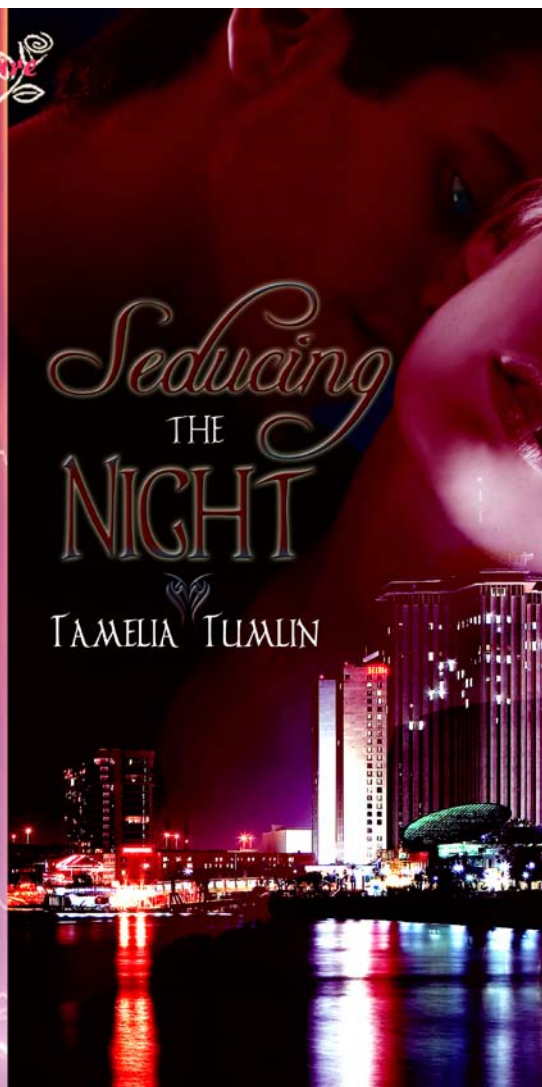




Black Rose

Seducing
THE
NIGHT

TAMELIA TUMLIN



Seducing the Night

by

Tamelia Tumlin

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Seducing the Night

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Dedication

As always, to my loving family for all their support:
 my mom,
who is battling her own personal trial right now;
 my dad for all his support and strength;
 and my son, Jacob, for his patience.
 And of course to my editor Callie
for all her wonderful advice and patience.

Praise for Tamelia Tumlin

“Ms. Tamelia Tumlin has created a great first novel; her plot is fresh and appealing and her cast of characters gripped this reader's interest as well as evoked a myriad of emotions.”

~Romance Studio

“Tamelia Tumlin pens a novel full of twists and turns; love and passion with Prince of Thieves.”

~Single Titles Reviews

Chapter 1

Kill Damien's father?

No! I can't!

Rana Cartwright reeled at the High Priestess's suggestion. She twisted her hands in her lap as a cold, clammy sweat pricked her skin.

"Drive a stake right through his demon heart and burn him." The High Priestess waved her arms over the wooden bowl in the center of the table emphatically. Gold bangles around her wrist jingled together like wind chimes in a summer breeze. Her thick Cajun accent, spoken through toothless gums, garbled her words. However, Rana understood their meaning perfectly.

And her heart turned to stone.

How could she ever consider killing her son's father?

There must be another way. There had to be.

The High Priestess leaned over the candlelit table, her thick ebony multi-braided hair narrowly escaping the bowl of goat's blood and looked Rana straight in the eye. "Save your son, child. Burn the vampire or he will take the life right out of your boy. The offspring of a Dhampir and a vampire is a life source for the undead. He gains strength with each rising moon and each setting sun. And your baby loses his." She clutched the chicken's foot that hung on a leather string around her neck and closed her eyes. Her lips chanted incoherently. A language Rana did not understand, yet somehow the murmured sounds sent icy chills over her skin. Seconds later the High Priestess's eyes flew open

and in a glazed, almost trance-like state. She grabbed Rana's shoulders, curled her long dark fingernails into the flesh and shouted, "Find and destroy the vampire or lose your son forever, child. Kill him!"

Rana's stomach bubbled. The stench of fresh animal blood—used for God knows what—mingled with the musty odor in the dimly lit room washed waves of nausea over her. She pulled away from the woman, snatched several bills from her purse and threw them on the table.

"Thank you." Rana jumped from the chair and fled through the beaded doorway. She burst onto the sidewalk of Bourbon Street. Blood pounded in her ears. Her feet hit the sidewalk, and she didn't stop running until her chest nearly exploded from exhaustion. Finally, she stopped, leaned over and gasped for air. The warm July sun beat down upon her.

She had come to find out how to save her dying son. Now she knew what she had to do. But would she be able to do it?

Rana took one deep breath, counted to seven and silently pleaded with her nerves to uncoil.

No luck.

Her hand trembled on the doorknob. She swallowed hard and looked up at the lavender neon sign flashing atop one of New Orleans's most prestigious nightclubs.

The Voodoo Den.

It blinked with rapid precision as if begging her to turn back. To save herself.

Mist rose around the building, shrouding it in an unearthly glow. The clouded night sky swallowed any chance for moonlight.

Rana shivered.

The Voodoo Den.

Playground for the Underworld.

Not exactly her idea of a night on the town.

Neutral territory they called it. The one place where humans and vampires could safely co-exist. She had never believed it safe. Not after the hushed rumors about some people who ventured into the nocturnal club to never be heard from again.

Rana gave herself a mental shake. No time to worry about that now.

She gathered her courage—what little of it she could muster, smoothed her black mini-skirt and opened the door.

The rhythmical beat of African drums vibrated through Rana's body and exploded like shrapnel. She wove through the crowded dance floor then blinked for focus several times. Blue strobe lights illuminated the smoke-filled interior of the club, making it nearly impossible to see.

All she could make out were flashes of fangs, a mass of bodies moving to the beat and the occasional pale almost lifeless face.

She wrinkled her nose. A putrefying mixture of cigarettes, booze and...the undead filled the air.

The average person would not notice the stench. At least not the undead part. But she was not the average person. She was a Dhampir, the child of a vampire and a human with the ability to detect creatures of the night. Detect and kill them.

"Hey, baby. Wanna party?" A strong arm encircled her waist and jerked her backward. She stumbled and fell against a hard chest.

Rana twisted her head around. A man with blond hair, an average face and glowing red eyes stared back at her. His breath reeked of a sweet metallic scent.

Blood.

Her stomach recoiled. He had fed recently.

Don't panic! You knew what they were when you

came in here. Focus, Rana. Focus.

"No, thank you. I'm looking for someone."

"Look, no further, pretty lady." The man's laugh sent shivers down her spine. His full lips spread baring fangs. "Nico is here."

He bowed slightly and tightened his grip.

Nausea churned in her stomach. She clenched her fist and disengaged herself from his grasp. She pushed the instinctive urge to drive a stake through his heart aside. Now was not the time to slay a vampire. There would be time enough for that later. "I'm looking for a specific someone."

Rana took a step forward and collided with gyrating bodies. She steadied with a quick sidestep and positioned herself near the edge of the wooden bar. The continuous stream of bodies danced by, ignoring her.

"That right?" Nico rocked back on his heels, his eyes losing some of their glow. "Who are you looking for?"

"Alexandru Milkos."

Nico raised a dark blond brow and snarled. "There."

He pointed toward the far end of the bar. Rana turned and squinted. Strobe lights flashed like lightning in a midsummer thunderstorm across the room.

"Thank..." She pivoted back only to find empty air.

Rana swallowed again. She never had cared for the way vampires could appear and disappear at will. Actually, she had never cared for vampires, period. Her father had been one before his untimely—or what she liked to think of as his timely—demise. Though she had never known him, what knew about him she hated.

He was a horrible creature that had taken her mother one night against her will, Rana the result.

And she wasn't proud of it.

She turned back toward the figure at the end of the bar and waited for her eyes to adjust to the light show. A brooding form with thick dark hair resting just below broad shoulders and mesmerizing eyes came into focus. She couldn't actually see the color of his eyes, but she knew it by heart. Sea-foam blue. The color of the Caribbean. And the color of heartache. His eyes met hers then haloed with a fiery hue. They flickered with just a hint of recognition.

Rana's breath hitched.

Alexandru.

She swallowed the wad of cotton now taking her throat hostage.

Six years.

Six long, lonely years since his strong muscled arms had held her, their bodies intertwining in the heat of the moment.

Tingles shot down her spine and unexpected warmth settled in her loins. Her body hadn't forgotten his touch. Not by a long shot.

Rana's heart beat erratically in her chest, nearly drowning out the steady rhythm of the African drums. Blood rushed to her ears, and she swayed. She grasped the edge of the bar to regain control.

Six years and he still had this effect on her.

Not a good sign.

Alexandru lifted his glass and took a long casual drink. His eyes never left her face. Rana felt the magnetic pull almost instantly. Her body—with a mind of its own—moved toward him. Without saying a word, he beckoned her with his gaze.

And she was powerless to stop it.

She reached him without even realizing she had moved. He set the glass on the bar and pierced her with a stare. His expression remained impassive, though an appreciative gleam entered his eyes.

Rana's pulse quickened, and she was aware of her heartbeat tantalizingly visible in her throat.

Alexandru's eyes drifted toward the pulse point. He hissed softly.

Rana swallowed hard and instinctively covered the pulsating lifeline with her hand. Alexandru's eyes darkened.

An avalanche of emotions washed over her. Longing. Desire. Love for a man who no longer existed, and for one brief moment, Rana almost forgot why she had come. He looked so much like the man she had once loved, yet he was different somehow. Darker. Powerful. Dangerous. So very dangerous.

Visions of her hands stroking thick wiry chest hair while lying on red satin sheets invaded her thoughts. Rana ran her tongue along her bottom lip, her gaze instantly drawn to his hands resting on the bar. Hands that had given her great pleasure in the past. Rana bit the inside of her cheek. Reminiscing the past would not help her now. Besides, she couldn't forget Alexandru's most important quality.

Deadly.

Her former lover now possessed the ability to end her existence at will. And he would if he knew why she was here.

Rana tore her gaze from his hands and mentally forced herself to focus on the task. She tightened her chin and met his stare head on.

Alexandru's lips formed a slow, seductive smile as if he knew exactly what she had been thinking. His fangs glinted in the strobe lights.

Heat scorched her cheeks at the possibility of him reading her thoughts. Then her heart skipped a beat.

He did know.

He had put those visions in her head.

Rana gave herself a mental kick. Of course!

Mind control. How could she have forgotten that deadly weapon? She knew better—had even trained with the best vampire hunters—and yet she had still allowed him inside her head.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

Rana immediately took control and summoned the few powers she possessed. She drew upon her inner strength and concentrated.

The dance of wills began. Hers—a weakened state striving to battle the power of a vampire's seduction. His—a slow sensuous tug-of-war taunting her to surrender with promises of pleasure beyond her imagination. Sharp pains shot through her temple and the room swayed. She ignored them and focused refusing to weaken even for a moment. The pain intensified and a wave of nausea settled over her. Rana narrowed her eyes and clenched her teeth. Her control slipped. Alexandru continued to probe her thoughts, never wavering. He effortlessly thwarted her every attempt to block him. Rana refused to give in. Her head felt like she had a major hangover, but she clung to her determination until she willed him out of her head.

The window to her mind snapped shut.

The visions dissipated.

Alexandru stiffened and raised a dark brow, his smile deliberate and sardonic. He had enjoyed their sparring. She was sure of it.

Rana breathed a sigh. She had stopped him.

This time.

But the war of minds had weakened her. One small slip-up and she wouldn't be able to fight him again. Not this soon. She must stay in control. Her son's life depended on it.

"Rana." His husky whisper caressed her skin sending tingles along the back of her neck. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Alexandru took another sip of his bloody Mary, savored the coppery flavor and studied Rana over the rim of his glass. The spicy metallic blood slid down his throat, but for once it didn't quench his primal thirst.

He had learned a long time ago how to satisfy his needs without taking another's life. The Voodoo Den served fresh glasses of blood every night. But, this time the drink didn't touch his addiction. The scent of Rana's sweet warm nectar pumping furiously through her veins triggered a new thirst.

A thirst for her.

Her pale face hinted fear.

Damn she was still beautiful!

Her hair flowed like a river of burnished gold, and her eyes shone the color of a summer storm. He wanted her all right, wanted her with the intensity of a thousand white-hot coals. Alexandru struggled to keep his carnal desires under control. Taking her would be easy and her blood...

His mouth salivated, and he licked his lips.

Her blood would be sweet as honey. Satiating in ways he had only dreamed about for the last six years. One touch and her body would be his for the taking if he chose. Heat rushed to his loins. His body hardened and ignited with desire. He pushed the urges aside.

First, he needed to know why she was here. Why she had sought him out after six years.

Rana bit her bottom lip and twisted her hands. "I—I wanted to see you."

A lie.

Alexandru knew it the minute the words slipped from her lips. Rana didn't want to see him. She had made that perfectly clear years ago.

But, he'd take the bait.

For now.

"Why, cara?"

"I missed you." The words seemed to stick in her throat.

Another lie.

"It's been a long time, cara." He reached out and brushed a curl from her cheek.

A mistake.

Her skin heated beneath his touch.

Desire flared through him. He fought the urge to pull her in his arms and feed on her nectar. The pulse throbbing at the nape of her neck taunted him.

Just one sip.

One taste.

No! Not now! Not yet.

He jerked his hand back and steadied his breaths.

Later.

He would take her later. When she was ready to give in to him of her own free will. And she would give in. He would make sure of it.

"It has been a while. Too long." Her eyes shuttered, and she smiled.

The sudden change set off warning bells in his head.

Something about her actions didn't ring true.

She moved away from the bar, her body now only a few inches from his. The black spaghetti strap silk shirt she wore stretched taut across her breasts. He could almost see the creamy flesh beneath. Could almost taste her soft salty skin. Alexandru's mouth salivated again. She was still beautiful. And she still had the power to weaken him.

A dangerous combination.

Rana ran her fingers along his jaw. "I never got over you, my love."

Alexandru inhaled sharply as his libido kicked into overdrive. His resolve weakened. The scent of her blood and her citrus perfume teased his senses. He had gone to bed many a night in the last few

years imagining her perfume. Imagining her. He'd had many other women, but none stirred his soul like Rana.

Careful, Alex. Falling for her again is not an option.

It took every ounce of his strength not to touch her.

Rana leaned over, her hair tickling his cheek as she brushed her lips across his. "Did you miss me too? Tell me you missed me, Alexandru."

Alexandru caught her lip with his teeth. Warning sirens sounded in his mind. He treaded on dangerous ground. He hesitated then gave in to his urges and suckled. She tasted of peppermint and coffee. A delicious flavor he couldn't seem to get enough of.

He growled softly and pulled her into his lap. Her body soft and supple fell against his. Her nipples beaded beneath her shirt. His hands caressed her arms then entwined in her hair. He pulled her closer. She moaned then slipped her arms around his neck. His teeth slowly let go of her lip, and he nuzzled her neck. Her pulsating life point beckoned him. The scent of sweet, warm blood grew stronger. He trailed her skin with his lips, his fangs hovering just above the hollow of her neck.

He could hear her pulse beating.

Calling.

Alexandru stilled. He could take her right now. Right here in The Voodoo Den. His body hardened at the thought. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. Or his death.

Alexandru's teeth grazed her skin. One bite. That's all he needed. Just one. He wouldn't take more than he needed. He raised his head...

Rana pulled away and stepped back, her eyelids heavy as if she'd been drugged. "Do you still want me as much as I want you?"

The insincerity in her words washed over him like a bucket of ice. Alexandru sensed the deception. She was here for one reason and one reason only. To kill him.

Chapter 2

“What do you want, Rana?”

She blinked. Alexandru’s icy tone startled her.

Had she done something wrong? Granted, seduction didn’t come natural to her—especially her inept attempt to seduce a vampire—but surely she hadn’t been that bad.

Had she?

Should have read *The Art of Seduction for Dummies* first. Rana mentally ticked off the Dummies titles she had in her small bookstore, but she couldn’t recall even one with that title. No matter. She would never be a femme fatale. She would just have to do it her way and hope for the best.

“I want you,” Rana whispered.

Tiny fingers of doubt took hold of her. Who was she kidding? She could seduce a vampire about as well as she could fly a rocket. But, for Damien’s sake, she had to try. It was his only chance.

Doubt cracked the window of her mind open. She immediately snapped it shut before Alexandru could get a glimpse of the small boy occupying her thoughts. She didn’t want him to know why she was here.

A muscle throbbed in Alexandru’s jaw. “Go home, Rana.”

Rana bit the inside of her cheek to keep from stamping her foot like a spoiled child. He couldn’t send her away. He just couldn’t. He must have felt something.

Her teeth punctured the flesh inside her mouth.

She could taste the metallic flavor. She wrinkled her nose. How could anyone or anything hunger for such?

Alexandru inhaled sharply and his eyes brightened. He scented it too.

At least she had some effect on him. Even if it was just as a meal.

Rana swallowed a sigh. She had to keep trying. She didn't have any other choice.

She grabbed her purse from the bar and gripped it to her side, thankful that she had the good sense to bring a stake and holy water. "Can't we at least talk?"

Alexandru's eyes shuttered. "We have nothing to discuss. What we had together is over. Go home, Rana." He turned his back to her.

Rana gritted her teeth. He had always been stubborn. As a mortal man and now as a Master of the Night. Well, she could be stubborn too.

She lifted her chin a notch and reached for him. Her hands clasped thin air.

Damn, vampires!

Always appearing and disappearing. What did they think they were? Magicians?

Rana blew a breath between her lips and wove her way back through the crowded dance floor. She shaded her eyes from the flashing light show and searched the room for Alexandru.

He was gone.

Disgusted, Rana marched across the room, opened the door and stepped into the warm Louisiana night. The air, thick with the promise of an approaching storm, engulfed her with humidity. The street, void of pedestrians or city lights, reminded her she was alone. In vampire country. Not many humans ventured to the underbelly of the Crescent City. Not if they wanted to live long.

Fear gripped her spine. She shouldn't be here

either. Dhampirs were never welcome in this section of the town. She clutched her purse and mentally assured herself she was prepared.

Rana quickened her step. Thick wisps of mist wove around her as if trying to prevent her escape. She aimed her keyless entry toward the small sedan parked on the curb and pushed the button. Her lock clicked and something hissed behind her.

Rana froze.

Nico materialized between her and the car. His eyes glowed with the fires of a hundred suns, his lips pulled back revealing fangs.

Rana slowly unzipped her purse and reached in.

Nico's hand curled into a claw and shot into the air. Her purse fell to the ground spilling its contents at her feet. The bottle of holy water rolled off the sidewalk under her car. Her stake protruded from the black bag. Nico growled and kicked her handbag off the curb.

Rana's eyes darted down the street.

Nothing but blackness.

No one would even hear her if she screamed. She took a step back, ready to flee back into The Voodoo Den.

Nico grabbed her arm and jerked her toward him. "Going somewhere, pretty lady?"

"N-no..."

Suddenly, Nico's body flew across the sidewalk and collided with the brick wall behind them. The impact threw Rana against the side of her car. She stumbled and looked up to find Alexandru's eyes penetrating hers. The fierce look on his face turned her blood to ice. She had never seen him so angry.

"You all right?"

Rana nodded, unable to speak.

He pivoted with a snarl and strode menacingly toward Nico. He grabbed the other vampire by the throat and lifted him into the air. "This one is off-

limits. You understand?" The words spoken softly, but supernatural power radiated from Alexandru daring the younger vampire to disagree.

Nico nodded and paled to an almost translucent state. Rana blinked at the skeleton glowing just beneath his skin. Alexandru dropped him on the concrete with a thud. "Next time you will not live to regret it."

Nico scrambled to his feet and rushed back into the club. Alexandru glided back to Rana. "You shouldn't have come."

"I know." Rana bent down to retrieve her bag. She scooped up the spilled contents.

Alexandru lifted a brow and pointed to the wooden stake. "Is that a present for me?"

Rana's face heated like a furnace. Did he know? "O-of course not. I just brought it for protection. Just in case."

"Protection from whom?" Alexandru asked softly.

Rana kept her thoughts firmly clenched behind her mind's window. "Them." She pointed toward the club.

"I see."

Rana tightened her hand on the stake. Should she do it now when no one else was around?

She swallowed. No, killing him now would not do. Not after he had just saved her life. Even she couldn't stoop that low. Besides, one stab to his heart and she would be surrounded by the underworld. And they would protect one of their own at all costs. She would have to get him alone first.

She let go of the stake and it fell in her purse. She zipped her bag closed.

Killing him would have to wait.

"I should go."

"I'll see you safely out of the territory."

Rana grimaced. Since when were vampires

chivalrous? Weren't they all evil sub-humans like her father? "That won't be necessary. I'll be fine."

"With your wooden stake?" His words mocked her.

Rana lifted her chin. "Yes."

"And you think this will stop one of my kind?"

Rana knitted her brow. "Of course. You don't think it would?"

He shrugged. "Depends on the vampire."

"What do you mean?"

"If the vampire is very old or very powerful, then I'm afraid your little stake will prove to be only a nuisance. It will not kill an elder." Amusement flickered in his Caribbean eyes.

"I have other weapons." Rana shifted to her left foot. Did he think she was daft? Of course, she knew a wooden stake wouldn't kill all vampires. But it would weaken them. Enough for her to escape, at least.

Alexandru's eyes traveled the length of her and gleamed with appreciation. "I imagine you do."

Lightning slashed across the night sky followed by the continuous rumble of distant thunder. Within seconds, large drops of rain fell from the moonless sky.

Alexandru opened her car door. "Get in."

Rana hesitated. Though Alexandru wasn't an old vampire, he was a powerful one. He had been turned by an elder which meant he her former fiancé now possessed exceptional powers.

Powers that could cost Rana her life if she wasn't careful.

Cloud-to-ground lightning ribboned dangerously close to her car. Rana flinched as a clap of thunder boomed overhead. She'd rather take her chances with a vampire than a thunderstorm.

Rana slid into the driver's seat. The door closed behind her. She looked through the rain-coated

window. Alexandru had vanished.

Again.

“Stop doing that!” Rana slammed her fist into the steering wheel. Couldn’t vampires just stay put?

She inserted the key and turned the ignition. The car hummed to life. Rana carefully backed away from the curb and pulled onto the street.

He hasn’t changed. Still stubborn, arrogant, sexy as the devil and yet, darker and more mysterious. And more powerful. Standing on the sidewalk, he had practically blended into the night.

But, somewhere beneath the creature was Alexandru. Her Alexandru.

Tears stung her eyes. How could she possibly ever kill him?

Him.

Her Alexandru?

She eased down the street and pulled onto the main highway. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Cars whizzed by. Finally, back to civilization.

A feeling someone or something watched swept over her.

She adjusted her review mirror.

Nothing.

Get it together, Rana. Your imagination is working overtime. No one is following you.

Still an eerie presence filled her car, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that she wasn’t alone. She ignored it concentrated on driving home in the rain. An hour later, she pulled into her drive and hurried into her house.

Once inside, she dismissed the babysitter—a college girl who lived next door—watched her safely enter her own home then went to check on Damien.

She felt his forehead. The fever still ran high, and his color hadn’t improved. If anything, his skin seemed paler. His small chest barely rose and fell

with each labored breath. Rana's heart constricted.

"Don't worry, baby. I'll get him." She kissed his forehead and nearly cried out as his skin burned her lips. "Somehow I'll get him."

Memories grabbed her by the throat. Rana choked back a sob.

Why was this happening?

What happened to her happy little boy? The one who loved to play Snakes and Ladders with her until it was way past his bedtime. The one who insisted on licking the bowl every time she made a cake even though Rana always told him he'd get a bellyache.

Rana swallowed the lump in her throat. He looked so miserable lying in his bed, face pale and feverish, his tiny body drenched in sweat.

Damien moaned. The sound shredded Rana's heart. Where was her happy, cherubic baby? Was he still in there somewhere or had darkness swallowed him up, determined to stifle every ounce of life out of him?

Rana sucked in a sharp breath. She had to find a way to save her son. He meant everything to her.

Damien was her life.

She left her son's room and checked the door locks for the third time. Finally satisfied that they were safe, she flipped off the living room light. A flash of lightning lit up her front yard. Out of the corner of her eye through the sheer curtain covering her bay window she saw a shadowy figure floating inches above the ground.

Fingers of fear tightened her abdomen. Someone or something was watching her. And that something now knew where she lived.

Chapter 3

Alexandru strode through the French Quarter, the street alive with the usual Friday night glitz. Bar hoppers, prostitutes and tourists. Neon signs flashed their welcome on nearly every corner. Jazz music wafted from inside various bars along the street. The sweet scent of blood pulsed through the veins of the innocents that surrounded him. Laughter and excitement exuded from their very soul.

He thirsted for their vibrant lifeline, thirsted for their carefree lifestyle.

Two young women chatted in a nearby ally. Alexandru's mouth watered. It had been a long time since he had fed the old-fashioned way. A very long time indeed.

He entered the ally. The women stopped their conversation and stared in horror at the dark, looming figure blocking the entrance. One of them screamed and ran the other way. The other—a petite blonde with heavy makeup and a tight honey-colored mini-skirt—stood transfixed unable to move. With hypnotic eyes, Alexandru beckoned the woman to him.

She came.

With careful control, he planted submissive thoughts in her mind until she tilted her head and allowed him full access to her lifeline.

Alexandru lowered his head, fangs lengthening and punctured the pulse point throbbing at the nape of her neck. The woman sighed and sagged against him. He drank hungrily. Greedily. The sweet

coppery liquid warmed his throat. Still he thirsted. He took more and more, but nothing satiated his hunger. He stopped just short of taking the woman's life.

His blood turned to ice. He had only killed once before, and he had never forgiven himself for it. He would not ever do it again.

Alexandru hated killing. Now, he rarely took a victim—and for those he did take he never took more from them than they could handle—choosing, instead, to feed at The Voodoo Den and the occasional blood bank. But, seeing Rana last night had unleashed primal desires he no longer could control. He wanted her. Always had and always would.

Even if it meant his death.

Disgusted with himself, Alexandru lifted his head and set the woman down. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and with a sweep of his arm erased the women's memory. She would never know she had been his victim.

He turned on his heel and disappeared into the night leaving the stunned woman gasping for breath.

Only one thing would satisfy him now.

Rana.

Something watched her. Rana could feel its presence inside the small bookstore. There were no customers and she only had a few minutes left until closing time.

She shot a look toward the glass door.

Nothing.

The streetlight outside flickered on just as the moon rose above the cypress tree alongside her building.

She straightened the display center and returned two books to a shelf at the back of the

store. The hairs on the back of her neck stood as she rounded each corner.

Rana's heart slammed against her ribs. Her skin prickled as an unseen shadowy presence settled over her. Though her eyes couldn't prove it, her sixth sense picked up on every labored breath and every stealth movement.

She wasn't alone.

Rana quickly checked each aisle before returning to the front.

Five more minutes.

Rana stared at the clock on the wall willing the hands to move faster. She usually didn't worry about being alone in the store, but tonight fear played tricks on her mind. She couldn't wait to lock the door.

She opened the cash drawer and began placing the money into the bag. She punched a button on the register to run the daily report. The noisy hum grated on her nerves in the otherwise silent store. She glanced back at the clock.

Two minutes.

The register spit out the report, and she placed it in the bag alongside the money. She leaned down and opened the safe underneath the counter.

The bell on the front door jingled.

Rana's head shot up. She looked around the store.

Nothing.

A soft breeze brushed through her hair. Rana swallowed. The fans were already off, yet something had rustled her hair—something that felt like someone had just walked past her. Fear gripped her heart. She shoved the bag in the safe and shut it. She gave the combination lock a quick turn to secure it. Her nerves jittered.

Eight o'clock.

Finally.

Rana checked each aisle once more then hurried to the door and locked it. She turned around and let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Alexandru stood behind her dressed in his usual black shirt and snug fitting black jeans. Jeans that emphasized his sexy, muscled form.

Rana swallowed. Despite her shock of finding him in her store, her body wasn't immune to the tsunami of sex appeal that rolled off him in tidal waves.

"What are you doing here? You scared the daylights out of me."

"I wanted to see you."

"Why? You made it perfectly clear last night you never wanted to see me again," Rana muttered. Her nerves were already on edge and he wasn't helping matters standing in her shop exuding a supernatural aura.

"You caught me off guard. I've had time to..." His gaze slid over her. "Re-evaluate the circumstances."

Wonderful. He'd re-evaluated, and she didn't even have her slay kit with her. Since she lived an hour from the nocturnal playground, she didn't need it at work.

Until now.

"Have dinner with me tonight."

"Dinner? Do you—I mean can you..."

Alexandru laughed softly. "No. I don't eat, but I can sit with you. It'll give us time to get reacquainted. There's a great little Mexican place around the corner."

"Mexican?" Rana bit the inside of her cheek.

"It's your favorite isn't it?" The corner of his mouth lifted into a rueful smile.

"You remembered?"

"I remember everything about you. About us." His words dripped with soft seduction.

Rana blinked. Her heart fluttered. For a moment, he almost appeared to be the man she had loved. The man whom she had planned to spend the rest of her life with, until that one fateful night that changed them forever.

Why? Why? Why? She wanted to scream. Why did he have to be in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Her thoughts drifted to that night.

She couldn't remember exactly what had happened, but she did remember the man she had thought was a mugger. Instead, he had been Vladmir Gustovez, Master of New Orleans Nocturne Society. One of the oldest, most powerful vampires in the Crescent City. A man she had hated and hunted all her life. And that night he had turned Alexandru into one of his kind.

She should have killed Alexandru then and there to put him out of his misery, but she had loved him too much. Instead, she blacked out. When she came to, Vladmir and Alexandru were both gone. Rana never went back to find the man she loved. She left the city and started a new life for herself by opening the small bookstore. And guilt over leaving Alexandru to deal with his own horrors alone nearly ate her alive. But, her guilt did not outweigh how much she despised vampires. Even Alexandru.

"You're right. You should have killed me then."

Rana gasped. She had been careless, and he was now in her thoughts.

Again.

"I couldn't. I just couldn't."

"I've adapted." His smile held a hint of sadness. "Why didn't you come back to me? I searched for you for years."

Shame heated her cheeks. "I—I wasn't ready. You are..."

"A vampire. I'm well aware of that. Do you still

hunt? Is that why you've come back to me? To kill me?"

Rana's eyes widened. His blunt question startled her. "I—I... No, I came to find you. I missed you."

That much was true. She did miss him. Terribly. But, that didn't change what he was. Or what she had to do.

Alexandru stared at her. His eyes glittered in the moonlight streaming through the front glass. "We have the same goal, you know."

"I don't understand."

"You are a Dhampir. Your job is to rid the world of vamps. I may be an unwilling vampire, but I also try to keep the city safe. I won't tolerate unnecessary killing."

"You don't kill?"

Alexandru's eyes shuttered for a moment. "No."

"But, don't you feed?"

"Sometimes. Only when the urge is too great to overcome, but I never take too much. Not anymore."

"But..." She swallowed hard. "You have killed?"

Alexandru hissed sharply. Torment flickered in his eyes.

"Once." The word tore from him in a guttural growl.

"What happened?" Despite the horror of it all, Rana realized that somewhere underneath the creature lay the man she had loved and trusted.

"I was new. Had only just been turned for a few days. I didn't understand the hunger." Self-loathing laced his words. "Didn't know how to handle it. I waited as long as I could before feeding. When I finally took a victim, I took too much. The police found her the next morning nearly drained of blood. Her name was Angie Fields. She had two young children at home."

"Oh, Alexandru." Rana touched his arm.

He flinched. "Don't pity me. I'm a monster. I

destroyed someone's family. Thanks to me those children will never know their mother."

"It wasn't your fault. You didn't know," Rana whispered. "It was an accident."

It had never occurred to her until now that vampires might have emotions. She had always been taught that they were all horrible, abominable creatures that needed to be destroyed.

"It doesn't matter. It won't bring Angie back. It won't give those children their mother back."

"No, it won't," she agreed gently. "But, you could use your..." Rana hesitated. "Your gifts for good by making sure no one else gets hurt or worse."

"I'm trying to."

Rana straightened a book on the shelf. Did he mean it? Was he really using his dark gift for good? Was it even possible for a vampire to do that? Everything she had ever been told about them pointed to pure evil, yet Alexandru didn't seem evil.

But, she still had to kill him. She didn't have a choice.

Rana shuddered. Damien was her world, but how could she possibly kill Alexandru now? If only there were another way. If only...

"I don't want you going back to vampire territory again. It's too dangerous," Alexandru said. "I won't allow it."

Rana's head snapped up. *Won't allow it?*

Old feelings resurfaced. She couldn't count the times Alexandru's arrogance and commanding nature had collided with her fiercely independent one. A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. He had always won a few of their battles, but never the war. It had been the fuel that kept things interesting.

A wave of melancholy swamped her. It wasn't the first time she had wished things could be different. But fate had dealt them a losing hand.

And she knew when to fold.

“You can’t stop me, Alexandru. It’s what I do.”

His eyes glittered like frost on a winter morning.
“I can and I will.”

Rana exhaled. She knew better than to argue the point. Alexandru was still a stubborn, stubborn man—or rather an immortal. However, she had no intention of heeding his command. He just didn’t need to know it yet.

“Let’s check out that Mexican place.” Rana grabbed her purse from behind the counter and followed him to the door. With a wave of his hand, the door unlocked and opened.

Alexandru watched Rana dip a chip into the spicy salsa. He swallowed a grin. There was once a time when he could have given her run for her money on eating chips and salsa. Their love of rich, flavorful foods had been one of the many things they’d had in common.

They had met in college and fell in love almost instantly. Within a few months, he had learned everything there was to know about her, including the fact she was a Dhampir. He also knew how much she despised her father and how she had trained to hunt and kill the vampires running amuck on the streets of New Orleans. He had even helped her track them on several occasions. Now, he realized sadly, they had very little in common. Except their aversion to vampires. He wondered how much of that night she remembered. He hoped nothing, for if she ever knew what else had happened the night he had crossed over she couldn’t live with herself. And she would hate him even more for not protecting her.

“Where do you live now?” Rana scooped a large glob of salsa on her chip and popped it into her mouth.

The corner of Alexandru’s mouth lifted. “A

vampire never reveals his lair. It's not safe."

"Oh, of course. I just meant..."

"I could take you there. Discreetly of course."

Rana's eyes widened. "Said the spider to the fly," she muttered. "Maybe some other time."

Alexandru laughed softly. "You are safe with me, Rana. I could never hurt you."

Rana's cheeks reddened, and she dropped her eyes.

Ah, the sentiment is not returned.

Alexandru picked up on her hesitation. So, Rana did intend to destroy him. He just wished he knew why. Why him and why now?

"Has it been awful for you?" Rana lifted her eyes and looked at him. True empathy flickered in the stormy depths of her eyes. The first sincere emotion he detected in her since their reunion.

"As I said, I've adapted." He reached across the table and took her hands in his. "The worst part—the unbearable part—is not being with you."

Rana swallowed and pulled her hands away. "I just couldn't bear the thought of you being like...like..."

"Your father?"

Rana nodded miserably. "It was too much."

"And now?"

She dropped her eyes again. "I think I could try to get past it."

Another lie.

Alexandru inhaled sharply. She must really want him dead to go through all of this. The question was, why?

"It's getting late. I should get home." Rana reached for the check.

Alexandru covered her hand with his. "Allow me." He motioned for the waitress.

Alexandru paid the bill and walked Rana to her car.

The sultry night air smelled of grilled meats and barbeque wafting from the various restaurants along the street, blooming magnolias in the boulevard and a reeking odor that turned Alexandru's blood to ice.

Vladmir Gustovez.

Chapter 4

Alexandru stiffened beside her. The hot Louisiana night air instantly chilled.

"What's wrong?" She touched his arm. Spirals of fear danced along her nerves.

"It's not safe here. Come with me."

"Go with you?" Rana's heart plummeted. No. She couldn't. She wasn't prepared. She didn't have her holy water, her wooden stake, her revolver with silver bullets or well...anything.

Not that she was even sure she could even use them on him anymore.

Alexandru rested his hands on her shoulders and pierced her with a hypnotic stare. "I need you to trust me, Rana."

Trust him? A vampire?

It had to be a trick.

She shook her head. "I've got to get home." She did. Damien might need her. She checked the cell phone attached to her belt loop. No calls. The babysitter would call if Damien worsened. Still, she wanted to check on him herself. Rana took a step toward her car.

His hands tightened on her shoulders, and he pulled her against him. She felt his warm breath on her cheek. Could hear his heart beating wildly in his chest.

Or was it hers?

"Trust me, cara. I would never harm you. We have to go. Now."

"Where?" Rana gulped at his urgency.

Said the spider to the fly a little voice mocked in

her mind. Rana's knees quivered as her nerves skittered along her spine. Her brain screamed for her to run. Her heart told her to stay.

"My lair. It's the only safe place." With a sweep of his arms they began to rise. Higher and higher until her bookstore below became only a speck, and the street lights looked more like a runway for airplanes.

Rana gripped his arms and held on for dear life, though there was no need. Alexandru was in complete control. They floated with ease across the suburb toward the belly of New Orleans.

Rana squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to look down.

Alexandru slipped his arm around her and chuckled softly against her hair. "Relax, cara. I've got you." He lifted her chin with his thumb. "Look. You're missing a fabulous view of the city."

Rana clenched her eyelids and shook her head vehemently. "Heights and I? Not the best of friends."

"Pity. The view is beautiful from here." Alexandru's murmur rustled a curl at her temple. "Just beautiful."

His words warmed her skin like a blanket of sunlight and her body tingled. She had the feeling he wasn't just referring to the landscape.

Within minutes, she felt her body descend. She didn't open her eyes until her feet touched the soft earth underneath.

"Welcome to my lair."

Rana opened her eyes. A large aging plantation home loomed before them. Lush green ivy snaked up the walls. Two large white columns held up the balcony of the second story.

Rana noticed no lights. Anywhere. And all the windows were boarded.

Alexandru waved his arm. The front door sprang open. He took her hand and led her across the lawn

and up the wooden porch steps. The wood creaked beneath their feet like the moans of lost souls. Alexandru stepped through the doorway into the darkness.

Rana hesitated on the porch. Entering a vampire's lair of her own free will not the best idea. Especially without her kit.

"Come." He swept his hand in the air. Two sets of candelabras—eight candlesticks each—resting on the mantel immediately lit the room.

Rana peered inside. The room flickered in the candlelight. A sofa, a coffee table and a fireplace adorned the room. There were no decorations of any kind on the walls. No bric-a-brac on the table or upon any shelf. Nothing. The room offered no down home appeal. No hospitality. Just a cold drafty space.

"What do you think?"

"It could use a women's touch," she muttered, crossing the hardwood floor to the sofa. Or at least, a human one.

Alexandru's laugh echoed off the walls as he sat down beside her. "Are you applying for the position?"

"Of course not." Heat scorched her cheeks. Images of them picking out fine china and linens popped into her mind.

Alexandru grinned. The flickering candlelight softened his hard features. "Eggshell white with mauve roses."

Damn!

He did it again. Got inside her head.

Nostalgia tumbled over her. Eggshell white with mauve roses was the pattern they had picked out before...

"Stop doing that!" Rana gritted her teeth. She must stay focused. Going down memory lane wouldn't help her or Damien. Alexandru was a vampire. An abomination. Just like her father. And

it would do her well to remember it. This—this thing was not her fiancé.

Alexandru was dead.

“What?” His took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. “This?”

Rana’s pulse quickened.

“Or this?” He rained soft deliberate kisses up her arm. Tingles of electricity shot through her veins.

Stop!

He’s a vampire. A...

Her mind fuzzed over. She couldn’t think. Couldn’t breathe.

“Or maybe this?” Alexandru leaned over and slanted his mouth over hers. He parted her lips with his tongue and tenderly explored hers.

He’s a vampire. An abomination! A...

Damn!

Rana sighed inwardly and her brain turned to mush. She had no idea what it was she wanted him to stop doing anymore, but it certainly wasn’t this.

His kiss deepened, demanding nothing, yet promising everything.

Rana moaned with pleasure. Though he demanded nothing, she soon realized she was willing to give him everything. Her body ignited beneath his touch. His hands, large and gentle, caressed her arms and her back drawing her closer until she nearly exploded with desire.

“Is this what I need to stop?” he whispered against her lips.

She knew what he asked. Knew what he was. Knew he wouldn’t take her without her consent. And yet, God help her, she consented.

“N—no. Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

Alexandru’s eyes darkened with passion; a soft glow haloed around them. He growled and gently pushed her back on the couch. He lifted the hem of

her T-shirt and pulled it over her head. His eyes strayed to her two mounds secured in the white lace bra. With a quick deft movement, her bra disappeared. He lowered his head and buried his face in the valley between her creamy, taut breasts. His lips climbed each peak before settling on a nipple. He suckled feverishly, never pricking her skin with his teeth. Quivers of pleasure shot through her. Rana arched her back and moaned. Her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer.

“Cara, I have missed you.” Alexandru lifted his head, fangs shimmering in the candlelight and tugged on her jeans. He rolled off her and as if by magic, her clothes and his vanished.

She watched unashamed as he stood au natural in the candlelight, pure male with an aura of supernatural power. His desire for her evident in his pulsating manhood.

His body, hard and taut, settled over hers. She welcomed him with warmth and moisture as he glided into her effortlessly. She quivered as he filled her. Electricity charged the air around them. Her eyes locked with his. Rana gasped inwardly. No longer was Alexandru just a creature of the night. He was *her* Alexandru. The man she loved. Rana tightened around him basking in the throbbing sensation inside her. She pulled him closer, her fingernails scraping his back. He groaned and began the mating dance. With each rhythmical thrust, she matched his passion as he unleashed his primal urges bringing them both to the edge of insanity.

Alexandru lay spent beside Rana on the couch, his arm slung casually around her shoulders while her head rested against his chest. Burnished-gold hair fanned out around her. He sighed inwardly, his hunger finally quenched.

For now.

He eyed the woman lying in his arms and his body hardened. Heat surged through him like an electrical current. He wouldn't be satiated for long.

Guilt drop-kicked him in the stomach.

Rana deserved better than this. Better than him. How could he have taken her so selfishly? Knowing he didn't deserve her.

His jaw tightened. She would hate him even more if she ever realized that he didn't...

Rana shifted, leaned over and reached for her pile of clothes on the floor.

"Don't." He trailed his finger down her back. "Not yet." He wasn't ready for her to go. He knew she would never be back.

"Alexandru, I must get home. It's getting late."

"Not yet."

"Why did you bring me here tonight?"

Alexandru's hand stilled on her back. Did she already regret their lovemaking? Or did she remember?

His stomach clenched.

"To protect you."

"From what?" Rana arched a brow suspiciously.

Alexandru paused. Then. "From another vampire."

"I don't follow."

"When we were on the sidewalk outside your bookstore I sensed another presence."

"Who?" Rana sat up and slid into the thin wisp of her white lace thong. She pulled on her jeans, zipped them up and snapped them.

"It's not important."

Rana jerked her head around and glared at him. "It was important enough to whisk me off to your..." She looked around the room and wrinkled her nose. "Your lair. Now, tell me who, Alexandru."

He blew a long breath between his lips and sat up beside her. "Vladmir Gustovez."

Rana's hand flew to her throat. "No!"

"He's been following you. Watching you. I picked up his scent when we were at your car tonight and when..."

"When what?" Rana yanked her shirt over her head, pulled it down and narrowed her eyes.

"When I escorted you home."

"Escorted me home?" She knitted her brow, then as if realizing what he meant she tightened her chin. "It was you. In my car. Outside my window."

Alexandru winced at the accusation. "Yes. I had to make sure you arrived home safely."

Rana's shoulders deflated. "What does Vladmir want this time?"

A long pause.

Then.

"You."

"H-how do you know that?"

"I just know. Let's leave it at that." Alexandru dressed then sat back down on the couch.

"He must have seen me in The Voodoo Den." She lifted her chin. "Well, I'm not available."

"No. You're not." It sounded more like a command rather than an agreement.

Rana's eyes widened. "Please take me home. I can take care of myself."

Alexandru swallowed a grin. Always Miss Independent. He'd take her home, but he'd also keep an eye on her. Just in case.

He nodded and reached for her hand.

A worried look passed over her. "Uh—we—uh, didn't use anything."

A muscle throbbed in his chin. "What do you mean?"

Rana's face reddened. "When we—uh—made love. We didn't use protection."

Alexandru inhaled sharply. "You're worried you might get pregnant?"

She nodded. Her hand moistened in his. He could feel her nervousness.

“You wouldn’t want my child?”

Rana swallowed hard. “I-I don’t think it would be a good idea right now.”

“I see.”

“Surely, you understand. Considering—”

Alexandru held up a hand. “Don’t worry. You won’t be inconvenienced with an unwanted child. I cannot have children.”

Rana’s brows drew together. “What do you mean?”

“I’m sterile. Have been since I contracted the mumps as a teenager. I thought you knew.”

Rana paled. Her eyes grew wide and she let out a strangled cry. The sound jackknifed through Alexandru like a heart ripped from a chest.

Alexandru caught her as she swayed. “What’s wrong? I would think you would be pleased, since the idea of having my baby repulses you.”

Rana blinked. Horror flittered across her face. “That means you can’t be...” She turned ashen. “Omigod! You’re not Damien’s father.”

Chapter 5

Rana bolted upright and squinted into the darkness. *Where am I?*

She patted the air beside her until her hands connected with...a satin comforter?

She strained until her eyes adjusted to the dark. A sliver of moonlight streamed through the window. She could just make out her bookshelf against the wall.

Her bedroom?

I'm in my bedroom? How?

Something rustled in the corner.

Rana's heart slammed against her chest, and she gripped the covers.

I'm not alone!

Alexandru stepped out the shadows into the moonlight.

Rana swallowed. "Why are you here?"

"You're awake."

"How did I get here?"

"I brought you home after you fainted. You've been out for several hours now."

"You've been here the whole time?"

Alexandru nodded.

Rana fell back against the headboard as the events of the night came back to her. The passion they'd shared. Pleasure beyond her imagination. Hands that caressed her until she...

Then the realization that Alexandru wasn't Damien's father punched her in the stomach. She inhaled sharply. How could that be? It wasn't possible. Alexandru was the only man she'd ever

been with.

Damien!

Rana jackknifed upright again and swung her feet to the floor. She had to see her son. Make sure he was all right.

"He's fine for now." Alexandru crossed the room and sat down beside her. The bedsprings creaked under his weight.

Rana didn't bother to block him from her mind this time. He already knew about Damien now, so what was the point?

"But his fever?"

"It's been the same all night. No better. No worse. He's resting now. You don't want to wake him."

Rana glanced at the bedside clock. After three in the morning. No, she didn't want to wake him, but she needed to see for herself that he was all right.

Alexandru gently laid his hands over her eyes. Immediately, a vision of Damien's small body asleep in his bed popped in her mind.

"See? He's fine. For now."

"How did you..."

"A perk of the afterlife." His words held a note of dryness. Then. "Why didn't you tell me about him?"

Rana's shoulders deflated. "I thought he was your son. When Vladmir turned you, I didn't even know I was pregnant. Two months later when I realized I was it was too late. You were already a... a..."

Alexandru's lips curved into a rueful smile. His fangs glinted in the moonlit room. "A vampire."

Rana nodded miserably.

"So you never planned to tell me about Damien. Even though you thought he was my son." The words were clipped and raw with tightly controlled emotion.

Rana shook her head. "I didn't want him to grow

up like I did. Knowing his father was an...an abomination," she whispered dropping her head.

"Is that what I am? An abomination?"

Rana shuddered. "No—yes. I don't know anymore." She buried her face in her hands. Tears burned her eyes. "I thought you were, but now..."

"Now...?"

She jumped to her feet and paced the room. "I don't know how I feel or what I think anymore. I loved you so much, Alexandru. It nearly killed me when Vladmir turned you. When I saw you lying there, morphing into a creature of the night, all I could see was my father and what he had done to my mother. She died a broken, frightened woman." She whirled around and gritted her teeth. "He did that to her. I hate him. Everything about him."

"I'm not your father, Rana."

"But you're just like him. You can't tell me you're not. Anyone who knows what you are shrinks away in fear."

A muscle throbbed in his chin. He didn't deny it.

Had Damien's babysitter, Jill, been suspicious when Alexandru brought her home tonight, or had he charmed her into accepting his presence in her home?

"Jill never flinched. She took the money I gave her for babysitting and headed home. Anything she saw or thought she saw tonight has been erased from her memory."

Rana nodded, then suddenly stopped pacing and stared at him as it suddenly hit her. Why wasn't he asking who Damien's father was? Why didn't he accuse her of cheating on him?

Her mouth went dry and she clasped her hands in front of her. "You know, don't you? You know who Damien's father is."

Alexandru didn't pretend to not know what she was talking about. He reached for her. "Rana."

Hysteria rose in her throat. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Rana. Don't"

"Tell me!" Rana twisted her hands. A flood emotions raced through her. Fear. Disgust. Hatred. Somewhere in the back of her mind shadows emerged and dark, deep-seated memories struggled to surface. She just couldn't wrap her mind around their meaning.

"Please understand, Rana. I never wanted you to remember." Self-loathing thickened his voice. Moonlight streamed though her bedroom window and reflected off his eyes. They brightened to a reddish-orange glow. "I didn't know about Damien." Alexandru's shoulders shook. "I didn't know."

"Tell me!" Rana's stomach recoiled and fear skittered along her spine.

"Forgive me, cara." The misery in his voice stabbed Rana in the heart. Then with one quick deft movement, Alexandru waved his hand in front of her. "Forgive me."

A blinding pain shot through Rana's temple. She grabbed her head and fell to the carpet. Memories rushed at her from every corner of her mind. Images flashed before her. Terrifying images. She blinked and tried to sort them all. Then one suppressed memory reared its ugly head...

Alexandru's hand felt warm and safe in hers as they strolled along the carefully landscaped park just outside the French Quarter. The September night breeze brushed against her sleeveless arms like soft feathers. Alexandru pulled her to a nearby bench nestled behind a hedge in a secluded area of the park.

"Did you enjoy the show?" A smile touched his lips.

"Of course. I always love the theatre." Rana grinned up at him. "You know that."

“You love anything that involves the arts.”

“Guilty.” She laughed. Then she touched his cheek. “I love you more.”

Alexandru slipped his arm around her. “Not as much as I love you. Let’s do it tonight. I can’t wait three more months to make you my wife.”

Rana swatted him on the arm. “Are you trying to deny me my dream wedding?”

“I could never deny you anything, my darling.” His eyes grew serious as he lowered his head. “Ever.”

His lips felt warm against hers, his kiss soft as a butterfly’s wing. Rana’s heart fluttered. She had to be the luckiest woman in the world. Life couldn’t be any more perfect.

A chill passed between them.

Alexandru lifted his head, and Rana’s heart stilled.

The man stood directly in front of them.

Watching.

His eyes resembled two black coals, his face hard and pale.

Heart in throat, Rana whispered, “Give him your wallet.”

Alexandru reached behind him and pulled his wallet out of his jeans. He held up his hand flashing the leather wallet. “Look, man. We don’t want any trouble. Take it. Take all of it.”

The man hissed, then his hand curled into a claw, and he knocked the wallet to the ground.

Rana’s extraordinary sense scented it then. Bad blood. Vampire blood. This man was no mugger. She inched her hand toward her purse, careful not to draw attention to her movements. If she could just get the wooden stake...

The vampire snarled, his lips stretching across his teeth. His reared back his head, and Rana saw the fangs. Her hand slid inside her handbag, and she

grabbed the stake.

The vampire jerked Alexandru to his feet and threw him into the bushes as if he were weightless.

"No!" Rana lunged for Alexandru. The stake slipped from her grasp and fell to the ground. The vampire pierced her with a hypnotic stare, his eyes glowing like a thousand suns. She fought him with all her will, but he was too strong for her. Her body froze in place. "Who are you?" she whispered unable to move.

"Vladmir Gustovez."

Rana drew a sharp breath. Vladmir Gustovez. Master of New Orleans Nocturne Society. Leader of her father's sector, and the deadliest of creatures from the other realm. She had hunted for this vampire for years, and she hated him.

Vladmir grinned knowingly. "You may despise my kind, my lovely, but you are a part of us. Your father's blood runs through your veins."

"I am nothing like your kind. Vampires are detestable creatures worthy only of death," Rana bit out. "I have no father. I never have. I will send you back to the pit of darkness where you belong. Where I sent my father." Rana's heart pounded in her chest. Not many knew she was the one who had hunted and killed her own father, but Vladmir did. And he was hell-bent on revenge. Which was why she had to destroy him.

Vladmir laughed, an evil sound that echoed throughout the park. "You will never be strong enough to destroy me, my lovely. Never. And now your lover will join me in the Underworld."

"No!" Rana screamed as Vladmir turned back to Alexandru. He leapt toward the bushes, and Rana saw his fangs glittering in the moonlight as he lowered his head. She heard Alexandru's strangled cry.

Then.

Nothing.

Her feet refused to move. Her body refused to comply with her racing mind. The vampire's hold on her was strong. She tried to move again. She had to get to Alexandru. She had to save him. Her body never responded to her silent pleas.

Tears stung her eyes as Vladmir lifted his head, blood dripping down his chin. His lips curled into a sadistic grin. She looked past the creature and her heart plummeted. Alexandru lay on the ground, his body pale and lifeless. Rana blinked back the tears. Suddenly, Alexandru howled and his body convulsed. Seconds later, he crossed over to the other realm, and Rana's heart broke. She had just lost her fiancé forever. He was one of them now, a repulsive predator of the night.

Vladmir materialized before her. "And now for you, my lovely." He reached for her. Her mind screamed for her body to move. To run. But she couldn't. He came to her. Just like her father had done to her mother. And before she could stop him, they were on the ground. She could feel rocks pressing into her back as he lowered himself on top of her. Her stomach retched, and she turned her face away as tears slid down her cheeks. She could taste the salt as the tears trickled onto her lips. She bit the inside of her mouth to keep from slipping into blackness.

He took her then and made her his lover. Against her will.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard Alexandru's voice, weak and laced with pain. "Forget, cara. Forget."

Then she slipped into darkness.

Rana lifted her head. The pain subsided, and she gripped the carpet beneath her fingers. "You knew. All this time you knew."

Alexandru stood and hunched down beside her.

He took her hand. "I never wanted you to remember. Never. That's why I tried to erase your memories of that night. As a newly turned vampire, I wasn't even sure I could do it, but I had to try. For your sake."

Rana jerked her hand away. It was her fault that Alexandru had been turned. If Vladmir hadn't been seeking revenge for her father's death, then Alexandru wouldn't have been his victim. She was a Dhampir. It was her job to destroy vampires, and she had failed miserably. Alexandru had paid the price for her ineptness.

"Go." Guilt squeezed her heart. She had destroyed the one man she had loved. Had turned him into something she hated.

Alexandru reached for her again. "Rana, I..."

"Go!" Rana jumped to her feet. "I want you to leave. You're all the same." She shuddered. "Please, just go."

Alexandru stiffened and rose to his feet. His eyes glittered with remorse. "Forgive me, cara."

Then he was gone.

Chapter 6

The sun would rise soon, Alexandru realized, materializing inside his lair. According to the position of the moon, it would be in less than an hour.

Not enough time to find Vladmir. Nor enough time to save the boy.

He descended the concrete stairs to the basement.

Tonight.

He would obliterate the vampire who destroyed his life tonight.

Or die trying.

Alexandru shut the steel door behind him and clicked each lock into place. He didn't sleep in a coffin like the old horror flicks portrayed. That was entirely too cliché for him. Instead, he slept in bed like everyone else. A nice soft bed with red satin sheets and a black velvet comforter. The only difference in him and the rest of the world was that his bed was locked in a steel and concrete mausoleum with no windows, no light other than the lone candelabra on his nightstand and no other entrances or exits. His safety was secured only by three dead bolts and the undisclosed location of his lair.

He undressed and slid into bed to while away the sunlight hours in the trance-like state he called sleep, but his thoughts turned to Rana.

Sadness swept over him.

He didn't blame her for hating him. He hated himself. He should have protected her from Vladmir.

He should have done something, anything to keep the monster from touching her.

Rage soared through his body like a flash of lightning. Rana would never love him again, and he may not be able to change the past, but he would make damn sure Vladmir never hurt her again. No matter what.

The shock wore off and the anger—no, pure unadulterated hate—set in. Oh, she'd hated him before, but now, knowing his poison flowed through her son's veins, her hatred escalated to a whole other level. A level without fear.

Rana knelt beside by Damien's bed. "Baby, mommy is going away for a few days. I promise it won't be too long." She kissed his soft cheek. He still felt warm. Too warm. His eyes remained shut, and he whined in his sleep. Rana tucked his white stuffed penguin under his arm. Damien never went anywhere without his favorite animal. "This time, when I get back, I promise you will be better." She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him to her. "This time you will get well."

Rana gave him another quick kiss then gently closed his bedroom door behind her. Thankfully, it was summertime and Jill was able to stay with him overnight for a couple of days. She gave the college student instructions on what to do if his condition worsened and made sure she had all the emergency numbers. And of course, Jill's parents would be right next door. Just in case.

Finally satisfied that Damien was as safe as he could possibly be under the circumstances, Rana grabbed her backpack and set out to destroy Vladmir Gustovez. And this time, she wouldn't come back until she sent him straight back to the pits of hell where he belonged.

Rana ignored the sinister mist that snaked around the entrance to The Voodoo Den. She ignored the continuous blink of the neon sign on top of the building warning her away. She ignored everything except her determination to find the monster who had destroyed her life. Backpack slung over her shoulder and a pistol tucked discreetly in the waist of her jeans, she jerked open the door and stepped inside.

The steady beat of African drums pulsed through the room. Rana shielded her eyes from the strobe lights and searched the dance floor until she found what she was looking for.

Nico.

Rana pushed past bouncing bodies until she reached him. She pulled the pistol from her waist and shoved the barrel into Nico's chest careful not to be seen.

"Where's Vladmir Gustovez?"

Nico's eyes widened, then glowed a fiery red. "Pretty lady."

Rana pressed the gun harder. "You can do this the easy way or the hard way. But I'm not leaving here until you tell me where to find Vladmir."

Nico looked down at the gun. Spinning bodies jostled her arm, but Rana kept her hand steady.

"You're going to shoot me? Here?" He arched a blond brow toward the mass of underworld creatures mixed with a handful of humans who partied around them.

"This gun has silver bullets and a silencer. You'll be dead before anyone realizes what hit you. And no one will hear it in here. Now..." She flicked off the safety. "Where is he?"

"You're one crazy-ass lady. No wonder Alexandru said you were off limits." Nico's lips curled into a grin.

Rana's heart fluttered at the mention of

Alexandru's name. She forced herself to focus. "Vladmir's lair. Where is it?"

Nico stared at the gun for a moment then as if he realized she meant every word, he finally choked, "In the French Quarter near the park. There's an abandoned house with a wine cellar outside. You'll find him in the cellar."

Rana stared him straight in the eye. "Don't ever cross my path again or I'll kill you." She turned and pushed her way back toward the front door.

Fifteen minutes later, she found the abandoned house. She parked her car one block east and slid out. Staying in the shadows, she made her way to the yard then trekked through tall weeds and broken window panes until she reached the cellar. Moonlight filtered through the Spanish moss dangling like rattlesnakes in the cypress trees beside the house. The fishy odor of the bayou's black, murky waters wafted on the sultry air from behind the house. Birds hooted their warning deep in the heart of the bayou. Their shrills begged her to leave.

Rana didn't heed them.

Adrenaline pumped through her veins and a tingle of fear raced down her spine. She pushed it aside, her determination outweighing any thoughts of terror.

"I'm here, Vladmir!" Rana shouted into the darkness. "I need to talk to you!"

"Careful or you'll wake the dead."

Rana started at the deep sardonic voice behind her. She spun around so fast she nearly collided with a tall dark form.

Alexandru stood beside her dressed in a black silk shirt, black jeans and loafers. His jaw hardened with controlled anger.

"That's the idea," Rana muttered, calming her nerves. Vampires! Always materializing out of thin air. It was enough to frighten even the bravest of

souls.

“What exactly do you think your doing?” A muscle twitched in his chin.

“Luring Vladimir to his death.” She narrowed her eyes and placed a hand on her hip. “What are you doing here?”

“The same.”

Rana drew her brows together. He was here to kill Vladimir too?

“I told you I didn’t want you coming back to vampire territory. It’s far too dangerous.”

“I didn’t have a choice. I have to save my son’s life. I have to destroy Vladimir.”

“Do you have a plan?” Edginess tinged his words.

“Yes.”

“Care to share it?”

Rana shrugged. “I thought I’d get his attention, catch him off guard and shoot him in the heart with the silver bullets.” She held up her gun for his inspection. “Then I’m going to stake him and douse him with holy water. Of course, I’ll have to torch him too.” She didn’t bother to tell him exactly how she planned to catch him off guard. No need to anger Alexandru further.

“And if you didn’t catch him off guard? What did you plan to do next? Become his dinner?” Anger glittered in his eyes.

“No.” She lifted her chin a notch and met his gaze. “This time, failing is not an option.”

A noise in the cellar caught their attention. Alexandru stiffened. Rana held her breath.

Vladimir had awakened.

Despite her courage, fear gripped her heart. What if Alexandru was right? What if she couldn’t do it this time, either?

“This is too dangerous,” Alexandru hissed pulling her deeper into the shadows behind one of

the cypress trees.

"I have an idea," Rana whispered back, knowing full well he wouldn't go for it, but that he would have to. "When is a vampire the weakest?"

Alexandru recoiled as if he'd been slapped. "No!"

Rana touched his arm. A current of warmth surged through her. She didn't have time to wonder why her body did a happy dance every time she touched him. Not when she was supposed to be repulsed by what he is. "I have to. It's the only way."

His eyes instantly drew to the hollow of her throat. "No! I can't allow it. You don't know what you're suggesting."

"I'm going to do it with or without your help, Alexandru." Her mouth tightened. "It's the only way to save Damien." Her voice caught, and she swallowed hard. "He's slipping away from me. I don't know how much longer he can hang on."

A myriad of emotions flashed across Alexandru's face. His pained expression told her he knew she was right. Rana's heart stilled. Alexandru was nothing like her father. How could she have ever thought he was? Her father had been a soulless creature. Pure evil. Alexandru may be tall, dark and powerful, but he was also full of goodness. Even in his afterlife, he still had a good heart. How could she have been so stupid?

The cellar door opened and Vladmir, dressed in a long dark trench coat, stepped into the night.

Rana sought Alexandru's eyes. The worry, anger and jealousy she saw in them punched her in the gut. Did he still care for her? "I'll be all right. Are you with me or not?"

Alexandru nodded then reached for her. He pulled her into his arms and lowered his head. His lips brushed hers then he crushed her mouth against his.

Rana's body heated like a furnace. She sighed

inwardly and responded with the same passion. She still loved this immortal man. She had never stopped loving him. He deepened the kiss for a moment then thrust her from him. "Go, cara," he whispered hoarsely. "Save your son."

Rana nodded, tossed him the gun and the stake then stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight.

Alexandru fisted his hand around the pistol. He shouldn't let her do it. Allowing Vladimir anywhere near Rana filled him with a river of rage. He didn't want that monster looking at her much less touching her. And certainly not...

He closed his eyes. Jealousy pierced his heart. The thought of Vladimir feeding from her sweet nectar repulsed him. It also renewed his desire to destroy him.

From his position behind the tree, he could see Rana walking toward Vladimir. His chin tightened.

"Rana, my lovely, we meet again." Vladimir's lips spread over his fangs. "How's my son?"

Rana stopped in midstep.

Alexandru held his breath waiting for her response. *Don't let him get to you, Rana. Keep your cool.*

Anger boiled his blood at Vladimir's brazen remark. Alexandru wanted to send Rana telepathic encouragement, but was afraid Vladimir would intercede. It took every ounce of his strength to veil his presence from Vladimir. The veil wouldn't protect him for long. As a fledgling, he knew the elder vampire would be able to sense him. And that would be deadly. For them both.

"Not well," Rana resumed her step. "I thought you should know. He's very sick."

Vladimir kept his eyes on her. "That so?"

"I thought you might be able to help."

To Alexandru's surprise, Rana kept her voice

steady and her emotions at bay.

"You want my help?"

"Yes."

"And what shall I get in return?"

Alexandru gritted his teeth. *Your demise!*

"What do you want?" He heard Rana ask softly without emotion.

Vladmir's grin widened. "Your blood flowing through my veins."

"All right."

"All right?" Vladmir's eyebrows shot up.

"My son is sick, Vladmir. I'll do whatever it takes to save him."

"I see." He licked his lip. "So you'd be willing to give yourself to me in exchange for helping our son?"

"Yes." Rana stood in front of him now, tilting her head to expose her neck. Pale skin glistened in the moonlight like a star in the night sky. Alexandru could see her knees shaking, but she held her own. His Rana had always been a strong woman. It was one of the qualities he admired in her.

Alexandru waited in the shadows. Ready to go in for the kill.

"This is a pleasure, my lovely." Vladmir's eyes glittered. "A pleasure indeed." He lowered his head, fangs bared and punctured her neck. She flinched, but didn't move away.

Alexandru recoiled as if shot. It was too painful to watch.

He sniffed. The scent of her blood filled the air. Alexandru salivated. He could almost taste her warm nectar, coppery and sweet, sliding down his throat, heating his veins. Alexandru sucked in a deep breath. He hated that Vladmir took what should rightfully be his. Rana was his woman. She always had been and always would be. And after today no man, mortal or immortal, would ever touch her again. He would make damn sure of it.

Somehow. Someway. He would convince her that he was nothing like her father.

Alexandru's nerves stood on end. He wanted to stop it.

Not yet. Wait for the swoon. That orgasmic moment when her blood rushes through his veins, and he is disoriented. The moment he is the weakest.

Predatory instincts kicked in. Alexandru paced like a caged animal in the shadows behind the tree. He forced himself to remain in control.

Not time.,

Not yet.

He waited with the patience of a lion on the prowl. Waited for the exact moment Vladimir had to be taken by surprise.

Wait.

Wait.

Now!

Alexandru materialized beside them. With the cry of a warrior he plunged the wooden stake through Vladimir's back straight through to his heart.

Stunned, the elder vampire reeled his head back and screamed a horrible sound that echoed through the bowels of the French Quarter. Rana jerked away and ran to the side.

Vladimir's face contorted with rage. He lunged for Alexandru. Both vampires rose, claws and fangs bared, and fought in midair. Snarls and hisses pierced the night. Power against power. Good against evil.

Alexandru reached for the pistol. He aimed it toward Vladimir's chest. The elder vampire howled again and knocked it out of his hand. The gun fell to the ground below them.

Rana scrambled for the pistol.

Alexandru circled his rival in the air then positioned himself behind Vladimir. His gaze caught

Rana's.

Shoot!

Now!

Rana raised the pistol and aimed it directly toward Vladimir. Her startled eyes held Alexandru's gaze. Questioning.

Alexandru nodded.

Now!

The elder vampire howled again then dissipated into thin air. He reappeared behind Alexandru, his eyes flaming like twin fireballs. He lunged toward his fledgling claws extended and fangs glinting in the moonlight.

Alexandru hissed and dodged the elder vampire's attack.

Rana followed the battle with the gun, her finger on the hair trigger.

Alexandru's eyes bored into Rana.

Now!

Alexandru disappeared.

With shaking hands, Rana aimed and fired.

Vladimir fell to the ground in a heap.

Rana fired again and again until she emptied the gun. She ran to her backpack—still on the ground behind the cypress tree—and grabbed the bottle of holy water. She returned and poured it over the writhing vampire.

Vladimir's body sizzled then burst into flames. The flesh melted away, leaving a pile of bones behind. Within minutes, the bones disintegrated, and Vladimir's body vanished into thin air.

It was over.

Alexandru reappeared beside Rana as she finished off the bastard. The battle had weakened him and he needed to feed. Needed to renew his strength.

His legs shook, and he crumpled to the ground.

"Alexandru!" Rana rushed to his side and knelt

down. "What's wrong? Did I hit you too?"

Alexandru moaned.

Blood.

He needed blood.

Now!

Rana cradled his head in her lap. "Talk to me. What's wrong?" She patted his body as if checking for injuries.

Sharp pain pierced as his veins collapsed, weakening him more. His body convulsed jerking left and right.

"Alexandru!" Rana held him steady.

He heard the terror in her voice. Was she really worried about him? Or would she just finish him off?

Alexandru's eyes rolled and his lids closed. He was slipping.

Fast!

Rana's hands gripped the sides of his face. She shook him. Hard. "Stay with me, darling. Tell me what to do."

Alexandru's eyelids fluttered. He needed her, but he couldn't ask her to do the unthinkable. He loved her too much for that. His body stilled and his head rolled to the side.

He felt Rana jump to her feet. Somewhere in the darkness, he heard her running across the yard. Sadness engulfed him.

She had left him.

Then... Something shattered.

Glass?

Did she hurt herself?

He struggled to open his eyes, but his body remained in a catatonic state. He couldn't move.

Seconds later, she returned.

"Hold on, Alexandru. Don't leave me." Rana pressed her wrist against his lips.

The first drop of blood trickled into his mouth and Alexandru's body burned with need. His veins

reacted like a druggie in withdrawal.

"Take what you need, darling." Rana whispered. "I trust you."

She trusted him?

Alexandru struggled to rise, but his body refused to cooperate.

The steady stream of blood filling his mouth tasted sweeter than any he'd ever had. A metallic substance that he needed more than life itself.

He swallowed and suckled her wrist. A rush of warmth surged through his veins bringing him pleasure beyond description. He moaned softly and fed until his body regained strength.

Then he opened his eyes.

His gaze locked with Rana's. For the first time he didn't see repulsion in their stormy depths. Instead, her eyes shimmered with the same love he had seen in them before he had been turned.

His heart quickened. Did she... Could she?

"Welcome back." A curve touched her lips, and she pulled her wrist back. "I thought I had lost you."

"Would you have cared?"

"Yes." Rana's smile widened. "Yes, I would have."

"Why?" He held up her red-stained wrist. "Why did you do it?"

"I didn't want to lose you again, Alexandru. I love you."

Hope flared through him. Did she mean it? Or would she hate him again in the morning?

"I'm still a vampire." Alexandru watched her face carefully for any sign of disgust. To his relief, he found none. "That's never going to change."

"I know." Rana nodded. "I've hated my father so long, that I've let it cloud my judgment." She touched his cheek and her eyes sparkled in the moonlight. "You are nothing like him. You never have been. I'm so sorry, Alexandru. I never meant to

hurt you. I really do want to be with you. I love you.”

Alexandru’s heart slammed against his chest. Dare he trust her this time?

“What are you saying, Rana?”

“I still want to marry you. Are you going to deny me my dream wedding?”

Alexandru grinned. “I could never deny you anything.”

He stood and pulled her to her feet. Moonbeams danced off her hair. “I love you, cara. More than anything. But, how can this work? I’ll live forever and you won’t. I can’t bear to lose you again.” He shuddered at the thought.

An impish smile touched her lips. “I have an idea.”

“Not again,” Alexandru growled softly. “I didn’t care for your last one.”

“It worked didn’t it?” Rana asked smugly.

“Barely. What’s this idea of yours this time?”

She took a deep breath. “You know how much I love my son. And I want him to have a somewhat normal childhood, but after he grows up, I want you to turn me too. It’ll just be a few years.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. In the meantime, we will work together and rid the city of the evil vamps. Vigilante justice, I call it. I realize now that all vampires aren’t bad. Just like all people aren’t bad.” She grinned and pointed to the smoldering soil beside them. “Besides, I think we make a pretty good team. Don’t you?”

Alexandru laughed and slipped his arm around her. “That we do. Only this time we are not waiting to get married. The sooner the better, I say.”

“I agree.” Rana laughed as the music from her cell phone penetrated the night. She unhooked the phone from her belt loop and answered it. Seconds later, she grinned and flipped the top down.

“That was Jill. Damien is awake, his fever is gone, and he asking for chocolate ice cream.” She hugged Alexandru. “Thank you for saving my son. He’s going to be all right now.”

“Our son.” Alexandru brushed his lips across her temple. “He’s our son now.”

“Our son.” Rana agreed softly as he lowered his head. His lips found hers and kissed her with the promise of eternity.

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