own free will.”

“How?”

“Voodoo. I told you, she had Talon convinced that he was her zombie slave. You of all people should know how that’s done.”

“I do,” Ashara said softly. “I try not to think about that part of my life. It wasn’t really me...I escaped that life, and have been trying to forget ever since.”

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Liam reached out and stroked her hair. “I know it’s hard for you, baby. I know,” he said emphatically “There are parts of my life I’ve not only wanted to forget, but have forgotten. But this is really, really important.” He took her by the hand and pulled her close. “Is there anything you remember specifically about a river, and voodoo, or maybe a river and Zariaz?”

Ashara closed her eyes and cleared her mind. She ran the words over and over in her head. Voodoo. Zariaz. River. Voodoo. Zariaz. River. Hate. Voodoo. Zariaz. River. Hate. “I keep thinking hate, or hatred.”

“Hmm...do you hate Zariaz?”

“No. I thought I did, but every time I see her, there’s this love I cannot deny. A bond. I don’t necessarily hate voodoo; there’s nothing wrong with the religion itself. Rivers...no, I don’t hate rivers.”

“It must be something else. It’s got to be connected with music somehow, since the clue that came to you was musical.”

“Do you think she’s a fan of *Name That Tune*?” Ashara deadpanned.

“Funny,” Liam said. “But I couldn’t name that tune in two notes. And I’m a musician!”

“Have you always been?” Ashara asked, settling back and trying to relax again.

“I started life as an archer — hence, the last name — but I’ve been many things. Music is just one of my favorite pastimes and has been for centuries.”

“No wonder you’re so talented. You’ve had hundreds of years of practice.”

“True, I have. But my band is just as talented. They’re phenomenal, really. And by the way, that story is true. I did find them by placing an advert in the paper. Tera and Joel came in together, and there was no doubt. I looked at several drummers, but when Buck came in with four sticks — two in each hand — I knew he was the powerhouse I needed

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to round out the band.”

“Four sticks,” Ashara said. Then she sang softly, “Three, four, pick up sticks.”

“Isn’t that a kid’s song?” Liam asked. “I think you got the lyrics wrong, but you may be onto something.”

“Yeah. It just came to me. Do you think sticks have anything to do with this river?”

“Well, there is the River Styx,” Liam said. He got up. “Let’s check my handy-dandy encyclopedia.” He crossed the room to a small bookcase and pulled out a leather-bound volume. Bringing it back to the couch, he began thumbing the pages. “Here.”

Ashara looked at the ancient map and read aloud from a boxed bit of text underneath it. “Styx. ‘In Greek mythology, it’s a river which is the entrance to the Underworld. It was often described as the boundary river over which the aged ferryman Charon transported the shades of the dead. The river was personified as a daughter of the Titan Oceanus, and Styx was the guardian of the sacred oaths that bound the gods.’”

“It says here the actual river is now called the Mavronéri, and it’s located in Greece. I’ve been there, but it was ages ago.” Liam began to rub his temples. “So long ago. It’s really quite beautiful. It plunges over this amazing cliff, at least six hundred feet down, and then it flows through a wild gorge. The ancient Greeks believed the water was poisonous. It’s legend that Alexander the Great died by drinking from those waters.”

“Look at this!” Ashara pointed at the page. “It says here the word Styx literally means ‘hateful.’ That explains even more of the puzzle.”

Liam closed the book. “I suppose. But there are still several pieces missing. Like, is your sister there at the River Styx?”

“I wish I knew, Liam, I know you don’t want me to apologize, but I can’t help feeling responsible for all this.”

Liam started to respond, but the phone rang, interrupting him. He picked it up off the end table and said hello, but after that he was quiet.

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Ashara strained to hear, and she searched Liam's face for clues as to whom it might be, but his expression was completely guarded.

He hung up the phone, then looked at Ashara grimly. "That was Tera."

"Oh my God! Are they all right?" Ashara gasped.

"It was Tera's voice, tape recorded," he clarified. "She said I just had to check out the new band playing at the Troubadour tonight. She sounded drugged." The weighty worry in his voice belied his flip words.

"What band?"

"She didn't say. I'll ring them up and see." Liam got the phone and put it in his lap. He dialed the number from memory, waited for a bit, then hung up. "No answer. Bollocks!" he cursed. "We'll just have to go there."

"Let's go!" Ashara was up and halfway out the door by the time Liam caught up.

They got on his Harley and headed down the winding drive. They went through the dark canyon wordlessly, then across Sunset Boulevard to Santa Monica. Ashara couldn't help but feel a ripple of happiness at the sight of the familiar streets and her favorite haunts. She was home. For a while there, she didn't think she would ever be back.

The Troubadour was packed as usual, with a line outside. Ashara and Liam looked up and saw the marquee at the same time. "TONIGHT: Leon Russell with special guest, Styx."

Each alone with their unshared thoughts, they parked the Harley in the alley and were let in after knocking at the back door.

"Hey, man," said the pot-reeking security guard, patting Liam on the back. "I heard you were missing in action!"

"I was just in action," Liam winked, putting his arm around Ashara.

The guard winked awkwardly back and said, "What brings you here, man?"

"I heard about this group, Styx. Who are they?"

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The longhaired, bearded guard walked along with them down the close, narrow corridor that led backstage. “They’re brand new. I haven’t heard them yet, but I understand they’re working on an album and it’s coming out next year. But get this—the label is Wooden Nickel Records! I don’t know about that,” he laughed, shaking his head. “Sounds a little shady to me.” He stopped and waved Liam and Ashara on. They were in.

“Thanks, mate,” Liam called. Still clutching Ashara tightly around the shoulders, he said, “Do you think she’s here? Do you feel anything?”

Ashara wished she could say yes. She felt so completely useless. If only she had taken the time to develop her mental powers. It didn’t seem now like it would have been that difficult. She stopped and forced Liam to look at her. “Sorry, Li. I just don’t know. My gut tells me she’s not here though. But if she’s not, why go to all the trouble with the riddle and the recorded phone call?” Of course, she already knew Zar was a drama queen who didn’t need a reason to play cat and mouse.

“Maybe she did it to get us out of my place for some reason.”

“Like what? It’s life she’s interested in, not anything in your house. And she’s got four lives in her hands, if you include Talon. I think she wants yours, too.”

Liam snorted with derisive laughter. “Come on, let’s keep moving.”

Ashara could hear a band, presumably Styx, playing onstage. She wondered why any group would name themselves after a poisonous river of death.

They were headed toward the stage so that they could take a look around the audience to see if Zariaz, Talon, or any of Liam’s band mates were there.

The side of the stage was just in view, but they never made it any farther than that.

CHAPTER 13

Strange Brew

“Hey! Liam, man. Hold up a minute there.” The stoned hippie guard ran down the corridor toward them. “I got a note for you.”

“A note?” Liam stopped. “What now?” he muttered under his breath, cutting his glance to Ashara.

Almost imperceptibly, she shrugged.

“Yeah. A big black dude just handed it to me; told me to give it to you,” said the guard, thrusting the envelope at Liam.

Liam took it. “Thanks, mate.” He looked patiently at the guard until he got the hint and left them alone. Liam looked at Ashara again. “This had better not be another riddle.”

He carefully opened the sealed envelope and plucked the folded paper from within. It was sheet music for “Leaving On A Jet Plane.” Liam rolled his eyes and chuckled. “Sure. Why not?” He dropped the envelope and sheet to the cement floor, and headed for the back exit.

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Ashara half-ran to keep up. “Maybe we can catch him. He was just here!”

“I don’t think it was Talon,” Liam returned. “I’m starting to appreciate what a game player your lovely sister is. My guess is, they’re already at the airport.”

“But where?” Ashara sighed, feeling hopeless again. LAX was a huge complex, with so many international terminals. Where would Zariaz be going? Back to Portugal? To the River Styx in Greece? To the Danube River at home? Timbuktu?

“I have a feeling she won’t be too hard to find.” Liam said goodbye to the backdoor guard, and he and Ashara hopped on the Harley, which was still parked just outside. “She wants us to find her,” he finished. “She just doesn’t want to make it too easy for us. She’s a piece of work, all right.”

“I know,” Ashara replied. She almost apologized again, but realized it wouldn’t do any good.

They made the trip to Los Angeles International Airport without speaking to each other. It would have been difficult at best anyway, over the roar of the high-performance engine. Ashara guessed that Liam was thinking about getting Tera, Joel and Buck back safe and sound. Ashara wanted that, too, but more than anything, she wanted to finish this craziness once and for all.

Ashara thought back over her wasted life. She realized she’d neither accomplished nor changed anything. Her first act as a vampire was to send the love of her life into a downward spiral of madness and depression. Unable to bear watching it, she left the country with Zariaz and Talon. They lived in Port au Prince, and she learned the ways of voodoo. But her heart was never in it; she had never been good at it. She left them, too. She drifted for years, until beginning of the tail end of the nineteenth century, when she found Zariaz in Portugal. Talon was out of her life then. Ashara tried to forgive her sister for the deaths she had caused, but her conscience wouldn’t let her. She sought out the

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Dark Council, and they took her in. She helped trap her own sister, and she thought it had been for the greater good. Even that was a failure. And now, she was putting the man she loved in peril.

She had to make it right.

Liam drove by the departing flights' drop-off a couple of times. Ashara finally saw what they were looking for: another of Zariaz's clues. It was a poster advertising Darkside's last Troubadour appearance, from July. Above it was another sign that read, "Final Destination, Lisbon." Évora was inland, while Lisbon was on the coast of Portugal; therefore, most flights going to Portugal terminated in Lisbon.

Ashara made a snap decision. She waited until Liam had to slow for traffic, then she swung her leg over the bike and jumped off. Like a cat, she landed gracefully on her feet and hit the ground running.

She sprinted for the entrance, dodging taxis and pedestrians. Liam's voice called after her, which only made her dash faster. She had to do this. Knowing it would take Liam at least a minute or two to park, probably illegally, Ashara made the most of her scant time. She ran through the terminal, yelling for her sister at the top of her lungs.

Few mortals were in the airport at that hour, but those who were stopped their milling about to gape at her. She was far more entertaining than anything else going on under the dingy lights, though they had no idea what she was up to. They probably thought she was merely frantic about trying to catch a departing flight. Entertainment nonetheless.

Ashara sprinted aimlessly, her hard run meant to lose Liam and through her rush of adrenaline came a mental image, clear as a magazine cover: Zariaz dining on Tera.

Dining... She saw the small diner just beyond the metal-detectors. She shot through, thanking her lucky stars she didn't set any alarm bells off, and headed for the restaurant.

Sure enough, Zariaz was there, having a leisurely round of drinks

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with Tera, Buck, Joel, and Talon. Her four companions were obviously drugged, and Ashara knew it was by the mind-altering zombie potion. It would wear off in time, but *was* there time? Ashara glanced back from where she had come but did not see any sign of Liam. He'd probably set off the metal detector.

"Oh, hey Shar," Zariaz called out cordially, waving Ashara over.

Ashara walked to the table but did not sit. "Are you guys okay?" She addressed Buck, who was the only one actually looking at her.

He stared at her, slack-jawed, then looked at Zariaz. Obviously, he thought he was seeing double. Talon stared at her, too, and she felt the prickle of nervous perspiration at her armpits. He had helped kill her once, and then nearly did it again when she escaped their little coven all those years ago—he still scared her. She wondered still how he had allowed himself to be overpowered by his protégé. But she didn't have time to think about that. She had a plan now, and she was going to stick to it.

"Me for them, Zariaz," she said firmly, putting her hands on her hips and standing tall with a confidence she did not feel inside.

Zariaz kept smiling. "You read my mind, Shar. It's about time. That's what I wanted all along. Why you had to make it so hard on everybody, I'll never know. You always were a stubborn little thing."

Ashara blinked. Would it be that easy? "So you'll let them go?"

"Sure," Zar replied. "They're two-bit street-corner musicians anyway. Your Liam puts far too much stock in them — *he* is the band." She took a sip of her drink. "You, Talon and I will pick up where we left off."

Talon's eyes were still fastened on Ashara. She knew he understood what was being said, but the spell over him kept him from speaking. "Is that possible?" she asked.

"Sure it is, Shar. The dynamics will just change a little, that's all. It'll be you and me on top and in control. Power of the twins."

"Power of the twins," Ashara repeated. It was the only way. "Okay.

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Let's go before Liam finds us. I left him just outside."

"What's to keep him from following us again?" Zariaz asked, rising. Without waiting for an answer, she snapped her fingers, and all four of her zombie slaves snapped to attention. "Talon, you come with me. Joel, Tera, and Buck, you stay here." She looked back at Ashara. "So, what's to keep him from following? Maybe I'd like for him to follow...do you suppose he'd want to join us?"

Never, Ashara thought. *I've done enough damage. I'll free him from me, and my cursed family.* "I don't think so," Ashara replied. "He's not one of us, anyway."

She got a napkin from the table and asked a passing waitress for a pen. On it she scrawled, "*Liam—I thought I loved you, but I was wrong. Blood is thicker than water, as they say. My place is with my sister. Don't come after me. I've made my choice of my own free will—Ashara.*" She hoped that would convince him she wasn't under a spell. She wished she could have written a longer letter, but she couldn't take the time. She folded the napkin and, reaching across the table, she stuffed it in Buck's shirt pocket. He half-rose, slow in his dreamlike movements.

"Stay..." Zariaz said as if addressing errant pets, and then she, Ashara and Talon left the table and headed for the exit.

Ashara thought of Lovecraft, but she knew that he would stay with Liam and that Liam would take good care of him. She blinked back the tears, knowing the decision she had made was the *only* one. "Let's hurry," she said, tight-lipped. "Before he catches up." *And before I change my mind.*

* * *

The trio was transported in coffins, all arrangements handled by Zariaz's mortal assistant, Markus Johnson. He was the one who had left the note for Liam at the Troubadour.

Ashara learned that Markus had met Zariaz in San Francisco on Halloween night. He'd fallen deeply for her. Now, his weak mortal soul

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was ruined and he would follow Zariaz to the ends of the earth and he would die for her, if need be.

When Ashara awoke, she was back in her room at the old hacienda in Portugal. She had not seen or spoken to Zar or Talon since they left LAX. She stayed in her bed for awhile, even after the automatic shutters opened. She was hungry and hurting, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore, except for Liam. She prayed that she had done the right thing in letting him go. And she hoped he would believe what she had written and stay away.

She sat up, and the first thing she saw was a single tea service and a note from Zar. "I remember you liked tea," the note said. "Have a cup and I'll be up in a few minutes. I hope you slept well—Your Loving Sister, Zar."

The night before, Ashara had decided it was time to embrace her true, evil nature. The resolve still held, and for that she was glad. Fighting what she was had only brought loneliness, misery, and danger to those she loved. What good were her principles, if that was all they wrought?

She sipped at the still-hot tea and thought, *From now on, I will live my life differently.* She would have no one to answer to, no conscience, and no worries. She thought about how much simpler life would be now. No more hunting for evildoers; anybody who was handy would serve. No more trying to assimilate herself into society; she would live on her own terms. No more trying to make the world more beautiful with her art. What was the point?

She and Zariaz would not only be remembered; they would be revered. They would be the stuff of legend...or would they rule the world? Ashara still wasn't too sure how potent her sister's magic was, but she doubted it was strong enough to sway the collective soul. Perhaps Zar really did need her to complete the curse. And if that was the case, so be it.

She had herself very nearly convinced that everything was going to

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be wonderful when she heard a confident knock at the door.

“Shar, are you up yet?”

“Come on in,” Ashara called.

Zariaz was dressed from head to toe in black. It was her favourite attire: widow’s weeds, complete with the hat and veil. She held a long black cape draped over the crook of one arm. She stepped inside the room and offered the cape to Ashara. “I’m loaning you this. If you’re going to be a proper vampire, you’ll have to get rid of all those flowery hippie clothes.”

Ashara nodded and got out of bed. She stepped forward and took the velvet cloak. “Thank you. And thanks for the tea.”

Suddenly, Zariaz reached out and took Ashara in her arms. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re home again. I missed you, Shar.”

Ashara returned the embrace, but it felt fake to her. Her instincts told her that Zariaz was only acting this way so that Ashara would return to the fold and add to her own voodoo magic. Power of the twins. But she had made up her mind. This was the lesser of the evils. She pulled back and looked into Zar’s piercing eyes. “Am I forgiven for...for what I did?”

Zariaz didn’t reply for a long moment. Then she looked back into Ashara’s eyes, her anger unhidden. “I’ve thought a lot about that. As my body slowly healed over those many years, I hated you. I wanted to do to you what you had done to me, only I would have the guts to do it *myself*. I wanted to tear you from limb to limb with my own two hands.” Her expression relaxed. “Then when I saw you again at the party...Well, those weren’t crocodile tears, Shar. What you said hurt me.”

Ashara said nothing, but she felt guiltier than ever. Maybe the Dark Council’s punishment really had had an impact on Zariaz.

Zariaz continued. “I understood then, that what Talon and I did to you on your twenty-first birthday was cruel. We should have eased you into it, instead of taking you as we did. My induction was beautiful, and

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I wanted to be what I am. You were never given the choice, and that was wrong. So, yes Shar, I forgive you and I ask you to forgive me.”

Could she really be sincere? Ashara wanted to believe that she was, and so she did. She remembered what she had said to Liam the other night about their undeniable bond. Zariaz must have felt it, too. Ashara tried not to think of their relationship as children or anytime after. This was a fresh, new start. The past was gone. They embraced again.

“Now come on,” Zariaz said brightly, pulling away. “Finish your tea, get dressed and we’ll hunt. I’m starving!”

Ashara found a simple black dress and some Victorian button-up boots in the armoire, and then put on the cape. “If you decided at the party that I was forgiven,” Ashara asked. “Then why did you still come after me?”

Zariaz sighed, much put-upon. “Shar, it was your boyfriend, Liam. He took Talon, and I had no choice but to retaliate. I wasn’t going to hurt you. I was just trying to show you that you and I should be together. Maybe I was a little harsh, what with locking you in here and all, but you’re home now and that’s all that really matters, isn’t it?”

Ashara nodded. It all sounded so good, but Zariaz and Talon had killed Leilani before Liam got involved. Hadn’t they? It was all so confusing...she didn’t want to think about it. She gulped the last bit of cooling tea and announced that she was ready to go. Tea was no substitute for hot, thick blood.

They left the room together and went downstairs. Talon was sitting on the sheet-draped sofa, waiting patiently.

“Come on,” Zariaz said to him, snapping her fingers.

He got up and followed them out the door.

“Why did you do that to him?” Ashara asked, *sotto voce*.

“No need to whisper,” Zariaz said. “He won’t remember any of the details. I’m going to release him from the spell soon. I just wanted to teach him a lesson.”

“Why? What did he do?”

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“Well, once he saved my life he became completely insufferable. He kept holding it over my head, reminding me of it every time I turned around. He doesn’t approve of my little plan, you know.”

Ashara nodded. She knew. Talon had always said the way to take over and make it a vampire’s world was slowly, quietly; to make it theirs while no one was looking. Zariaz was too showy and bold for his taste. He kept her barely under control, until finally she broke free. Then came the trial, the execution and his rescue. He had her back where he wanted her, her power harnessed by him.

“Anyway,” Zariaz continued as the trio walked down the driveway and onto the narrow street, “once he’s back to himself—he is rather boring this way—he’ll remember all this as only a dream, but he will still be docile.”

You hope, thought Ashara. “Where exactly are we going?” she asked.

“We’re going to have a lovely drink at the local tavern. Remember the tavern? It’s still there, just like it was when we lived here together.” Zariaz looked over her shoulder, and saw that Talon was falling behind. She snapped her fingers, “Come on!”

* * *

The lovely drink at the tavern turned out to be a young barmaid. Then a hapless tourist who came to their table, asking for a light.

Zariaz had a special table up in the balcony, nestled deep in the shadows. She had threatened the bar’s owners—and many other business owners in the small, medieval town—with curses, and had most of the townspeople in her thrall. Ashara wasn’t sure if they knew a vampire was in their midst; probably not—their belief in voodoo curses was enough. The never-ending supply of tourists, spiced with the occasional local, Zariaz said, would keep them in fine dining for years. Of course, Zariaz went on, they wouldn’t live in Évora forever. They would move about the world freely, satisfying the curse and writing the Song.

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Zariaz took the young barmaid for herself, while Talon and Ashara shared the tourist. When Talon finished and offered her the half-dead man, she hesitated only a moment before plunging in. The forbidden nectar was so sweet; she wondered if innocence tasted better somehow. Her self-imposed rules had been in effect for so long, she could barely remember. But now, the rush came back.

Kicking the bodies under the table, they raised their hand for another barmaid. One to serve them drinks this time. Zariaz even had a rare steak. They sat and chatted like real sisters while Talon kept his silent vigil.

“Where will we go?” Ashara asked. “Can we go to China, to Sri Lanka, and to Siberia?”

Zar laughed. “We can go anywhere we want to! Nothing holds us back, my sister. Everywhere in the world there is sweet music, and the musicians who play it. Even Siberia!”

Ashara laughed, too. Siberia. Why had she said that? Because it sounded exotic, she supposed. She had never been there, but suddenly the thought of it was so exciting she could hardly contain herself. This was a whole new life, with a whole new world of possibilities lying at her feet. She would help to write the Song.

Ashara found it exciting to think that she herself might also possess such heady powers and never knew it. Why had she wasted so many years? Sitting there, flanked by her sister and her old mentor, she felt right.

Everything Zariaz had said was true. Especially about the power of the twins.

CHAPTER 14

Wild World

“And if you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with,” Zariaz sang in her pretty, lilting soprano voice.

“What are you singing about?” Ashara asked, smiling. “I thought you didn’t like hippy-dippy music.”

“I like all music that’s good,” Zariaz responded. “Give me some credit. After all, I’ve drunk from the very best. Each time, I absorb more wonderful notes and tunes. More knowledge. More power.”

Ashara was sitting on the couch relaxing while Talon and Markus were out getting dinner. The weeks had passed like hours, and Ashara felt more and more secure every day. When she thought of her old life—of Liam, Lovecraft, the house and car she’d left behind—if she did at all—it was like a strange dream she’d had. This was her real life. And soon, it would be kicking into high gear. Every night, she and Zar went over their travel plans.

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Zariaz sat beside her and started flipping through a magazine. "I'm hungry. I hope they come back soon," she murmured.

"Is that a *Rolling Stone*?" Ashara asked, somewhat surprised.

Zar seldom read anything but horse books and pedigree studies. She had two beautiful Lusitano stallions in the barn right now, and she was planning on breeding bullfighting horses again.

"Yeah, I've got a subscription. I thought you might like to keep tabs on your old business. You're going to have to go back to it soon, you know. With you in the music world, we'll be unstoppable." She giggled gleefully, like a young girl being tickled. "Won't it be fun? What would you like your first to be—a singer? A drummer? A composer?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're going to start feeding my dream, too. With both of us working on it, we'll write the Song in half the time."

Ashara's body instinctively tensed, but her mind told her to relax. It was almost like she heard another voice saying, *You knew this all along, Ashara. You knew...* But she hadn't really planned on killing any musicians herself, only helping her sister. But how else *could* she help?

Zar began singing the jaunty CSN tune again. "If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with." She paused, then said casually, "Look at this, Shar. It's your old beau." She held the magazine open and handed it over.

It was a photo of Liam at a Christmas party with a beautiful blonde on his arm. They were both laughing. "Christmas? Has it passed already?" Ashara asked, mildly surprised.

"Yes, dear. It's January 9, 1972."

"Oh," Ashara said vaguely. "How did I miss New Year's Eve?" All she could think about was the odd passage of time. The sight of Liam with another only numbed her heart more. She had made a mistake, falling in love with him. It was all a big mistake, her life before now.

Still, she remembered the good times they'd shared over those scant few months of summer and fall. His laugh, his bad jokes, and easy

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riddles. The feel of his callused hands on her thighs, the whisper of his eyelashes on her cheek, his sweet songs ringing in her ears. Had it all really been that way? If he loved her, then why did he ruin everything? Zariaz had explained to her how Liam had interfered, causing all the trouble. Even so, somewhere deep in the back of her mind, Ashara secretly treasured her vague memories.

The front door opened, and Talon and the mortal came inside, carrying two unconscious tourists. It was a newlywed couple from Spain, Talon explained, his deep voice flat and emotionless. Ashara wondered absently why Zariaz hadn't freed his mind yet, but then she decided she really didn't care. Whatever Zariaz did was probably for the best.

The mortal servant, Markus, seemed also to be in a fugue state and was completely under Zariaz's command. Ashara speculated on whether her sister would ever make him a creature of the night, but it didn't seem so. There was another mortal who had caught her fancy recently, an extremely beautiful young boy of eighteen years named Alessandro. He had been working for Zariaz just a few weeks, exercising and caring for her horses. She made no secret of the fact she found him enthralling.

His beauty did not go unnoticed by Ashara either. Earlier that evening, just as the sun set, she awoke early so that she could watch the young man end his day. He was walking one of the spirited stallions around the courtyard to cool him down after his ride. Ashara appreciated the similarities between the two creatures. Both were unmistakably male. Both possessed a feline grace. Both had wild, intelligent eyes and long, silky manes, the color of midnight.

The topic of turning Alessandro had come up a few days before, when Zariaz asked Ashara if she was lonely.

"No," Ashara had replied. An image of Liam flitted to her mind, but he seemed so very far away and so very long ago. "I'm not lonely as long as I'm with you, my sister."

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“I know, Shar. But I mean, are you not lonely for a man? I have Talon, and you have no one.”

“But I don’t want anyone.”

“How about my gorgeous young horseman, Alessandro? His beauty is truly too fine to be wasted on mortal women. You, Talon and I—we can make him one of us.” Zar’s eyes flashed with excitement at the prospect.

Ashara guessed that Zariaz wanted Alessandro for herself, but she knew there would be no changing her sister’s mind once it was made up. Ashara had made a terrible mistake once, creating another vampire, but she felt strangely apathetic now. She didn’t care what happened to anyone else. Or herself, for that matter. She acquiesced. “As you wish.”

The tangy scent of freshly spilt blood broke Ashara’s reverie. Talon brought the newlywed bride to her, holding the frail body in his outstretched arms like a sacrifice. Of course, she was no sacrifice at all for the vampires; they had nothing to lose and everything to gain by killing her. Talon had already drunk his fill. He laid the limp body across Ashara’s lap and she took the woman’s delicate hand in hers. She raised the wrist to her mouth, bit through the ropy vein, and sucked the quickly cooling blood. There was no pleasure in it, only animal satiation. When she was done, Talon lifted the body and took it to the basement, where the incinerator awaited its own meal for the night. Markus, staggering under the weight of Zariaz’s finished meal, followed.

Ashara heard a sharp gasp and looked up toward the sound. Alessandro stood in the open doorway, his eyes like saucers. He had *seen*.

Quick as a lightning strike, Zariaz was upon him. He fell forward into the room, floundering under her weight on the hardwood floor. Ashara watched with a detached, morbid fascination as the man fought for his life. A small part of her wondered at her apathy; the other part didn’t care about it.

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Talon and Markus, having heard the commotion, dashed back into the living room. Their arms were empty, and Ashara smelled the burning meat.

Markus stopped and stood as he watched the spectacle, his mouth hanging open. He looked awestruck and there was a longing in his eyes, like he wanted to be among them as equals.

Talon slowed, then walked deliberately toward the struggle. He knelt and held Alessandro down for Zariaz. The young man's movements slowed, then stopped.

Zariaz rocked back on her heels, squatting, as she wiped her bloodied lips with the flowing sleeve of her gown. She closed her eyes and let out a long, shuddering breath. Then she looked over at Ashara, who was still seated on the coach. "Now's the time, my sister. You know it takes three."

Talon was already lifting the unconscious young man and propping him against the doorjamb. "I shall get the poppet," he said, the low deepness of his voice rumbling like a thunderous growl. He headed for the bedrooms upstairs.

"What are you going to do?" Markus stepped farther into the living room.

Zariaz looked up as if she'd forgotten him. "Be gone, Markus. Your time will come."

Bowing his head, he turned and went back toward the basement. "I'll stoke the fire," he muttered.

Ashara got to her feet just as Talon came back down the stairs. He was clutching a crude rag doll in one of his enormous hands. Zariaz just smiled, looking down at Alessandro's prone body.

"Let's take him to the dining room table," she suggested. "That's apropos, don't you think?" She knelt and took him by the hands. Walking backward, she dragged the young man into the next room. Talon helped her lift him onto the dark, deeply scarred wooden tabletop. He laid the poppet beside Alessandro.

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Ashara watched as the voodoo priest dipped his index finger into the ravaged neck of the horseman. He brought the bloody tip to the doll's chest and drew an X. Then he took the poppet in his hand and crushed it, ripping into the cheaply woven burlap-like fabric with his long, sharp fingernails. He dropped the doll to the floor, then bowed his head to the body, motioning for Zariaz and Ashara to join him. Each of them took a long draught—Talon from the neck and the sisters at each wrist—without swallowing.

Talon bent to Alessandro's slack mouth and placed his lips over the opening. He fed the mortal his own blood, mixed with vampiric venom. Zariaz did the same, and the young man's throat began to convulse. He was ingesting it. Ashara just watched.

Zar shot her a look and snarled, "Hurry! You must complete this."

Ashara bent and, with closed eyes, felt for the mortal's soft, velvety lips. She let the blood fall from her mouth into his. She let her fangs extend, but something stopped her from biting. She lingered, pretending to shoot her venom, then raised her head and nodded at Zariaz. It was done. She even gave a small, sad smile.

The smile disappeared as Alessandro screamed back into the physical world. Making Ashara jump back, he sat bolt upright on the table, arms flailing. He cried out in Portuguese, wailing of his burning agony. His blood, brain and heart were on fire.

Zariaz and Talon each took one of his arms and steadied him. Murky tears streamed down his cheeks, and Ashara felt terribly sorry for him. He was condemned to an eternal life of darkness and death. She remembered how she had felt in his place.

After several moments, Alessandro calmed. He slid off the dining room table and stood unsteadily. He shook off Zariaz and Talon's hands. Then he walked unassisted to the large wood-framed mirror on the living room wall and examined his once-ravaged throat. The only evidence of his violent death was the sticky, dark blood that soaked his shirtfront. He turned and looked with wide, questioning eyes at the

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unholy trinity that had made him live again.

Zariaz rushed to his side, soothing him in nurturing tones. Much different than she had been with Ashara all those decades ago, but then, of course, she herself was still a freshly made vampire at that time.

“You will live forever, Alessandro,” she explained, her words tumbling over each other in her excitement. “You can never die. You will never fall ill. You will never grow old. You will be beautiful, always.” She indicated his reflection in the mirror as she smoothed his raven’s wing hair.

“So it’s true then?” Alessandro croaked. He was still very weak and not fully healed yet. “You are a witch?” He turned to Ashara. “And her, too?”

Zar chuckled. “Is that what they say in town? I’m much more than that—I’m a mambo, a vampire, a succubus—I am a living nightmare!”

Alessandro trembled. “What now?”

“Now you must feed,” Talon said. “I’ll take you.”

Alessandro’s eyes grew wide with terror. He clearly didn’t like the giant black devil. He turned to Ashara. “Would you take me instead, please?”

“No, no. I’m afraid not,” Zariaz spoke before Ashara could reply. “Talon will bring you a meal.” She turned to the priest and nodded once.

He headed out the still-open front door without a word.

Alessandro waited until Talon was gone. “Meal?”

Ashara jumped in to answer, afraid that her sister’s reply would be flip or too harsh. The young man was clearly confused and very afraid. “We’re vampires, Alessandro. Do you know what that means?”

“Like Count Dracula?” he asked, turning from the mirror to look at her. His face was ruddy with nervous excitement, but he was gaunt and ashen around the edges. He laughed bitterly. “That’s only a story.”

“All stories have some basis in truth,” Zariaz said

“Kill?” he echoed.

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“No, no,” Ashara assured him. “At least not at first. All you have to do is...drink the blood that Talon brings you.”

Alessandro blanched.

She went on, “You’ll want it. I know it’s hard to believe, but you will. You’ll crave it, because it’s what your body needs. It’s the only way you can survive, and there is no greater instinct than to survive.”

“Shar was like you, at first,” Zar said. “All scared and trembling. But look at her now. She’s killed hundreds and hundreds of times!”

“Only because I have to,” Ashara spoke up. Then she stopped herself. Why did she feel the need to explain herself to this newborn? She didn’t give a damn what he thought. She kept having to *remind* herself to embrace her dark, evil nature.

The twins took Alessandro by his hands and led him to the sofa, where they sat on either side of him.

“What about my family? What will I tell them?” he whispered, absently stroking his healed throat.

“You shall never see them again,” Zariaz said flatly, leaving not an inch for argument. “It’s for the best.”

Alessandro nodded. “Yes. They’re devout Catholics...they wouldn’t understand...”

“Mistress Konrad?” It was the mortal, Markus. He was standing at the top of the basement stairs. “Will you be needing me anymore tonight?”

Zar looked at him with narrowed eyes, as if contemplating whether he should be Alessandro’s first meal, then she sighed. “No, Markus. Off to bed with you.”

Markus crossed the living room, glancing at the new vampire with unmasked envy, and headed up the stairs toward the bedrooms.

The three immortals sat in uncomfortable silence for a time, each occupied with their own very different thoughts.

Then Alessandro flinched. “I hear something. Someone coming.” He trembled with dread. All new vampires had an instinctive fear of the

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unknown.

"It's only Talon," Zar explained, smoothing his silky hair. "Breathe deeply. Do you smell the fresh blood?"

Alessandro closed his eyes, his long black lashes casting elegant shadows down his pale cheeks. There was a sharp, metallic odor, and a hint at warmth. He took a long, sustained breath through his nose, and a slow smile crept across his face. "I do."

Talon stepped into the living room with a limp body lying across his arms. Zariaz stepped forward and helped him bring it to the sofa. It was obviously a vagrant, reeking of cheap red wine.

"This calls for a toast!" Zariaz laughed as she watched her fledgling bend and put his teeth to the human's filthy neck. "You need to use your fangs," she explained gently.

Alessandro looked up at her. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. "How?"

"Close your eyes, and imagine them. It's as simple as that."

Alessandro did as he was told, but the fangs did not grow.

The bony tramp was drifting back to consciousness; he groaned and tried to stir. His hand instinctively went to back of his head, where the black man had brained him.

Alessandro's eyes grew shiny with fear and frustration. "I need to drink," he whined, "but I can't. What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing, my sweet," Zariaz crooned. "You're just new, that's all."

Ashara hadn't seen many new vampires, but she had a feeling this was her doing. She had withheld her venom, and Alessandro was weak. She prayed she wouldn't be found out. Why would she act on such a silly impulse? How could she have been so stupid? Though she loved and trusted her sister now more than ever, there was a persistent core in her soul that still held stubbornly onto the fear.

Zariaz bent and opened a wound in the man's neck. She bit through a vein, and blood began to spurt from it in time with the heartbeats. Alessandro swooped down and closed his mouth over it. He sucked

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greedily, taking great swallows and growling like an animal as he took the nourishment. The man went rigid and bucked beneath his killer, but Zar and Talon helped to hold him steady.

“Give him the venom,” Zar said to Alessandro. “It will calm him.”

Alessandro kept sucking until the vagrant was drained. He raised his head and grinned, his teeth stained red. “Ahh, I feel wonderful! So hot and high!”

“It’s the wine,” Zariaz explained with a smile. “You were very lucky with your first.”

“But what of this venom you mentioned?” Alessandro asked, giving the corpse a small shove and letting it fall to the floor.

“Your fangs never extended?” Zar asked, leaning forward to peer at Alessandro’s mouth. “Show me your teeth.”

Ashara cringed inwardly, hoping Zariaz and Talon wouldn’t discover the real reason for the problem. She promised herself that she would go to Alessandro later, when he was alone, and right her wrong.

Alessandro bared his perfectly even, blunt teeth. Zar and Talon inspected them but couldn’t figure out why the fangs hadn’t extended.

“Perhaps it’s too late in the night,” Talon suggested. “Morning will be here soon.”

“Morning?” Alessandro shuddered. “Is it true, about vampires and the sun?”

“Yes,” Zar replied. “But not to worry. Our home is sun-proof. You will sleep with my sister, and she will be your companion from now on. I made you for her.”

“Please, you’re making him sound like the bride of Frankenstein,” Ashara chided. The poor boy was scared enough already. But then she glanced over at Alessandro and saw the grateful expression on his face. Perhaps he felt he needed her. She took his hand, and stepping over the dead body that lay at their feet, she guided him up the stairs to their bedroom. “Good night,” she called.

Alessandro looked around the spare, starkly furnished room with

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wide, wondering eyes. His gaze settled on the portrait Ashara had painted of herself and Zariaz with the dark horse, so long ago. “Were you...*alive*...there?” he asked haltingly.

“No,” Ashara replied. “We were ninety years vampires then.”

“But you’re in the sun.”

“It was only my longing, my imagination.”

“*You* painted that?” Alessandro asked, stepping all the way into the room. “You know horses.”

“Thank you.” Ashara liked to think she had a talent for painting, but she’d since lost her desire for that. She wondered fleetingly what had happened to her cameras, if anything. She’d only been away from her house for a few months and everything was paid in full. Probably no one had noticed her absence.

Except maybe Liam. But most likely not. What would she say to him when she returned? If she were to go back to her old life to feed the curse, she would have to see him. Then the awful thought came to her: Would she be expected to kill him? She shoved the notion away. Even Zar wouldn’t be that cruel. Besides, she knew that Ashara had come back to the fold in order to save him and his band. Zar wouldn’t break her promise.

Alessandro yawned and glanced out the window.

“Don’t worry,” Ashara said. “The shutters will come down, and you will be protected. We’ll sleep there, on the bed. No coffins for us.”

Alessandro unbuttoned his bloodied shirt and cast it off. Next came his shoes and socks, then his pants. Ashara watched, admiring his sinewy body, but feeling absolutely nothing. Would she be expected to spend the rest of eternity with this beautiful boy at her side? If Zar deemed it so, she would.

Alessandro watched her watching him, then went to the bed, wearing only his underwear, and crawled beneath the blankets. “I’m so very tired,” he said softly. “So tired...” His eyes closed, and he nestled deeper into the pillows.

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Ashara disrobed and put her nightclothes on. She crawled into bed and felt the warmth radiating from Alessandro's body. His breathing was deep and even, and he didn't move. She wriggled over to him, seeking his heat. She pressed her body to his, feeling content for the first time in a long time. She didn't have the heart to singe him with her venom now. She would do it tomorrow.

She closed her eyes, and before the automatic shutters came down, Ashara was asleep.

* * *

Falling through bottomless pits of never-ending nightmares, Ashara's slumber was restless at best. When she opened her eyes, it was late afternoon. The shutters were down, but tiny bits of sunlight crept around the corners. The sun leaks were safely cast across the room, not close to touching her. Groggily, she stirred.

It was a struggle, but she sat up. Her head was spinning and she felt as though she was moving through warm molasses. She hadn't woken so early in a long, long time. Alessandro was next to her, dead to the world. She reached out and stroked his cheek. It was cold. That was to be expected, but there was a certain stiffness to his flesh that was not natural. Not natural to an immortal, that was.

It was rigor mortis.

Ashara closed her eyes and sighed. It was all her fault. He wasn't strong enough to survive even one day because she had not given him the venom he needed. She fell back against the pillows. What now? Alessandro was at peace; this was certainly for the best for him, but what about her? Zariaz would be furious.

Thoughts plowed through her slow, sleepy mind—the incinerator, for one—but in the end she knew she would have to admit the truth. She just hoped that Zariaz would still love her.

Her eyes were too heavy. Ashara slid back down; down into the covers, and back down into the nightmares.

She dreamed she was inside a giant piano, running along the strings

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as it was being played. A heavy hand commanded the music, a harsh classical piece that jangled her every nerve. As each chord was struck, a new strand would move and one would loosen. She could barely keep her balance, running along the musical tightrope.

She heard laughter, the high notes of it tinkling like wind chimes. It was a woman's laugh, but Ashara couldn't tell who it was. It was somebody laughing derisively at *her* though. That much she knew. She looked down, and instead of the wood platform of the piano's body, Ashara saw a swirling pit of fire below. Hell. Suddenly, it was unbearably hot inside the piano. Ashara looked down; she would fall in if she lost her balance.

Another hard note was struck, so loud she screamed at the pain echoing and reverberating through her skull. She felt one bare foot slip from the string, then the other. She screamed again, knowing she was going into the giant incinerator. She would die with the laughter and that horrible, dissonant music her final memory.

She felt her weight in the air and the awful, unstoppable sensation of falling. She clutched desperately at the chords as she fell, but they moved just out of her reach as a new tune began.

She felt a horrible, bone-breaking pain in her shoulders as her descent suddenly stopped in midair. She was inches from the fiery lava pit. She took stock of herself and discovered that the strings she had been running upon were part of her: long strings were attached to her wrists, elbows, shoulders, and there was one at each ankle.

Ashara looked up. The piano was propped open, and through that opening she saw a huge face peering down at her. Such a frightening, awful face. *Her* face.

Or was it Zariaz? She couldn't tell the difference in the dream. Or maybe she couldn't tell the difference anymore at all.

She felt her body being manipulated by the strings, making her dance. She cried out in pain and despair as the puppet master pulled her up and away from Hell.

CHAPTER 15

Song Is Over

For the first time since she could remember, Ashara woke to an empty house. She could feel the hollowness in her bones, and she knew intuitively she was alone. There was no hot tea by her bedside, no greeting from her sister, nothing. Alessandro's body was gone.

Ashara got out of the bed, her feet protesting against the icy, hard wood of the floor. The February night was cold, the coldest yet. She could see her breath on the air; Markus had not turned the central heating on, nor had he lit her fireplace.

She went to the armoire and got her thickest robe and a pair of slippers. She stepped out of the room, feeling that something had gone terribly wrong. Something worse than Zariaz finding Alessandro's dead body. Her skin was all prickly with warning. The lights were on in the hallway, but when she checked her sister's room, it was empty and the bed appeared not to have been slept in.

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Ashara stood in the room for a moment, looking around. She'd never really *looked* at this room before.

The bed was posted in wrought iron, like hers, but unlike hers it twisted and twined into images of death and clefs. Zariaz must have had it specially made. The bedspread was a black satin comforter, and the animal skin she had on her floor was that of a horse. Ashara stepped over to it. It was dark, satiny brown, with a black dorsal stripe running down its center. El Despejo? Of course the horse had to have died, but the thought that her sister would have had a rug made of his hide sickened her.

She sidestepped it and went to the bookcase. So many books—everything from an original copy of *Les Miserables* to *Valley of the Dolls*. Everything was painstakingly categorized and alphabetized. Novels first, then short story collections, then nonfiction. The nonfiction library included several volumes on magic and voodoo, as well as true crime. She reached for a hardback, *In Cold Blood*, and slid it from the shelf. She opened the book, flipping absently through it. Then she saw that Truman Capote had signed it personally to Zariaz. The inscription was nothing special or enlightening; her sister could easily have picked it up at a book signing. Was Zar's life ever that mundane? Had she ever stood in line, book in hand, awaiting a signature from a famous writer?

A huge, wood-framed mirror hung on one wall, its baroque frame curly-cueing like dull gold-painted vines. Underneath it was a mismatching vanity, makeup carelessly strewn across its surface. The armoire across the room stood open, as if Zariaz had dressed in haste.

Ashara felt a stab of chilly fear, wondering if perhaps the townspeople had come and taken Zariaz while she slept during the day. Perhaps Alessandro's parents had discovered the truth, and taken him *and* Zariaz. But why not get Ashara, too? And Talon—where was he? She went downstairs and checked the ground floor, but no one was around.

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She checked the kitchen, the dusty, unused servants' quarters, and even the bathrooms. There was no sign of anybody.

She returned to the living room, completely at a loss. Ashara sat on the couch and, unable to stop herself, began to weep. She felt like a child who had been abandoned. How could Zar and Talon just leave her? Was it punishment for her willful folly? Why, oh why, had she meddled in Alessandro's making? It meant nothing to her!

She was terribly hungry, but she had no will to hunt. Her meals had been brought to her for so long, she didn't know what to do. Her head pounded, and she gave way to wracking sobs, her face buried in the soft cushions. She cried until her voice gave out.

The moment she quieted, she thought she heard music. It was coming from outside. The barn! That's where they were. Of course, Talon and Zariaz were with the horses. They hadn't left her at all.

She ran back upstairs and changed into a stern black riding habit. Maybe she and Zariaz could ride together, as they had all those years ago. Ashara hadn't ridden a horse in ages; she wondered if she still could. As she dressed, she thought back to the last time she and Zar had ridden together. Zar was on Despejo, and Shar was on a spirited dapple-grey called Manly. They rode in ornate sidesaddles, and their horses had handmade rawhide bridles with horsehair reins and spade bits. Both sisters were decked out in black riding habits, and as they passed through the town that evening, there were audible intakes of breath. The people of the community then revered the two as goddesses, and to be graced with an appearance was a rare treat indeed.

She went back down the stairs, taking them two at a time, feeling giddy. She rushed through the living room and out the front door. She headed for the barn, then she stopped. The music was louder now.

She recognized the song. It was something Liam used to play. Then she heard the lyrics. "I wanna live with a cinnamon girl. I could be happy the rest of my life, with a cinnamon girl." Her head hurt so badly. The song had to be in her imagination. Ashara began walking

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again, moving quickly but cautiously toward the barn.

The sight that greeted her when she opened the big, wooden double doors was surreal. She absolutely *had* to be hallucinating.

Liam Archer was sitting on two stacked coffins with an acoustic guitar in his lap, and he was strumming the love song like it was the most natural thing in the world. Ashara couldn't believe her eyes, but she said his name anyway.

He looked up at her, still playing. "It's okay, baby. Come in," he said softly, as though speaking to frightened animal. "Come in."

Then she heard Zar's voice. "Don't—it's a trap!"

Without thinking twice, Ashara pivoted and ran. She shot toward the safety of the house like a bat out of hell. *I should have listened to my instincts*, she chided herself. From the moment she'd woken up, she'd known something was wrong. She should never have gone outside.

She heard Liam's running steps behind her, and she found the strength to go even faster. She nearly made it inside, but he caught her by the hair. Her head was ripped back, and she screamed in anguish. She clawed desperately at the doorjamb, but he had her.

Liam twisted the fistful of her hair, then pulled her to him by her shoulder with his other hand. He tore into the side of her neck with his fangs, and without bothering to soothe her with paralyzing venom, he drank and drank until she could feel her veins collapsing and her heart shriveling. She cried out, but no help came. What had he done with Zar and Talon? Zar was alive, she knew, for she had warned her.

Every few seconds, Liam would let go and spit her blood out. Trapped in his iron grip, she could do nothing but watch her blood spattering at her feet and wonder why Liam would want to hurt her.

He sucked her blood until the ache pounding from her drained, desiccated organs was unbearable. She couldn't breathe, let alone cry out anymore. She was in agonizing pain and terrified that she would spend an eternity like that. Finally, thankfully, her brain stopped

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working and she was released.

The peace didn't last long. Ashara was ripped back into harsh reality, every fiber of her being stabbed with rapier blades of anguish. She had never hurt so badly in all her life, and all she wanted was to black out again. She didn't care what happened to her body, as long as her mind could rest in peace.

Liam was still holding her by the hair, but this time it was gently, and he was pushing her head toward something. Blood. Her vision was blurry, but she could smell it. The tangy, metallic odor roused her, and she stuck her tongue out. She felt something wet and warm. An open, flowing wound. She began to suckle, slowly regaining her strength. Relief flooded through her muscles and organs as they were replenished. She half-sat up on her own, gripping the mortal's arm for purchase.

When she had drunk her fill, she looked and saw that it was Markus she had been feasting upon. She released him and lay back down. She was on her back, lying on the straw-covered floor of the barn. Liam was kneeling beside her, looking down at her with a tender, worried expression.

"Are you okay, baby?" he asked softly. "I'm sorry I had to hurt you."

"What happened?" Ashara whispered. She felt terribly weak, and somehow battered, as if she had been in a fight for her life.

Liam reached down and traced her jaw line with one fingertip. "You were under her spell."

Ashara recalled fragments of a strange dream. She dreamed that she had lived with Zariaz and Talon, and the three of them had...what? She couldn't remember. "Was I dreaming?"

"No," Liam replied. "It was a nightmare."

Ashara heard a thumping noise. "Don't listen to him, Shar! Let me out of here, and I'll explain everything." The voice was muffled, but strong.

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Zariaz was inside one of those coffins, Ashara suddenly realized. She struggled to sit up and saw that the coffins were freshly nailed shut and wrapped with chains. The dead mortal lay sprawled right beside her. She couldn't bear the sight of him, his dead eyes staring at her so blankly.

Liam helped her to her feet. She leaned on him for support as he walked her back to the house. She saw her blood on the doorstep and remembered vaguely what had happened. She faltered, and Liam steadied her.

He picked her up and carried her up the stairs to her bedroom. He laid her on the bed and smoothed her brow. She closed her eyes and Liam said, "Sleep. You've been through so much, my love."

Ashara slipped in and out of consciousness, her mind manufacturing the wildest, most impossible thoughts and dreams. She was aware of Liam sitting by her side, and she thought she heard him singing once. It was a song about her, Ashara, and something about her immortal love. It was all so very, very strange.

* * *

"So very strange," she croaked aloud, blinking.

Liam was there. "What?" he asked, leaning forward. "Are you all right?"

"I'm hungry," Ashara answered, trying to sit up. "How long have I been asleep?"

"A couple of days," Liam said. "I have nourishment for you. Wait here."

A few minutes later, Liam came back with a large cut-crystal pitcher and two matching wineglasses. He set the glasses on the nightstand and filled them. "I know it's not fresh," he said as she took her glassful of gore, "but it was the best I could do. I didn't want to leave you alone for very long."

They drank in silence for several moments, and then it hit her. A dream. A spell. "Was I?"

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He nodded. "She had you drugged. It started with the tea, then the mortals you and Talon shared...she injected them with the potion, and you both drank."

"How do you know that?"

"Markus was very informative while begging for his life," Liam said simply.

"Did you know all along? Why didn't you come for me?" she demanded. She was still confused and uncertain, but she was herself again. All of her feelings for Liam came back, but she didn't understand why he had left her for so long.

"Do you remember the note you left for me?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"You told me not to come after you. At first, I didn't believe it. There was nothing I could do though. I had Tera, Joel and Buck to take care of. It took quite some time for the potion to work its way out of their systems."

"Do they know...? Do they know we're vampires?"

"No," Liam answered.

He told her he'd had to convince the trio that a drug dealer had poisoned them. Their memories were Swiss-cheesed from the spell, so at first they had believed it. They stayed at his house, and he tended to them every day. He told them that the drug dealer was an old enemy of his from England, thereby taking the blame for what had happened to them and keeping them from going to the police.

But Buck had started to ask questions, Liam told her. He didn't recall any drug dealer. He was convinced that Ashara, actually remembering Zariaz, had done something to hurt him and his friends. It took an awful lot of convincing but eventually he, and the others, swallowed Liam's pabulum.

Finally, after two weeks, they were strong enough to leave his home and take care of themselves once again. The strange incident was never reported, and never spoken of again.

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Liam looked deep into Ashara's eyes. "I came here right away, just as soon as I could. But nobody was here."

Ashara couldn't believe that. She thought she had been here since leaving L.A. in November. She *had* ...hadn't she? It was all so hazy.

"I returned home, not sure what to do. I went by your house in Hollywood every night for weeks. It was hard for me, but I convinced myself that your note was sincere and you didn't want to be found. I took some comfort in Lovecraft...he's a lot like you, you know.

"Then I got a long letter from you, assuring me that you were happy and not to worry about you. I was a wreck," he admitted with a heavy sigh. "Finally, I had to take a break. I went back to England, and my sister took care of me."

"Your sister?" Ashara echoed.

Liam nodded. "You're not the only one with a vampire sister," he said with a tight smile. "She got me through Christmas, then I returned to California for the New Year."

So, that was the blonde in the Rolling Stone photo, Ashara thought. And a letter...did I really send him a letter?

"It was time to get into the studio for our second album and buckle down." He took her hand. "I never stopped loving you." He inhaled, exhaled, and went on. "It was Zariaz who told me you were being held in her spell."

"What?" Ashara couldn't believe that.

"She didn't mean to," Liam explained. "But she couldn't help gloating. She sent me a New Year card, with a little note saying essentially that she had won, and I had lost. She said you would have a new lover soon. There was something in her words that made my skin crawl. I remembered the zombie elixir and wondered if she could have done that to you, too. Your note told me no, but it also said you never loved me. I began to wonder if Zariaz hadn't written it herself."

"*I did* write you that note at the airport," Ashara said. "I didn't truly mean it, but I wrote it. Because I've caused you nothing but trouble,

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Li.”

“No, no, no,” he said softly, emphatically. “You’ve brought me happiness and love. In all my time on this earth, I have never met anyone who has the effect on me you do.” Then he cocked his head and looked at her sideways. “It’s not voodoo, is it?”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Ashara said, trying to keep her tears of joy at bay. “Tell me the rest.”

“I didn’t let myself think twice after getting that card. I just came over here. But I was smarter this time around. I watched the house for a few days and got to know the routines. First I got the mortal, then Talon.”

“Where were the coffins all this time?” Ashara couldn’t see him staring those in his hotel room.

“I brought them here today, and right before Zariaz woke up, I got her.” He paused, then switched gears. “Now, I need to explain to you what I did—”

“I think I understand,” Ashara interrupted. “You drained me of all the tainted blood, right?”

Liam nodded. “It was the only thing I could do. I’m so sorry I hurt you. It was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done, and when I saw the pain and confusion in your eyes, I almost stopped. But there was no other way. I couldn’t wait until it wore off and risk you getting away from me. Your sister’s hold on you was strong, and you might have found some way to free her.”

“What about Alessandro? Did you find him?” Guilt plunged through her, the memory hazy but sharp-edged.

Liam looked at her, wide-eyed. He shook his head.

Obviously Markus had taken care of the body before becoming one himself.

“Never mind.” Ashara swung her legs over the bed and stood. “Let’s get out of here,” she said resolutely. “I don’t want to be in this house ever again.”

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She went to the dresser, where Liam had stacked some of her clothes that he'd brought from her home. "My jeans," she sighed, smiling. "I've missed these! And my tie-dye sweater. Oh, thank you." She got dressed and took Liam's hand. "I've got an idea. Let's ride off into the moonlight."

"Then what?" Liam asked.

An image flashed into Ashara's mind of this hateful house burning to the ground. The stables and coffins burning, too. Everything razed to the ground. Then another image, of Zariaz rising from the ashes...that last was sent telepathically by her sister; she just knew it. She also knew that she could never go through with such a thing.

"I don't know what happens next," Ashara replied. "Will they be coming home with us?"

"It's the only way to know for sure," Liam said. "Keep your enemies close, as the old saying goes."

Ashara shut her eyes and tried to clear her thoughts. "Let's just go for a ride." Although the sound of ringing hooves had been her bane lately, she felt as though riding Zariaz's horses would somehow conquer those bad connotations. She hadn't been on a horse since 1902, but she wanted to gallop and feel the wind in her hair. She wanted to run free, with Liam at her side.

They went down the stairs and out the front door. Crossing the courtyard, they headed for barn. The doors hung open, but the corpse was gone, and the coffins were carefully stashed behind the last stall. Liam had cleaned up while Ashara slept.

The two stallions nickered when they walked in.

"Have you been feeding them?" Ashara asked.

"Sure," Liam replied, unconvincingly.

Ashara knew of a meadow where they could take the horses to graze. She read the nameplates on the stalls, and saw that the younger stallion was called El Bondaso. *Everything good*, or *the good one*, the name meant. That was the horse she would ride. The other horse was

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called Desperado de Cappuccino.

“Do you know how to ride?” Ashara asked, turning to Liam.

“Sure,” he replied in the same unconvincing tone. “I can ride a hog—I can ride a horse.”

She got the bridles out of the tack room, which lay just beyond the last stall, and was thankful that no thumping was coming from either of the coffins. She bridled the stallions and led them from their stalls. Liam mounted his bareback horse as if he knew what he was doing, and Ashara did the same. They rode out of the barn side by side.

The moon was high in the sky as they rode down the narrow street, the horses’ hooves clip-clopping. Ashara and Liam rode in companionable silence until they reached the meadow that lay beyond the ruins of the Roman temple. It was a crisp, cold night and no one else was out.

Ashara and Liam dismounted and unbridled the horses, letting them graze unfettered.

“Isn’t this beautiful?” Ashara asked in wonderment, walking slowly toward the skeletal structure. She felt so young and free, as if she were seeing everything for the first time.

Liam followed, not replying. They stopped beside a crumbling column, and Liam immediately brought his lips to hers. They kissed, softly and sweetly at first, then more ardently.

Breaking away, Liam’s mouth trailed down her throat, sucking and biting, while he backed her against the column and pushed his body against hers. He took her hands and held them above her head. The marble was icy cold, but his touch was like a fleshly fire. She raised one leg and wrapped it around his thigh, pressing their pelvises together.

Liam let go of her wrists and put his hands under her sweater. He excited her nipples with his warm, callused palms, then cupped her with a tight grip as he brought his mouth to her ear and whispered how badly he had missed making love to her.

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She reached down and teased him through his jeans with her rounded fingernails, before unbuttoning and unzipping his fly. She reached in and guided him out, rubbing the engorged head and pulling it gently but insistently to her.

Liam bit into her earlobe and moaned eagerly. His hands slipped down her belly to her pants button and fly, undoing them in one fluid motion. He jerked her tight jeans down, then his. She kicked hers free and wrapped her legs around his waist, her writhing back still firmly pressed against the Roman column. They both gasped when he entered her and gripped each other tightly, as if holding on for dear life.

He entered her, and she matched him, thrust for thrust, rocking him back on his heels more than once. Her breath coming in short gasps, Ashara began to tingle and soar into climax. She urged Liam to join her, pulling his hips into her harder and faster. She closed her eyes and savored the ultimate union with the man she loved.

Dizzy and weak-kneed, they slowed, then stopped. They held each other, still joined but motionless for some time. Liam eased back, and pulled up his jeans. He helped Ashara with hers, but they stayed by the column, face to face and resting against each other.

"I think we made a baby," Liam said huskily, smoothing her clothes.

"How?"

"If you have to ask how, I think I've done something wrong!" Liam chuckled, still winded. Then he gave her a sexy little wink.

"No, I mean...I've never had a baby. I didn't think I could."

"It's only possible with a Chosen One," Liam explained, then laughed self-consciously. "A Chosen One! Sounds so pretentious. But you know what I mean: an original vampire."

"A child..." Ashara whispered. "Really?"

Liam nodded, kissing her. "And not only that, I have a another riddle for you."

"Lay it on me," Ashara sighed, shaking her head. She realized she'd

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better learn to love riddles; she had a feeling she'd be hearing them forever.

Liam took her hand in his. "I have no top or bottom but I can hold flesh, bones and blood all at the same time. What am I?"

Ashara thought. She didn't know. She looked around for Liam's telltale clues but found none. "Tell me," she demanded, a smile curving her lips.

"Just say yes," Liam teased.

"Yes," she repeated. Then she felt a cold metal band slipping onto the ring finger of her left hand. "A ring. Of course." She looked down, and saw the large, multi-faceted stone sparkling in the moonlight. "Hmm. A diamond is forever, they say."

Liam kissed her again. "And so are we."

EPILOGUE

Sucking in the 70s

Ashara flipped the calendar page over. She couldn't believe it was July already. She couldn't believe what year it was, actually. But the calendar helped...without it, she would have no concept of time whatsoever. The '70s had passed so quickly, like a happy dream you wanted to go on and on, but it never did.

Life was more complicated now.

Liam came up behind her, putting his hand on her shoulder as he glanced at the calendar. "Amazing. Sometimes it seems like ten minutes since we met, doesn't it?"

"Time flies when you're having fun," she replied, turning to kiss him. She gave him a quick buss, then said, "Yet it seems I've known you forever. I'm glad we're still so happy. After all, it has been ten whole minutes."

"You might not be so happy when you hear about Francesca's little

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brush with the law.”

“Not again!” Ashara sighed.

Liam nodded. They both sat at the kitchen table, and Liam began to tell Ashara about their daughter’s latest shenanigans at preschool.

Francesca was six in mortal years, but she looked half that. Her gestation had taken eighteen months and, while she seemed to be aging slowly physically, her mind was already light years ahead. She hated being forced to go to preschool with the babies, but Ashara and Liam believed that if France was going to live among mortals, she should be raised among them. Emotionally, she was still very much a little girl. A little girl who liked to drink blood, but a little girl nonetheless.

“She bit the teacher again,” Liam said with a sigh. “Thank goodness her fangs aren’t fully developed yet.”

“Did she break the skin?”

Liam shook his head. “But it’s only a matter of time.”

They both worried that their precocious daughter would move on to her classmates eventually. The teacher thought she was just an undisciplined child—after all, her father was a rock star, and her mother worked nights—but the parents of bitten children might not be so tolerant.

“When?” Ashara asked. “When do you think her fangs will start working?”

“I honestly can’t say. As you know, she’s my first. All I knew was that she was possible—not what those possibilities were.”

“Hmm,” Ashara sighed. She didn’t know what to make of Francesca. The girl favored her father in most ways; she had bright blue eyes, curly blonde hair, she could walk in the light, she ate and drank regular food, and she had an incredible musical aptitude. But like Ashara, she still needed blood to survive. It was surreal. Daddy took her to the zoo on her birthday, and when they got home that evening, Mommy shared the blood of a vagrant with her. It was no wonder France was confused and frustrated.

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“Why did she do it?”

“I did it because Billy Thomas was teasing me,” France said in her chillingly mature voice. The little girl had entered the kitchen, holding Lovecraft in both arms. The cat was almost as big as she was, but she was more than strong enough to hold him.

“And what does someone else teasing you have to with you biting Mrs. Slovich?” Ashara asked, raising an eyebrow.

France set Lovecraft gently to the ground and then took a fastidious moment to brush the cat hair from her Strawberry Shortcake tee-shirt. She looked up into her mother’s eyes and said, “Billy kept taunting me. ‘I see England, I see France, I see France’s underpants!’ Mrs. Slovich laughed. Instead of defending me, she had the audacity to laugh. It made me angry.”

Ashara tried to conceal her own smile. She liked France’s spirit. But in the mortal world, it had to be tempered. She put her mommy-face on and said sternly, “That is not to happen again. This is the fourth time, Francesca Paris Archer. There will not be a fifth. Your father and I have told you that we’re different—”

“I know what we are,” France interrupted. “We’re freaks.”

“No, honey,” Liam said, holding his hands out to his child. She hesitated but took them in hers. They rocked their arms from side to side for a few seconds, and then Liam swung her onto his lap. “We’re vampires. We’re *different*. But nobody else can know that. You have to be good, honey.”

“I know,” France said, whining like the child she really was. She nestled her curls under Liam’s chin and closed her eyes. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

Ashara sagged slightly. There was no doubt that France was daddy’s girl; she shouldn’t mind, but sometimes it hurt.

“And who else should you be apologizing to?” Liam prompted.

France opened her eyes and looked at her mother sheepishly. “Sorry, Mommy.”

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“Okay,” Liam set his daughter on her feet. “You can go now. But go to your room. You’re still in trouble.”

France’s expression grew stormy and tears sprang to her eyes. “You’re mean!” she cried and ran from the room.

* * *

France hated these babyish feelings that overwhelmed her sometimes. She thought like an adult but felt like a child. She knew she was smarter than most adults—including that awful Mrs. Slovich—yet she couldn’t help but fall prey to Barbie commercials on TV. She toddled across the living room, mentally cursing her short, chubby legs.

“Francesca.”

It was just a whisper. But she’d heard it before and wasn’t afraid. She thought maybe it was her guardian angel, but she couldn’t be sure. The voice seemed to be inside her head, but she heard it as if it were actually speaking. The voice, somehow feminine, let her know what a good girl she was, and how special. *Special*. Not “different.”

She paused, and her gaze went about the room. She knew her daddy had lived here before he met Mommy and that much of the décor was the same...but there were several paintings on the walls that Mommy had done. She was painting a lot; painting more than she was taking pictures, though she still worked as a photographer sometimes. France looked at her favorite, the family portrait that hung above the fireplace.

Ashara had painted it in oils when France was just one year old—but in age she looked about four months. It was typical in that it had the parents posed side by side with the mother cradling the baby in her arms. What intrigued France most about the painting was Lovecraft. He was shown lurking in the background, stalking a fat mouse. France, before she knew what she was, had always identified most strongly with the cat in the portrait. She often felt the need to stalk prey, but unlike a feline mother, her own wouldn’t teach her. France was practically spoon-fed, and she was beginning to wonder what it would be like to actually kill someone and drink their fresh blood.

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“Francesca...” The whisper came again. “Come down.”

Down? Down where? An image popped into her head: the door that led to the basement. It was always locked, and it always scared her. She had never gone near it before. Both Mommy and Daddy had told her she was never to open that door. There were black widow spiders down there, they’d said, and rabid rats, too.

She heard their voices coming from the kitchen. They were talking about how to handle her, no doubt.

Nobody’s going to handle me, she thought defiantly. “And nobody’s going to tell me where I can go in my own house,” she added aloud. Instead of going upstairs to her room, she headed for the basement door.

* * *

“I don’t think she loves me,” Ashara lamented.

“Of course she does!” Liam protested in a soft but forceful voice. “Come here, baby.” He opened his arms, and Ashara settled onto his lap. She put her arms over his shoulders and rested her forehead against his hair. “You know how it is between mothers and daughters.”

“Not really,” she replied. Times were different when she grew up. She’d loved *and* respected her mother. “Besides, I thought that was the teen years.”

“Well, maybe she *is* a teenager in her mind,” Liam replied. “It’s hard to say. It’s not like there’s a local vampire pediatrician we can take her to.”

Ashara smiled ruefully. “True.” She paused for a long while, just enjoyed the slightly lemony scent of her husband’s hair and the feeling of warmth being wrapped in his arms. Finally, she spoke again. “Have you thought any more about Darkside?”

He sighed. “I think I can do another five years.”

Another five years before the fans really started to notice he hadn’t aged a day since he appeared on the rock scene in 1971. Already he was being called the Dick Clark of heavy metal—a term Ashara knew

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he despised—even though as far as anyone knew he was only about thirty years old. At thirty-five, he probably shouldn't be looking twenty-something anymore...suspensions might be roused. After all, most of his hard-living peers looked twice their real ages. Tera, Joel and Buck were still in the band, and they wanted it to continue. Perhaps it could go on without Liam. Doubtful, but perhaps. They were already millionaires and didn't need the group, but the four musicians loved what they did.

"And then you can always go into management full time. No spotlight there."

"But people will remember me." He looked out the window, over the neighbors' rooftops. "And look at all this development. I think we'll have to leave for a few decades."

Ashara nodded solemnly. "I know. And you miss England, don't you?"

"I never thought I would, but yeah. I do. And I think France would like living there. At least for awhile." "Awhile" could be forty or fifty years.

"What about...?"

"Them?" Liam gave her a squeeze. "We'll have to take them with us. We can't take a chance on leaving them behind. Someone could break into the house and find them. A fire could break out and the bodies discovered. It's just safer."

Ashara wanted to leave Zaria and Talon behind someday. Would she have to be their guardian all of her immortal life? The presence of the bodies made her uneasy, and she was tired of feeling ill at ease in her own home. It hadn't even been a decade. How would she feel in ten decades?

She hadn't told Liam, but sometimes she thought she heard Zar's voice. It was like the tenuous telepathy they once shared, but the connection was even weaker. She couldn't tell what Zar was saying; she only knew that she spoke. But Zar shouldn't be conscious anymore.

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She should have shriveled into a lifeless, mindless husk years ago. But perhaps...

It was too much to think about.

"Could I paint?" she asked.

"Of course. You've seen the manor—it's huge. We could get rid of all those old, stuffy portraits and fill the walls with your gorgeous artwork."

"It would be kind of fun to redecorate. And we could send France to private school."

"The best."

"Let's do it," Ashara said, kissing Liam on the nose. "I'd better start packing. Five years will go by just like that." She giggled and snapped her fingers.

* * *

France snapped her fingers, giggling softly to herself. "I've got it."

She dragged a chair from the formal dining room down the short flight of stairs that led to the basement door. She was very careful to be quiet as she struggled with the cumbersome furniture. She butted it up against the door and climbed to the chair seat. The padlock was securely fastened, as she had feared. She had hoped it was just looped through the hasp, not really locked. Sometimes Mommy did that with the back gate. But not here.

"Francesca."

She nearly reeled backward. The voice was a real voice this time, not a whisper in the back of her mind. It was still inside her head, but she *knew* it was originating from inside the basement. She had to open that door.

"Look at the lock," the voice said.

She did.

"Use your mind."

France didn't know what to make of that. She reached for the lock and gave it another tug. Nothing.

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“Think,” the voice prompted urgently.

Then she knew. She’d seen Daddy set the table once using nothing but his mind. It was a long, long time ago, when she was just a tiny baby. He didn’t think she understood what she was seeing, and maybe she didn’t then. But now she did.

Could she do it, too? France looked at the lock again, imagining it coming loose. She knew what tumblers were and thought about them moving inside, freeing the lock. It trembled slightly, but nothing else. Maybe she wasn’t strong enough. She turned her head and looked up the stairs. Maybe she’d better stop this before she got caught. She was in enough trouble already.

“Don’t go,” the voice caressed her mind. “I’m trapped down here.”

“Who are you?” France whispered.

There was no answer to the question, but a plea. “Don’t go. Try again.”

Francesca twirled her curls through her fingers, as she always did when she was uncertain. Mommy and Daddy would be really mad if they found out what she was up to.

“They won’t,” the voice assured her. “They don’t know I’m in here. You’ll be a hero.”

The sentences were getting longer, and it seemed the entity was reading her mind. A chill of fear shot through her. Was it a ghost?

“No, my sweet. I’m your guardian angel. But I can’t guard you from in here.”

France smiled. So it was true! She did have a guardian angel. She’d always thought so, but Billy and some of the other older kids told her there was no such thing as angels.

She looked at the lock again, more fiercely this time. It shook and shuddered and began to tap against the wooden door. France hoped her parents wouldn’t hear. Then the lock lay still.

“Concentrate.”

She did. She concentrated with all of her might, and just when she

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felt so dizzy she was afraid she'd pass out, France heard the lock come loose. She giggled and clapped her hands. Then gave a nervous glance up the stairs to make sure her parents hadn't heard.

She took the heavy padlock in her right hand and pulled it from the latch. She swung it back, then got down from the chair. She pulled the chair away and twisted the doorknob. It, too, was locked. She sagged.

She looked at the doorknob, imagining it turning. Turning, turning, turning...

"France!"

It was her mother's voice. "Francesca Paris Archer, where are you?" Not nearby, but close enough.

France jumped up on the chair and frantically put the padlock back into place. She mustn't be caught. She didn't have time to lock it all the way but doubted anyone would notice. She leapt from the chair and grabbed it by the back, taking the stairs two at a time.

France was halfway across the living room with the chair when she was found.

"What are you doing with that chair?" Ashara demanded. "Aren't you supposed to be in your room?"

"Yes, ma'am," France answered, eyes downcast.

"Take that chair back to the table and get your butt upstairs."

"Just my butt?" France sassed. She didn't want to, but she knew if she didn't Mommy would suspect something.

Ashara looked at her hard until France muttered an apology and did as she was told.

As France passed the basement stairs on the way to her bedroom, she heard the voice again.

"Come back. Tomorrow...when your mother is sleeping..."

STACI LAYNE WILSON

Staci Layne Wilson is a multi-faceted writer (everything from horror novels to horse training manuals to movie reviews) and entertainment reporter (on-camera and print interviews with everyone from Marilyn Manson to Brad Pitt). She's an Active Member of the L.A. Press Club and lives in Southern California.

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* * *

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